The Poem and the Place: How Poetry in the Alien Language of English Exists in Israel

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Literature written in the Hebrew language possessed enormous significance for the establishment of Israeli identity. Yet, in the 1970s, people started questioning the linguistic exclusivity of the *Hebrew Association of Writers*. In part to counter this criticism, and perhaps also to preserve the purity and the development of the Hebrew language, members of the *Hebrew Association of Writers* helped to form a *Federation of Writers' Organizations*—among others, the *Israel Association of Writers in English*. This article explores the development of "Anglo-Saxon" poets in Israel and examines their relationship to the local literary and cultural identity. For the first generation of these natives, English poetry was insular, written for the local population or anonymously for a foreign audience. Thus, questions of politics were not often raised, and poets did not have to feel like they were explaining their lives in Israel to others. The opening of the skies and the invention of email and the internet gradually created a generation that could be based in any country and publish elsewhere. As possibilities for publishing from multiple residences became viable, so the occurrence of political and cultural controversies became more frequent, as some of the writing changed its subject and purpose. By comparing some of the poems from the 1970s with poems written today and published everywhere on the internet, the startling distinction of subject matter becomes clear. While some poets write exclusively for their country of origin, others depend on local readership and their subjects vary accordingly.

Introduction

In a cupboard in my office, on two top shelves, are the only files in existence that document the attempts of English writers in Israel to organize into some form of group. This would have allowed them recognition in the country, eligibility for grants, prizes, and publications, as well as a dialogue with the culture. Most people in these files achieved a reputation as writers in their countries of origin, but many were eager to attain local recognition and to achieve common goals as Israeli writers in English. There is no current interest in these documents. Yet, although the "ingathering of exiles" includes fascinating phenomena and parallels many of the general changes in the relations of English writers in Israel to their adopted homeland, research on English writing in Israel, in general, is scarce and has yet to be considered. My essay will explore the development of what came to be called the "Anglo-Saxon writers" in Israel and examine their relationship to the local literary and cultural identity.

The first generation of these native English writers were in Israel to stay. They came by choice or by accident, but, unlike refugees whose choices were determined by others, they determined to remain in a country that favored a completely different tongue. The simple absence of speedy and inexpensive transportation made their commitment to the land definite, and if they could not learn the language sufficiently to write effectively in Hebrew, they resigned themselves to sending their writing abroad by mail and maintaining a small coterie in their adopted country. As long as poetry was insular, written for the local population or anonymously for a foreign audience, questions of politics were not often raised, and poets did not have to feel they were explaining their lives in Israel to others. The opening of the skies and the invention of email and the internet gradually created a generation that could be based in any country and publish elsewhere.

As possibilities for publishing from multiple residences became viable, so the occurrence of political and cultural controversies bacome more frequent, as some of the writing changed its subject and purpose (Alkalay-Gut 2002). Early writing was mostly ideological or insular, where the emphasis was on promoting the concept of Zionism in the world. Later writing became far more complex in many ways. For example, while pre-internet poetry submissions would be of necessity identified by the country of origin, post-internet poetry may be submitted without any emphasis on its source. Also, pre-internet responses to submitted poems often assumed that the writer's English was a second language, or that the poet was unacquainted with the contemporary poetry scene. While these issues might be trying for poets in many countries around the world, the specific identity of Israel frequently led to expectations about politics and religion. More specifically to Israel, poetry may or may not refer to Israel and/or Judaism and may or may not be aimed at a Jewish audience.

Early Writing: Jessie Sampter ***(1883-1938)***

From the beginning of the revival of the Hebrew language in the early twentieth century, writing in Hebrew was encouraged as much as possible—to the detriment of writing in other languages. A true literary pioneer was expected to exchange his or her mother tongue for a language that was both ancient and new, in order to help revive and develop a vocabulary, a set of references, and a heritage. Poets whose work was rooted in the Israeli experience, but composed in English, such as Jessie Sampter, were published primarily abroad (Badt-Strauss 1956) and considered irrelevant to the local literary establishment. This, despite their deep commitment to the country, as well as their potential for popularizing life in the Land of Israel for the outside world. Sampter moved from New York City to the Land of Israel in 1919. Her volume *The Emek* (1927) portrays, with realistic accuracy, the people and the places in the North during the 1920s, and also affords

a direct look at Zionism. Sampter was known for her political involvement as well as for her establishment of a vegetarian convalescent home in Giv'at Brenner. Nonetheless, she was not able to penetrate the linguistic barrier, and her messianic language and atmosphere seemed strange to the contemporary writers she encountered. Despite her acknowledged contributions to agriculture and diet, her poetic opus remains virtually unavailable in Israel today. Her ardent words of praise and encouragement for the work of the Jewish People in the Land of Israel, however significant it was for explaining what the Land of Israel was to people in the Diaspora, held little interest within the country: "O you whose hearts are heavy now / And red with rage and pain, / Be faithful as anemones / To plant His hill again" **(**1937:17); or "Lord, I am no better than my brothers. / Let me be like them; / Make me blind. / Why is this glare within mine eyes / This hand of burning steel upon my heart" (1937: 152). Her words may have been passionate and devoted, but they did not speak to the pioneers. Even when she wrote about local life and ideals, she was ignored by readers in the Land of Israel. Her description of moshav Nahalal in the 1920s, its plan and its individuals, bring an entire experience to life for American readers (1927, n.p.):

