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**C**ross  
cultures

Readings in the Post / Colonial  
Literatures in English

102

ASNEL Papers 12

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(Giessen)

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Transcultural English Studies

Theories, Fictions, Realities

ASNEL Papers 12

Edited by  
Frank Schulze-Engler and Sissy Helff

With editorial assistance from  
Claudia Perner and Christine Vogt-William

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## From the Belly of the Fish

### — Jewish Writers in English in Israel: Transcultural Perspectives

AXEL STÄHLER

**D**IASPORIC WRITING, transcending borders and cultures, is, by its very nature, a test case for transcultural and transnational studies. But what about diasporic writing that has come home? There is a sizable community of Jewish writers in English in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Yet their position is a difficult one, for they suffer severe problems of integration into the culture of their, usually freely, chosen homeland, whose language, at least for artistic purposes, they cannot or do not want to adopt: “For many of these writers,” Karen Alkalay-Gut observes, “there is a degree of ‘Diaspora’ in their work, a sense of a cultural, literary and personal center elsewhere, that is concurrent with a varying but steady commitment to Israel as the homeland.” This phenomenon, “of being physically Home in the Holy Land, but native and/or loyal to another language,” has been labelled by Alkalay-Gut a “double diaspora” and qualified as “almost unique to the Zionist experi-

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Alkalay-Gut, herself a poet writing in English, a professor of English at Tel Aviv University, and Chair of the Israel Association of Writers in English (IAWE), estimates that there are about “500 professional and semi-professional writers of literature in English in Israel, in addition to at least a thousand people who make writing their hobby”; Alkalay-Gut, “Double Diaspora: English Writers in Israel,” *Judaism* 51 (2002): 459.

ence."<sup>2</sup> "Most Anglos," she concludes, "remained loyal to English, and either deserted writing or Israel, or fell silent."<sup>3</sup>

My purpose, in this article, is to have a closer look at those who did not fall silent and who did not only continue to write in English in their chosen homeland but also gave their concerns a voice by organizing themselves into a professional body. For it seems to me that an exposition of the cultural 'loquation',<sup>4</sup> of the transcultural spot Jewish writers in English in Israel find themselves in may well contribute to an understanding of what constitutes Jewish literature in English. For one thing, the diasporic origins of most anglophone Jewish writers in Israel to some degree appear like a cross-section *en miniature* of Jewish existence in the anglophone diaspora. With all due caution, their 'loquation' may therefore perhaps be considered in some ways to be paradigmatic of the larger context. In addition, the very tenacity with which they adhere to the diasporic language even in Israel suggests a particular force of cohesion which relates them both to the cultural contexts of the anglophone world and to each other. And this, too, may perhaps be seen as paradigmatic, and as a version *en miniature* of the transcultural and transnational intertwinings of Jewish literature in English in the global context.<sup>5</sup>

In 1997, the Israel Association of Writers in English (IAWE),<sup>6</sup> itself established in 1980, issued an anthology of poems that were, as it says on the

<sup>2</sup> Alkalay-Gut, "Double Diaspora," 458–59. Usually, the term "double diaspora" is understood 'quantitatively' rather than 'qualitatively' and alludes to consecutive displacements within the diaspora; see, for example, Sophia Lehmann, "In Search of a Mother Tongue: Locating Home in Diaspora," *MELUS* 23 (1998): 101, 111, and the discussion of "double or even triple diasporization" in Monika Fludernik, "The Diasporic Imaginary: Postcolonial Reconfigurations in the Context of Multiculturalism," in *Diaspora and Multiculturalism*, ed. Monika Fludernik (Cross/Cultures 66; Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2003): xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Alkalay-Gut, "Double Diaspora," 459.

<sup>4</sup> A contraction of 'location' and the Latin *loquor* ('to talk, to speak'; cf. 'locution'), this self-fashioned 'neologism' alludes to Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993). It will subsequently be used to signify the inseparable connection between language and culture and to refer to the Jewish writers' situation and self-positioning between languages and cultures.