Regeneration
I slept in the house of Regeneration
On a black horse-hair sofa. Regeneration
Everyone calls her, in Hebrew, without her surname.
Regeneration is the lone woman farmer of Nahalal,
Working her earth alone, tending her cows and poultry,
Keeping her three-room cottage in emphatic comfort
Though she only sleeps there, being all day in the wind.
Arabic hangings on the rough board walls and tables,
Among the pictures, conspicuous, three photographs of a dead comrade,
Shot through the heart defending an outpost against Bedouins,
A young man, in her youth, a fellow worker.
Was he her lover? She has been more than twenty
Years working in Palestine, roughing and tramping it,
Fearless yet careful; she was a girl of alabaster,
White-handed and thin, when defiantly she came.
Now she is broadened and coarsened, the color of earth.
Regeneration is homely—one crooked eye, two teeth missing—
But she dresses with care, she wears a hat on the Sabbath.
On the Sabbath, at breakfast, she had brought in flowers from her garden,
She offered me bread of her wheat, her eggs, her butter, her cheese,
And only the salt and coffee were foreign. She eats the work of her hands.
I said: "Are you not lonely, Regeneration? Would you not live in a group?"
She said: "I have lived in groups and lost my self-feeling.
I want to create, to make a house, to see the fruit of my work."

She works from four in the morning until ten at night
Just to feed herself, to make her bread and her milk
And earn enough to pay her taxes and buy a hat.
But she is not a lone woman spending her life just to keep alive;
She is creating, she is bringing forth,
Hers the regeneration of the sacred earth.

The clear emphasis on reality, the paucity of poetic devices, the bare use of language, using few adjectives and only a hint of romantic evaluation in the last line, echoes the life she is describing—a life of stark renewal. Even Sampter's use of the Hebrew title "*Teḥiyah*," literally translated as "Regeneration," emphasizes not only the reality, but also the ideals fulfilled by the actual situation. The only exception to this journalistic style is the second word from the last—the evaluative word "sacred." This interjection of the spiritual element transforms the entire poem from a realistic poem to an inspirational one. Yet, as much as Sampter's descriptions of the Land of Israel were accurate and influential in the American Jewish community, detailing an important part of the history of Israel, they were considered irrelevant within the Land of Israel itself, as witnessed by the paucity of translations and her absence in literary journals (see for example: Badt-Strauss 1956; Rock-Singer 2020). Sampter's attempts to join the local writers' circle were rarely successful, despite her friendship with noted political figures, such as Henrietta Szold. Sampter endeavored to form friendships with other writers and poets, but she only succeeded in having a single poem translated into Hebrew by the contemporaneous poet, Rachel Bluwstein ([1890-1931]; Sampter 1937: 20):

City in the Heavens
Blue in the sky
And blue in the dome of the Mosque of Omar.
Rose-gray are the clouds
And opalescent in sunshine.
And rose-gray and opalescent
Are the walls of the ancient city.

O Jerusalem, rose-gray and opalescent,
White as the light
And shadowless as the heavens;
O Jerusalem,
Dark and terrible and human
And shining white as a city in the heavens,
Is it a wonder that your suffering children
Dream to build of you a holy city,
A miracle,
A city in the heavens?

Rachel (as she was known) noted in a letter she wrote (1924/1925) that she was unable to connect to the sentimentality in Sampter's work (Rachel 2021). Perhaps this was also due to the stress on the didactic, and the movement away from the contemporary lyrical role of women in Israeli poetry which concentrated on individual emotions. Rachel herself noted: "I only knew to speak of myself. / My world as narrow as the world of an ant" (1970: 128; translated by Karen Alkalay-Gut), and indeed, only male poets published about political ideology. But Sampter's emphasis is clearly related to her perspective as an outsider, and particularly her need to document and propagate the information illustrating the wonder of Zionism to the world. Sentimental, enchanted, spiritual, or critical, in the manner in which only a person with the perspective of a newcomer can have, even today the English writer frequently encounters the lack of appreciation by native Israeli culture. This different perspective remains characteristic of English writing in Israel. Both in subject and approach, a fine distinction appears in almost any comparison with Hebrew poetry.

Simultaneously, Sampter's popularity in the English-speaking world was enabled by this distinct perspective. Her writing speaks to a generation longing to identify with the Land of Israel and to know every detail about its re-creation. The situation altered as a more critical stance emerged, and as translated Hebrew literary sources appeared more genuine and, therefore, more authoritative.

From Statehood to the Present

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the emphasis on the responsibility for developing Hebrew as the single language was understandable. What was essential then was the literary re-creation of Hebrew. The forging of a functional language and modern culture excluded the use of other tongues, whatever their significance or relevance to politics or public relations (see, for example, Weininger 2019). The *Hebrew Writers' Association* (HWA), which set the basic standards for Hebrew culture, was founded, to encourage the revival of Hebrew and the creation of a new Hebrew culture. The HWA established and provided much-needed social securities, including pensions, grants, and awards, and it was given the same status as other workers' unions. The subsidized literary publications had wide circulation, lectures and readings that were well attended in the large hall of the building, and numerous literary prizes were established for Hebrew literature. Another association entitled "Art for the People" ([*Omanut La-'Am*] *Israel Arts Directory* 1999) ensured, and continues to ensure, that writers and artists would be brought to all areas of the country. This promotion of art and literature was considered basic to the establishment of Hebrew culture and Israeli governmental funds were generously allocated with the understanding that capitalism and the need for private profit would seriously curtail the

availability of this literature. Writers in other languages found themselves at a serious disadvantage, with no encouragement to maintain their own languages.

In the 1970s, however, the linguistic exclusivity of the HWA began to be questioned. What of the other writers, especially those who wrote in Arabic, who live in this country? Why were they not included? What of the writers who were embedded in the cultures of their origins, cultures no less significant than Hebrew? After all, Jewish culture had blossomed in Yiddish and was still being written in Israel; literature of great value was, and still is, being written in Arabic by Jews and Arabs in Israel even today. Could this exclusivism be contrary to the ideal of the unification of cultures?

Perhaps, to counter this justifiable onslaught of criticism, or to preserve the purity and ongoing development of the Hebrew language, various forces from the HWA and the Israeli government encouraged the establishment of the *Israeli Federation of Writers' Organizations*. In order to lend significance to the concept of a "federation," other associations for individual language writers had to be created. To that end, organizations in Arabic, French, German, Polish, Russian, Spanish, Georgian, and other languages were formed. These organizations were intended to provide equal rights and status to all writers while maintaining the exclusivity of Hebrew. The Federation organized and subsidized readings, journals, and weekend retreats, and was, in turn, subsidized by the government. At that time, I was called in to help organize the English writers.

Why me? Few English writers were known to the Hebrew literary community. Since there had been almost no publishing outlets for English writers, the few that published kept to their countries of origin: Olga Kirsch (1924-1997) and Riva Rubin (1932-2013) published in South Africa; Shirley Kaufman (1923-2016) and Robert Friend (1913-1998) in the United States; Dennis Silk in England. I was fortunate to have been widely translated into Hebrew, and—perhaps because of the unusually daring content of my poetry and my academic status as a lecturer in English literature—to have brought attention to the possible inclusion of English poetry in Hebrew culture. The story of my first attempt to publish my book illustrates the strangeness of English. The well-known Israeli poet, David Avidan (1934-1995), supervised the editing, but the printers, printed it from right to left, as if it were a Hebrew book. This was reported in newspapers such as *Davar* and *Ha-Olam Ha-Zeh* as an indication of Israel's provinciality, and the shamefaced printer subsequently reprinted the book from left to right. The title, *Making Love: Poems* (Alkalay-Gut 1980), was probably what drew the attention to the printer's error—this literary-erotic subject was a novelty.

It was not difficult to organize writers in Tel Aviv in the1970s. Although there were many writers who wrote in English, their self-recognition was of amateur status and their interest in blending

with others was minimal. Several writers, however, soon seized upon this idea and alternative opportunity. Richard Flantz—well-known as a cultured translator and editor, as well as an admired lecturer and a rousing hippie—immediately began to organize literary evenings in nightclubs, hotel lobbies, and art galleries, places that had not been previously considered sufficiently dignified for literature. Zigmunt (Zyggy) Frankel (1929-1997), with his Joseph-Conrad Polish-gentlemanly sense of understatement in his perpetual role of ironic outsider, was always the star. Frankel's following poem exemplifies one of the few that immediately broke through all linguistic and cultural barriers (1999:16):

With All The
With all the
pills
IUDs
condoms
safe periods
coitus interruptus
abortions
accidents
wars
and emigration

why is the bus so crowded?

Richard E. Sherwin and his direct-questioning theological poetry formed another aspect of this multicultural and multi-perspective group. His work constantly reveals the complexity of religion and the difficult struggle of faith, and his powerful readings provided the perfect contrast to the other writers, who were philistine in nature. Riva Rubin, widely known as a translator, had long been considered the most prominent English poet in the area. She completed the initial group, which had published a highly regarded poetry broadsheet from the outset, which they gave out to all who were interested.

This group gradually discovered like minds, both within the city and without. Almost all the writers were isolated, perhaps publishing in their countries of origin or known only by their neighbors. In Beer-Sheva, well-known writers abroad, such as Haim Chertok, and in Haifa, activist Ada Aharoni, and multitalented Professor William (Bill) Freedman also joined in. In Zafed, there were Reuven Goldfarb and the late Adam Schoenbrun, who eventually reached out across the mountains. But what of Jerusalem? There, the community had, to some extent, broken through the linguistic borders and intermingled with Hebrew poets, and they seemed both integrated and isolated at one and the same time. Dennis Silk (1928-1998), Robert Friend, Gabriel Levin, Harold Schimmel, and others were included in the intellectual community surrounding the Hebrew

University but were primarily published and known abroad (see Stähler 2009). Without knowing Hebrew, Shirley Kaufman had worked with well-known Hebrew poets, such as Abba Kovner (1918-1987), to discover and translate their works and to integrate herself into the culture, and Friend, whose knowledge of Hebrew was also less than perfect, became one of the authorities on translation, as well as on English poetry. A translation of Friend's English poem, rendered into Hebrew by Nathan Alterman (1910-1970), recently appeared on a popular Netflix program, "Shtissel," and a collection of Friend's English poetry is soon to be published. In the semi-anonymous world of English poetry in Israel, Friend seemed to overcome both political and gender prejudice by writing about co-existence through homosexual love, as well as about friendship. Starting from his first book in 1941, Friend speaks freely about homosexuality and its influence on his politics. In *Somewhere Lower Down* (1980), he describes the 1973 Yom Kippur War as the loss of the lives of individuals. Thus, he writes in his poem, "SEX MANIAC" (1980: 37):

> When he reads in the papers,
> Man Killed in Car Crash,
> he thinks in sorrow:
> one beautiful cock,
> two beautiful balls,
> forever ruined.
> And when he hears on the radio,
> Five Slaughtered in Ambush,
> he thinks in anguish:
> five beautiful cocks,
> ten beautiful balls,
> food for worms.
> But when he hears the announcement,
> 5,000 Slain in Battle,
> he can only say
> 5,000 cocks, 10,000 balls
> 5,000 cocks, 10,000 balls
> over and over.

In Tel Aviv as well, English poets 'infiltrated' the Hebrew poetry circles by means of translation. In the 1970s, Rubin was first known to the world of local literature by her translation of major Hebrew writers into English and the subsequent translations of her work into Hebrew. I found myself improving my Hebrew by translating literally hundreds of writers and poets. Through translating from Hebrew to English, English writers drew interest to their own writing. Translation became the determining issue for the integration of Anglo-Saxon writers into Israeli society, and it remains a major means of integration today. In my poem entitled, "Some Thoughts on Writing

in English in Israel," I attested to the dual influence by writing: "Translating is changing worlds" (Alkalay-Gut 2000: 60).