<sup>5</sup> For Jewish writing in English, see also *Anglophone Jewish Literature*, ed. Axel Stähler (London & New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> In April 2004, membership was forty-seven, according to an e-mail communication from Mark L. Levinson, IAWE mailclerk, from 15 April 2004.

IAWE website, "culled from the first several issues of *Arc*."<sup>7</sup> *Arc*, first published in 1982 and appearing annually, is, again as advertised on the IAWE website, "a continuing literary showcase for the members of the IAWE (Israel Association of Writers in English) and for other Israeli citizens and residents. It includes both original works in English and translations into English from the many other languages of Israeli writers."<sup>8</sup> A 'distillate' of *Arc*, *English Poetry from Israel*, according to the blurb, is an anthology that

presents a sampling of poets writing in English in Israel. Of various backgrounds and native cultures, they left their homelands of their own choice, not because of a tragic past, hostile government or social persecution. And yet, at some level, they remain foreigners within this community: often a unique opportunity for independence and perspective.<sup>9</sup>

The anthology was edited by the poets Karen Alkalay-Gut, Lois Unger, and Zygmunt Frankel, and Frankel also designed the collection's cover illustration. This shows, next to the prominent lettering of the title, a stark, woodcut-like image of a hunched human figure inside the belly of a fish. The allusion to Jonah is obvious but not necessarily self-explanatory. Why, then, was this

<sup>7</sup> Quoted from [http://www.geocities.com/iawe\\_mailbox/pubs.html](http://www.geocities.com/iawe_mailbox/pubs.html) (accessed 10 April 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from [http://www.geocities.com/iawe\\_mailbox/pubs.html](http://www.geocities.com/iawe_mailbox/pubs.html) (accessed 10 April 2008).

<sup>9</sup> A point worth noting is that the IAWE publications are programmatically open to all (not only Jewish) writers in English who are citizens of, or resident in, Israel, see [http://www.geocities.com/iawe\\_mailbox/pubs.html](http://www.geocities.com/iawe_mailbox/pubs.html) (accessed 10 April 2008). Yet statements like this seem to apply exclusively to the Jewish particular, and in fact none of the writers represented in *English Poetry from Israel* is of non-Jewish origin. The anthology includes poems by the following thirty-eight poets: Ada Aharoni, Karen Alkalay-Gut, Rachel Tzvia Back, Ruth Beker, Gavriel Ben-Ephraim, Edward Codish, Eugene Dubnov, Elazar (= Larry Freifeld), Zygmunt Frankel, Shalom [Seymour] Freedman, William Freedman, Robert Friend, Gershon Gorenberg, Aloma Halter, Jean Kadmon, Shirley Kaufman, Sharon Kessler, Olga Kirsch, Charles Kormos, Orit Kruglanski, Lami (= Lami Halperin), Mark L. Levinson, Simon Lichman, Fay Lipshitz, Rochelle Mass, Joanna Morris, Shimon Palmer, Reena Ribalow, Riva Rubin, Raquel Sanchez, Reva Sharon, Richard E. Sherwin, Norman Simms, Elaine M. Solowey, Lois Ungar, Roger White, Chayym Zeldis, and Linda Zisquit. In the "Introduction" to *Arc* 13, explicit mention is made of the fact that only Jewish writers contributed to this volume, although its thematic focus might have been of particular interest also to Arab-Israeli authors; see Jeff Green (= Jeffrey M. Green) & David Margolis, "Introduction" to *Arc: Journal of the Israel Association of Writers in English* 13 (1999): 1.

particular 'emblematic' image chosen for the evidently programmatic self-presentation of the I A W E? I will return to this later in my essay.