What other way would English writers be of interest? How else would they become integrated? How else could a dialogue be established?

Gradually, publications of English writing in English within Israel began to appear. *Voices*, an open group for English poets, has monthly meetings in numerous areas in the country and publishes a monthly bulletin and an annual poetry anthology. *The Israel Association of Writers in English* (IAWE) also publishes an annual journal, *arc*, and a quarterly newsletter that appears on the website *www.iawe.org.il.* These journals are sold at readings and are available online, but their influence rarely extends to Hebrew culture. For many years, Professor Gabriel Moked valiantly tried to incorporate English writing in what was first the *Tel Aviv Review* (1988-1996) and later became the *Jerusalem Review* (1997-2017), but the lack of funding made further publication impossible. Although four issues of the *Tel Aviv Review* and ten issues of the *Jerusalem Review* were published, containing stellar translations from Hebrew and Arabic literature as well as original writing in English, their distribution was limited, and publication was halted. Having been one of the editors of this journal, I know it can be done, but I was also witness to the numerous promises and failed appeals to public offices to help organize, distribute, or underwrite this endeavor. A center of PEN International [a worldwide assocation of writers) also existed, with offices in the HWA building; PEN published a few annual journals of translation and original English until the 1990s. We editors were extremely optimistic about the possibilities of PEN to unite all writers in all languages, but the organization soon foundered and numerous attempts to revive it failed. Another journal, *Ariel*, under the aegis of the Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was published from 1962-1995, and contributed a great deal to the translation of Hebrew literature, sometimes even including English writing. Yet funding was discontinued along with the discontinuation or diminishing of support for all Israeli literary associations.

During the 1980s, this literary integration project seemed to have great potential and funding was generous. Thus, when the IAWE was established, it was classified as a formal, nonprofit society of professional writers. The Federation of Writers' Organizations sponsored not only journals in various languages, but also a journal of translations into Hebrew of the works of member authors, thus providing a window into their worlds. The Federation also offered weekend congresses, in which writers of all languages were introduced to each other and connected, sharing their work and their situations; there were also well-attended monthly literary evenings in the HWA's great hall. There were gatherings with then-Prime Minister Shimon Peres in the Cabinet room of the Knesset, where new immigrant writers were introduced to him.

Moreover, at the President's residence, the Ministry of Immigration sponsored awards and annual prizes to writers in foreign languages. Even though it was only the English-speaking writers who emigrated to Israel by choice, as a Zionist "homecoming" all immigrant writers were welcomed.

The purpose of all the aforementioned activities was singular: to integrate these writers into Israeli society. Over time, however, with the changing governments and administrative changes in the Federation, these activities were no longer considered relevant, and, to the best of my knowledge, none of them remain. The absence of encouragement of literary institutions is apparent in all areas of literature, making the concept of an evolving literary tradition all but impossible. If no records or archives are kept and no criticism exists, individuals may continue to flourish, but a local poetic tradition cannot be established.

Writers who write in English in Israel do not suffer from this lack of continuity in tradition, because there is no tradition. An English writer in Israel today may have little in common with the contemporary scene in Hebrew, or other languages, and would have difficulty finding predecessors from whom something might be learned, because the texts themselves are rarely accessible. The possibility of creating a tradition of writers in English, whether influenced by Israeli writers or English writers from other countries, is absent, and the absence is not missed. This sense of newness allows a wide range of possibilities. Some writers endeavor to connect themselves to an Israeli identity through translation and the research of local writers. Some remain easily connected to the countries of their birth through publication there, made far simpler by the internet and the ease of travel (though less so during the pandemic); this, despite the existence of some residual prejudice against foreigners' literary writings, on the one hand, and political suspicion of Israel, on the other.

Although it would seem natural that writers in English would form a bridge between Israeli culture and the rest of the world, this is rarely the case. Writers in English may publish works about life in Israel in relation to politics or Levantine exotica, but these subjects are usually avoided. Some writers endeavor to overcome this problem by completely ignoring their immediate environment and situating their work in a science fiction context, somewhere in their childhood, or within a neutral space. This should not be surprising since, by clinging to their native language, they are often alienated from the local society. Often, the lack of a community turns many of these writers inwards, to their lost past or to the uniqueness of their identities, but it may also lead to the abandoning of the craft itself. This may even be true for writers who write in the language of the majority; the possibility of some form of recognition helps to alleviate that situation. Antithetically, writers who find a community and an audience, such as the Russian

writers, are sometimes empowered to continue their initial fame in their native country, yet occasionally meld into Hebrew culture (Lev-Ari 2006).

In other cases, writers may turn to another language, such as Hebrew, Arabic, or even French, or they may choose English, despite their linguistic origins in other languages. Such considerations may provide access to potential audiences around the world, the desire for a neutral political language, an ease of expression enabled by the cultural perspective of a distant tongue. An Arabic writer who wishes to communicate with a universal audience, like the Palestinian-Israeli Osama Massarwa, or the numerous songwriters who dream of an international career, are but two examples. Rubin was always critical of the possibility of mastering literary capabilities in Hebrew: "I know writers," she wrote, "who have mastered Hebrew and no longer write in their native Polish, English, Hungarian and other languages. Most of them seem like swimmers who have jumped into the stream from one bank and are floundering in the shallows, because they cannot quite make it to the other side. If the solution were as simple as mastering the mechanics and nuances, and even the spirit of the mainstream language, I would be writing in Hebrew. But my mind is structured in English. I can mean only in English" (2006: 54). Furthermore, as Kaufman wrote, "You can't learn two/ landscapes in one/ life […] or a language/ to put them in" (1979: 48). Nadežda Rumjanceva deals with this subject exclusively and should be consulted for further examination of this issue (2015). Yet, the fact that modern Hebrew literature was created by many writers who first spoke another language, belies the absolute truth of these convictions. Furthermore, an English writer in Israel, exposed to Hebrew literature and living within the Hebrew language, may find writing in Hebrew more convenient, or more interesting and/or challenging. Two exemplary cases of authors who picked up the gauntlet are Harold Schimmel and Chanita Goodblatt.