The programmatic quality of *English Poetry from Israel* is elaborated on in more detail in the editors' preface on "The English Poet in Israel."<sup>10</sup> Here, the Israeli anglophone writers' alleged independence is emphasized once more, as is their continuing alienation within the society they elect to live in. Their predicament is largely attributed to their choice of language:

Some have the common problem of learning a language. Some have never tried to learn Hebrew and exist comfortably among their countrymen in this multicultural society. Others speak perfect Hebrew but remain loyal to their mother tongue.<sup>11</sup>

That it should be possible to escape exposure to other cultures in a multicultural society seems to belie the very concept of transculturality, and I would suggest that, on closer scrutiny, none of the poems in *English Poetry from Israel* stands in splendid isolation. Indeed, any such notion seems to be revoked by the next paragraph, which is, in effect, a proclamation of the transculturality of the anglophone Israeli writer – the result of border crossings, temporal and geographical as well as cultural and national or political:

There are writers who perceive their foreignness a handicap, and others who see it as an opportunity for independence and perspective. Even within this small community of writers, there are marked differences. Geography and atmosphere play a part: Jerusalem writers often have different subject matter or moods than Tel Aviv writers, and those in the desert and kibbutzim may have alternative narratives to relate. Background and native culture are additional factors. A poet steeped in the American tradition will begin from a different position than another brought up on British literature. But there is one factor which unites them all – an obstinate, sometimes even perverse, affection for the English language.<sup>12</sup>

As is suggested here, *English Poetry from Israel* appears to be mainly a document of the diversity of writers in English in Israel, the contributors to the

<sup>10</sup> Karen Alkalay-Gut, Lois Unger & Zygmunt Frankel, "The English Poet in Israel," in *English Poetry from Israel*, ed. Karen Alkalay-Gut, Lois Unger & Zygmunt Frankel (Tel Aviv: I A W E, 1997): 7.

<sup>11</sup> Alkalay-Gut, Unger & Frankel, "The English Poet in Israel," 7.

<sup>12</sup> Alkalay-Gut, Unger & Frankel, "The English Poet in Israel," 7.

anthology hailing from all over the anglophone diaspora,<sup>13</sup> conjoined only through their choice of language and the common experience of foreignness. (Their 'Jewishness', quite intriguingly, is not explicitly evoked as common ground; perhaps because it is taken for granted, although the publications of I A W E are open to contributions by non-Jewish Israelis as well.<sup>14</sup>)

Yet I would argue that *English Poetry from Israel* should be considered in conjunction with the two issues of *Arc* immediately following its publication. They both concern themselves with set topics and progressively aim at a thematic coherence lacking in the earlier volume. In fact, if seen together, all three publications seem to follow a continuous course of narrowing their focus. Since editorship of *Arc* rotates,<sup>15</sup> this may not have been a deliberate editorial policy, yet in effect it seems to amount to a homing-in on what appears to be the central problematic of being a writer in English in Israel: the multiple and polydirectional processes of transculturation in a sustained encounter with cultural differences while still retaining the diasporic language.

Published just a few months after the anthology in autumn 1997 as a prose special and edited by Haim Chertok and Shalom Freedman, *Arc* 12 gathers contributions which are meant to "reflect some aspect of contemporary Israeli life or culture."<sup>16</sup> The vagueness of the thematic criterion, insufficiently defined and retrospectively acknowledged as "nettlesome"<sup>17</sup> by the editors, was further narrowed down in *Arc* 13. This was published after a lengthy interval

<sup>13</sup> According to the biographical notes appended to Alkalay-Gut, Unger & Frankel, ed., *English Poetry from Israel*, 68–72, of the thirty-eight contributors to the anthology more than half (twenty) were born and raised in the USA (another three, born elsewhere, spent a substantial time there before emigrating to Israel); only four were born in Britain (three lived there for a while), another three in South Africa and two in Canada; three come from Eastern Europe and are not native English speakers at all; one emigrated from Germany (via the USA), one from Egypt, one was born in France and then lived in many other countries, and only one is a native of Israel; two do not reveal where they originate from. It is tempting to see this configuration as reflecting not only the spectrum of anglophone countries of origin but also numerical proportions. However, I am not aware of any demographic survey on this subject, and for the time being this suggestion must therefore remain purely conjectural.

<sup>14</sup> See note 10.

<sup>15</sup> "Because editorship is rotated from one issue to the next, *Arc* demonstrates how aesthetic tastes and concerns vary even within the English-speaking community of Israel." Quoted from [http://www.geocities.com/iawe\\_mailbox/pubs.html](http://www.geocities.com/iawe_mailbox/pubs.html) (accessed 10 April, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Haim Chertok & Shalom [Seymour] Freedman, "Introduction," *Arc: Journal of the Israel Association of Writers in English* 12 (1997): 4.