A personal example: When I moved to Israel in 1972, I lived in a completely Hebrew-speaking community, where no one spoke English. There were no telephones in the neighborhood besides a payphone that was a block away, so I lost touch with all my American friends. In fact, one day on the street, the postman asked me to read the English address on a letter. "How am I supposed to deliver this?" he raged. "It's written in Christian!" My linguistic isolation was complete. The first poem I submitted for publication went to *Bitterroot* (18.67/68 [1979): 56) and reflected this isolation. Menke Katz (1906-1991), the editor, responded in Hebrew, accepting the poem and asking to see the original. It was entitled "Miss Emily":

> Entombed, I await
> the orgasm of all times
> when you, gentle reader
> take me up on your arms

and explore
all I have kept
so modestly silent.

The eroticism, born of the privacy of English, was soon adopted into Hebrew. The Hebrew poets who discovered me and translated my work—Raquel Chalfi, Eyal Megged, Sabena Messeg, Rafi Weichert, and others—ensured that numerous books would follow.

Poems on Jerusalem

To some extent, the feeling of "belonging" is involved in language and it is precisely this perspective, this writing from the unexpected and unacknowledged corner, which makes this literature unique, lending both the freedom and limitations of immediate anonymity. Zygmunt Frankel's poem on Jerusalem, for example, written in the 1970s, inverted the sense of euphoria following the city's reunification (1999: 20):

Jerusalem
I know it's been there for the past four thousand years
but it still looks temporary to me.
A transit camp, with tribes that do not mix
like sacred oil and holy water,
on their way to some other place,
preferably with a beach and a port.

The sacredness of the city is often challenged in poetry, particularly by the classical writers of Jerusalem, like Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), who everywhere begs that the human be elevated to the sacred, while the city be demoted to its practical role. Thus, a poem about Yom Kippur [the sacred Jewish Day of Atonement] describes a visit to an Arab shop similar to the one that his father had owned, or another poem that tells of transporting his ex-wife's mattress on his back along the Via Dolorosa, depicting Jerusalem as a city in which people live. He repeatedly calls to look at the individuals who live in the city, not at the city's uniqueness. Amichai's vision of Jerusalem comes from within, while Frankel's is that of an observer, for whom the concept of its uniqueness is an irritant.

The same subject of Jerusalem appears frequently in the poetry of English-speaking writers, particularly those who have emigrated to the Holy Land for religious reasons. Shlomo Yashar, who changed his name when he moved to Israel, continues to publish under the name he had first became known as a poet abroad—Steven Sher. Even his new name is an illustration of his devotion to the Land of Israel, and his writing emphasizes his commitment (2019: 82):

Jerusalem Overlooking the Kidron Valley
This land belongs to those who love it,
to those who never cease to dream
of timeless hills in brilliant light
swept bare by wind.

This land spreads out before us
once again—the ebb of centuries
that never seems to end, settling like dust
over stone in the valley below.

And so, at dusk we set
our hopes aloft like birds
extending wings, riding the drafts,
again ascendant.

This allegiance is not foreign to Hebrew poets, but is less common among contemporary Hebrew writing, since the landscape has become ingrained and consequently less of an object in itself.

In addition, the ubiquitous archeological, historical presence, the complexity of the political conflict, and the actuality of everything in daily city life are present everywhere. Marcela Sulak, with her unique eye, adds original images to the details of a familiar landscape when describing the city (2015: 84):

The cracks in the Western Wall are soaked in prayers.
The doves are scraps of light above Jerusalem,

Like teeth broken on what they've been given to say,
Rows and rows of white boxes, asleep against the might of Jerusalem

Bullet holes are horizontal, rain-bored holes are vertical.
The pools, the ritual baths fill themselves in the sight of Jerusalem

No other city has drunk so much ink;
Who from the sages would know how to write, but for Jerusalem?

Friend uses the backdrop of the city as a contrast to himself, as an English-speaking poet (1975: 44):

Identity
Words are written
on the Wailing Wall
I cannot read.
My Name?

I have come to read my name
where even the birds are Jewish
and the cats yowl
in the holy language,
whose mystery I masker,
its stubborn consonants
and its warm vowels,
but not that mystery

I shroud in English.
Robert, I say
pronouncing who I am
in the cold syllables

of the tongue I love.

The Local Eye

The uniqueness of many of the subjects, sometimes so basic and inimitable to the local eye, but unknown to an audience not Israeli and often overlooked by the local inhabitants, is common. Rubin's poem "Prove it" deals with the numerous Holocaust survivors, a subject is apparent everywhere on the local scene. The poem begins (1996: 42):

Something is passing out of the world;
soon there will be no more numbers
soon that will be another Jewish legend,
the blue tattoos you have to see
to believe

"You have to see/to believe" is a basic theme used by English writers in Israel.

Dara Barnat begins her book *The City I Run From: Tel Aviv* with a poem entitled "These are the Sidewalks of Tel Aviv" (2020: 9):

After "A Postcard from Tel Aviv" by Tuvia Rübner
These are the bike lanes.
They're close to the sidewalks, be careful.
This is the square where someone who cared
about peace was killed.
They painted his footsteps black where he fell.
I push the stroller past them
every day. My son plays in the shadow
of peace. This is the city that holds me
as I sleep, and as I lay awake.

People walk their dogs at 3am.
In this city, when I hear helicopters, I stop
what I'm doing. When you hear
more than one, it's serious.
I don't know why I keep returning
to this city that's never been
my own. Find me a place that speaks
my mother tongue.
Find me a home in Queens.
Find me a home in Brooklyn.
Why Tel Aviv, hot, no rain
until December? Yet, I live
to feel those drops, to watch
a downpour from the window.
Is that why I've come back
(again), because Tel Aviv keeps me
waiting? This is the city
I run towards, then from, then towards,
and still from. No matter how many
years go by on these streets, they're foreign.
Brodetsky. Zeitlin. Ibn Gvirol.
When I drive, though, I don't have to think
about where I'm going. My body
knows where to turn,
which intersections to avoid.
Maybe I hold on to Tel Aviv,
because this is the city that wrote me
my first poems, in a language
it doesn't know very well. Graffiti
in English is often misspelled.
The mesiah is coming.
I doubt the messiah is coming.
Tel Aviv doesn't care enough.
Tel Aviv cares about vegetables
from the *shuk*, perfect tomatoes.
Perfect pita, hummus. Green olives
for my son. Tel Aviv cares
about cold coffee and museums.
Here's the white sand on the beach.
Here's the Mediterranean Sea.
I've stood there, in the early morning, alone.
The water changes by the hour.

Bill Freedman, Professor Emeritus of English Literature at Haifa University, who has published numerous books of poetry and prose, explained his position to me. As it reflects the position of numerous poets, I quote part of his letter to me (11 October 2021):

> My poetry is principally an exercise in self-isolating contemplation and exploration, and for that, I find nature—the Mediterranean I live near, the uncontainable day and night sky above it, the imagined worlds and lives of animals and insects—far more giving. I do not write public or political poetry and would find it extremely hard to do so. I once debated the very political Druse poet, Samih Al Kassam on this topic and took the position that politics and the like weigh heavily on the fledgling poem, burdening its effort to take to the air. This is not at all to say that good poetry cannot be written on these subjects, only that one would have to be a considerably better poet than I to do it effectively. If one can, as, for example, Al Kassam, Carolyn Forche and others can and have done, more power to them. Or rather, more power than I have.

There are indeed many poems in his large oeuvre that could have been written anywhere in the world. And yet, local subjects creep in, often giving a heartbreaking view of the country (Freedman: 2022).

This Land
Every night the jackals come
to the prickly undergrowth beneath this porch,
pulled open from Mount Carmel
like a drawer with an unmatched sock.

Their cry is mournful, hopeless,
a wolf howl more like weeping.
I lean across the rail to see them,
but they are not for seeing.

Only a gleaming eye,
a spark yellow-flinted from the moon,
tells me it is not this land of soured milk, tart honey,
where cactus, gorse, and other bristling wild things thrive,
that wails.

A mother wanders
from the daily reinterment of her child
with the nightly news.
Her eye could ignite that bush,
could make it burn.

This sense of the tragedy that infiltrates every aspect of life in this country, so painful that it makes some sort of escape necessary, seems to explain why Freedman and many others prefer to avoid the subject of Israel entirely. With the linguistic choice of remaining in Israel or returning to their country of origin, their criticism is usually sharper and yet more committed to an explanation for their remaining in the country. Freedman embodies this double bind in many ways. In a poem entitled "Tall Grass" he writes: "they clutch at your ankles, as though they'd have you stay. / As though for all their stoic courage and acceptance, / there is something more familiar at the root" (unpublished; printed with permission of the author).

Nonetheless, Rachel Tzvia Back, who was born in the U.S. but was raised in both Israel and the US and their respective cultures, is equally involved in both. She is actively engaged in the Israeli literary and political worlds, with her translations of significant Hebrew poetry, her involvement in organizations for political change, and even her own family on the frontlines (her son is in the IDF). In her latest book, *What Use is Poetry, The Poet is Asking,* her introductory poem (brought in its entirety in the Appendix), describes the devastation from Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip, that prefigured the destruction caused by the military actions that followed (2019: 10):

> There were boys pulling boys from
> the wreckage and flames, from the tunnels or into tunnels
> beneath it all, an underworld amazed
>
> while whole buildings collapsed from above

Her descriptions of the 2019 attacks, that were repeated in 2021, depict the comprehensiveness of the damage, and describes both sides as victims. This incorporation of extreme experiences in the country, which is transformed into some kind of 'normality', is reiterated again and again. Kaufman's early protest of the occupation, "The Status Quo" in *Rivers of Salt*, is typical of this. In as bland a description as possible, she describes swimming in the sea and floating on a wave to the shore "like a road in the desert after a flash flood/ like the houses we blew up yesterday" (1993: 2).

The imperative of community and the communal experience simultaneously include and exclude the Anglo-Saxon writer. We are witnesses to the present, but we do not entirely share all the experiences. For instance, only a few of the writers who emigrated to Israel served in the I.D.F., so they do not share the deep collective memory of war and battle trauma. Even though all Israeli residents have experienced war in some way, few can appreciate the shared history and camaraderie resulting from active duty in the defense forces. It creates intimate bonds and devotion, so much a part of Israeli culture that they extend into the economic and political arenas, sometimes excluding those who do not share that common past.

Conclusion

Were these the only difficulties in delineating the topic of defining English writers in Israel, they would not be insurmountable, but the changing times have impacted English writing in Israel even more. In the previous century, the lack of means of communication, and the disinterest of the media – in English, as well as in Hebrew – made the task of distributing poetry and information about this literature far more difficult. Writers were primarily known in the countries from which they came, if at all, and, in Israel, they created a reputation only by doing translations or learning Hebrew well enough to write in Hebrew. To my knowledge, the works of writers, during that period, who wrote about Israel and published abroad, were published not as literature, but as education and enlightenment.

English writers were more challenged than other immigrants, since their cultural background did not encourage transitions to other languages and, therefore, they remained virtually anonymous, though the literary movements from which they had emerged were becoming popular. The relative absence of a local reading community in English exacerbated this isolation. English readers – when they read—preferred to read literature of their country of origin and avoided supporting local writers. "Do you not feel you have betrayed the purpose of your *aliyah* [emigration] to Israel by continuing to write in English?" I was asked again and again in interviews. This challenge has not been voiced during the past decade, indicating the growing sense of cultural security felt, of late, in Israel.

Despite these continuing challenges, according to my informal calculation, more than a thousand English writers residing in Israel publish world-wide today and work in many ways to breach the cultural gap. Yet, they continue to be ignored in local Israeli culture. In writing this, I have further discovered the extent to which this is true. I have left out literally hundreds of superior writers, with whom I am acquainted, all of whom deserve far more public recognition that they have received thus far. Moreover, I am aware that there are numerous clusters of writers who are unknown to me and to whom I have no access. The absence of a single, umbrella organization, or a community of dedicated publishers, is complicated by the mobility of national identity and the lack of an audience, and I hope this situation is altered in the future. These writers have so much to contribute—not only to Hebrew culture, but also to the knowledge and understanding of Israel throughout the rest of the world.

It is particularly interesting to cite a poem by Elazar (pen-name of Larry Freifeld), who frequently writes of his childhood and his poetry life in New York; nevertheless, his lack of a reflected self-image, the absence of people with whom his early life was shared, and his not belonging to a

relevant literary community, may be factors in his elimination of the past. A recent poem entitled "Dementia", on Facebook, speaks of this (April 8, 2021):

> a word came knocking at his door,
> a face walked in
> he couldn't recognize anymore.
> or how to spell it?
> sleeping or awake
> time expands into an earthquake of memories lost
> only love can comprehend
> a flower
> a son
> an old friend come to visit are all one,
> incomprehensible
> as such
> peace comes to the weary
> and waits for yesterday to remember

This is not an autobiographical poem, yet it speaks to me clearly of the need for an audience: not only for creative inspiration, but also for sanity. It is fortunate that some of these writers find their audience abroad, since the Anglo-Saxon community in Israel, unlike other language communities, look for their literature in their countries of origin, and have little connection to local writers. Local English writers are not usually stocked in Israeli bookstores, and I know of no Israeli book clubs in English that have read local English works. While this may not be true of other languages, the French and Russian language organizations have informed me that their communities encourage and support local efforts, purchasing books through designated book shops and organizing events in their honor.

While English often acts as a 'bridge' to the English-speaking world, it is sometimes unsuited to the Hebrew landscape. Translating scenes experienced in Hebrew, with its innumerable references to the biblical Hebrew tongue, is often akin to translating Judaism into terms that may be understood by other religions and cultures. My own first encounter with this difficulty came when I tried to describe my husband's water skiing on the Sea of Galilee, which emerged as a reference to the Christian Bible, instead of to the "Song of Songs" (1986: 32):

> **Skiing on the Sea of Galilee**
> **(a love song for Ezi)**
> A rainbow flies in his wake
> each time he slaloms starboard.
> I lean against the windscreen back
> and cannot take away my eyes.

Aboard the ancient fishing boats
brown faces turn up from their nets,
smile at the moving halo of spray.

I have vowed not to cross men
with gods. Yet as he holds
to the tow.
easy on the water
when my hands
would long have given out
glowing, alone
with the early-morning fishers

I would pass my bread
to him
to cast

Here

now

Writing about a life experienced in Hebrew—a language that constantly recalls the Hebrew Bible, as well as a constantly changing contemporary experience—in English, is always a challenge. All these multiple aspects that I have enumerated above, in no small manner, complicate and blur the nature of the subject, but are important for the elucidation of the complexities of the English writer's reception and absorption into Israeli culture.

Appendix

[All poems cited in the Appendix, as well as throughout the article, are printed with permission]

Rachel Tzvia Back (2019: 9-18)

What Use is Poetry, the Poet is Asking
I
What use is poetry, the poet is asking
of the evening news
where the experts

of military affairs have been assembled,
the political analysts and politicians
amassed, ex-generals

of measured pace and phrase all
called to the ideological front,
the starched and uniformed delivered

as fact, in lieu of truth, expert and
ex-general of the demarcated
worlds, barbed-wire words

hurled across the room, the anchor
confidently moored
with her earnest nod-nodding of head

stating stately readiness
for next round of certain warfare
around the news table.
There were troops moving south
under rocket-lacerated skies, arced anger and
armoured vehicles fully unarmed by fire,

there were boys pulling other boys from
the wreckage and flames, from the tunnels or into tunnels
beneath it all, an underworld amazed

while whole buildings collapsed from above,
bombed complete to the ground, perfect aim at
entire worlds behind walls, all destroyed, until

the buried alive and the buried dead the burned and the
broken are all one in the hearts' darkest undertow so

what use is poetry, the poet

wants to know.

II

They whispered *peace* in the dark corridors, as though
it were a code.

With gun thrust into his arms first time, he saluted
as trained, and shouted back
I swear to uphold
but the soldier behind him in formation heard
green gold
from out of the fire's eye and glow
in the rhythm of
his marching boots.

When the speakers blared *red alert red alert*
across the desert base,
he saw the furred
and antlered faces

at the horizon, waiting
in watchful patience.

In the barracks at night, they listened for
home as one listens
for bells that toll
only in foreign cities

or for snow

falling on the already fallen
snow in remotest hills
in contented and constant

quietude.

III

The mother who sent her son
To war, allowed her son to go
To war, let the years unfold
until
Her son could not avoid going

To war –

The mother
Who didn't stop her son
From going
To war –

Was called before the High Court
Of mothers held on full moon nights
At undisclosed Celestial sites, Stars of the Light
Not yet evident on earth the only ones
In attendance.

There they argued her case in silver-tinged
Syntax, crystalline intonations, verbed
Asterisms composed wholly from the black holes
Of her heart

From when he first left,
When he first called, when he
Wept over the dark nightline as though
Distance from life's imagined places to frontline
Frenzy greater than to remotest planet in space, and

Distance from the child's home to flare-lit fear no more
Than the tug of a unravelling
Cord.

The mother who sent her son to war, didn't
Stop her son from going to war,
Was found to be
Guilty.

She, and the High Court, found her
There where lost and forever

Guilty.

IV
Meanwhile, hating Crete, and his long exile, filled with a desire
to stand on his native soil, the father applied his thought to new

invention, and altered the natural order of things. He laid down lines
of feathers, beginning with the smallest, following the shorter with longer

ones, so that you might think they had grown like that, on a slant.
Then he fastened the feathers together with thread at the middle,

and bees-wax at the base, then flexed each one into a gentle curve,
so that they seemed like real bird's wings. His son stood beside him,

and not realising that he was handling what would be his peril, caught
laughingly at the downy feathers that blew in the passing breeze, and

softened the yellow bees-wax with his thumb, in his play hindering his
father's marvellous work. When last touches were put to what he had begun,

the father balanced his own body between the two wings and hovered there
in the moving air. He instructed the boy as well, laying down the rules

of flight, as he fitted the newly created wings on the boy's shoulders.
While he worked and issued his warnings, the ageing man's cheeks

were wet with tears, and his hands trembled. *No heat or sun, no delight*
of blue borne flight. He was carried aloft in the metal belly of

the roaring beast, unleashed into the sky. His arms were bare.
His chest was weighted with vest and pack and gun. He rode the air

until they landed in storming dust, into the bellowing battle. Even as
his mouth cried his father's name, he wrapped bandages around the wounded,

staunched bleeding, placed morphine in ravaged mouths of pain. The sky was
orphaned of birds; there were no feathers, not on land or waves. Imagined

wing-span of the fallen.

V

There were the tales being woven
of others' lives, long narratives
unfolding, crafted with devotion.

She had been told, "This is the contract
you make: you agree to believe,
you agree to care." But she

was already otherwhere: what pretend
could hold through despair. Old

vows were now disavowed.

Shelves weighted with books, second-hand
stores sought in strange cities, her
ceaseless travelling

through storied worlds created
as though just for her, for she had agreed
to believe –
That was over now.
Henceforth the heart would disallow all tales
that weren't true.

VI
He was only three years old.
He was four and soon to turn five.
He already knew most of the letters.

He was first born, devoted to the baby sister.
He was second born, always the younger brother.

He was killed in the evening at play in the street.
He was killed in the afternoon in the home's shuttered
peace.

The domed play tent, yellow and red, stood undisturbed
also after.

In the photo, he is all little boy pride standing tall
beside the colourful tower he's built, slender and
so serious.

In the photo, bundled in small denim coat, he
sits by the sea, he is smiling, it must be a
first evening breeze.

It was mortar fire. It was a missile.
It was or it wasn't pre-emptive, was or wasn't
retaliatory.

The little-boy body wrapped in shrouds
is now
the single certainty.

(for Sahir Abu Namous and Daniel Tragerman, in memory)

VII
It was a sea of roaring lions, he
had said, their soft white-padded feet
are pawing at the wind.

It was a sea of small feathered
things, see how they spread
their light-boned wings

not to take flight, she had offered,
but for the simple delight
of hovering on air,

over water, then touching back
down on dark and quiet
waves.

It was a sea they hadn't seen, it was
possessed, delineated green
depths, death-silent

swimmers with explosives, barricaded
waves, grey vessels patrolling
water and wind.

It was a sea of mortar fire fired –
mistakenly, intentionally – it was
that sea, so

what use
is poetry

the poet keeps asking.

Karen Alkalay-Gut (1994: 9-11)

Some Thoughts on Writing in English in Israel

I

Where I live, speech is deeper
then the archeological digs that remind us
of the many layers under our feet.

I exist
in this tongue
discover my hidden face
again and again
in words remote
as hazy desert oases

But I do not use it for writing.
The words I scream out into night's ear
are translated on the page
into something
more civilized,
controlled.

II

We are writing a rock song in Hebrew.
I say, now that's a nice phrase.
You say, yes, Isaiah liked it too.

III

I limp in my children's language
as my parents limped in mine,
alone in my foreign eloquence.

My mother tongue becomes
my mother.

IV

From Hebrew to English
is from Jewish to Christian,
anonymous scribes to King James.

The gentle Kinneret
Rachel dreamed of while dying
becomes miracles of bread and fishes

Translating is changing worlds.

V

But ah the options at my command!
The dog turns from filth on the curb
at the Arabic, “Wossach.”

My curses come from words my mother learned
from Russian soldiers in pogroms, blessings
from soft-eyed Yemenites, irony from that old
tongue of alienation in the shtetl.
It is language soup,
the kind you make when all
the vegetables in the fridge
are wilting and need renewal,
collective transformation.

VI

This holiday, pleasant like Sunday in the States,
we become visitors in our own land,
riding on roads we have driven
in jeeps, cars, motorcycles,
looking out from the touring bus
as we pass places we have made love,
and the silos you built years ago.
And the tour guide points out
the spot where Yael gave it
to Sisera with her own tentpin.
“This is called Megiddo,”
he says in clipped British tones,
and someone shouts out
“Armageddon!”

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