<sup>17</sup> Chertok & Freedman, "Introduction," 4.

in summer 1999 and was given the punning title "Expatriates and Ex-Patriots" by its editors, Jeff Green and David Margolis. Intriguingly, after the programmatic effort of *Arc* 13, the journal's next issue, published in spring 2000, was "self-edited"<sup>18</sup> and seems to be pervaded by a certain flavour of indecision.<sup>19</sup> Far from giving any concerted statement of purpose or definition of collective identity, *Arc* 14, in what appears to be almost a gesture of retraction, seems to be the product of a retreat behind the notion of diversity and eschews articulation of the common, and sometimes perhaps unsettling, experience of transculturation programmatically.

This had been strongly emphasized by Green and Margolis in their "Introduction" to *Arc* 13. There, they state that "we hoped to encourage Israeli writers in English to explore the stimulating but perhaps uncomfortable space in which we function as writers in a language that is foreign to the place where we live."<sup>20</sup> The 'place' they refer to, obviously the state of Israel, is the contact zone of a varied multi- and, invariably, transcultural encounter, in certain respects perhaps even more varied than in the diaspora. For in Israel, the encounter with the other 'Self' – born Israelis and Jewish returnees from the global diaspora and their different cultural backgrounds, religious and secular – compounds past and present encounters with the individual's diasporic origins in a narrowly confined, and possibly 'claustrophobic',<sup>21</sup> space with encounters with various 'Others'. All of this takes place in a highly charged and potentially violent atmosphere under constant international scrutiny.

All of those encounters are thematically present in the IAWE publications. Yet the most basic one remains the continuous encounter with the English language and whatever this entails:

We have [...] not given up the language we brought from the diaspora, which also means that we are still engaged in dialogue with the place we came from. Our memories of that place color our experiences in Israel, and our experiences in Israel

<sup>18</sup> "A Word of Explanation," *Arc: Journal of the Israel Association of Writers in English* 14 (2000): 4.

<sup>19</sup> While, in "A Word of Explanation," 4, it is claimed once again that "it is important to foster creativity in English and the other languages that writers brought to Israel, along with other precious cultural luggage," the main intention of this issue was "to introduce [members] to one another as to the public at large."

<sup>20</sup> Green & Margolis, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>21</sup> See Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage. Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000): 20.

color our responses to that place when we return to it, either physically or in memory.<sup>22</sup>

Central to Green's and Margolis' description are the categories of experience (past and present) and of memory, which is relevant to all three temporal dimensions. Through memory past experiences reverberate into the present and, compounded with those of the present, inform expectations of the future. Any disruption of the interconnectedness of the three temporal dimensions threatens individual and collective identification schemata. This disruptive experience has been rendered evocatively by Linda Grant in her award-winning novel *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000). In an attempt to re-create the historical consciousness of an Anglo-Jewish immigrant to postwar Mandate Palestine, the British-based author shows her narrator suffering from what amounts, in effect, a split personality. For all her memories, she says, "were in the English language and what I saw when I opened my eyes was in Hebrew, so how could I know what I was anymore."<sup>23</sup> Later, she remembers: "I felt as if we were all half here and half somewhere else, deprived of our native languages, stumbling over an ugly ancient tongue. We knew that we were to be re-made and re-born and we half did and half didn't want to be."<sup>24</sup> She has the feeling as if she were living in two spaces at the same time, as if there were two Palestines at odds with each other:

As much as I felt that I belonged heart and soul to Zion, it was the British whose taste and idioms, language and dress, cooking and habits I knew and understood. The British were the only people who did not seem like foreigners to me, although they were the colonial, the oppressive power. They were the enemy and the paradox of my life was that the ways of the enemy were partly mine too.<sup>25</sup>

The experience of disruption and paradox, similar to that rendered by Grant, yet finally transcended, is also the subject of Mordechai Beck's "My Aliyah Story," published in *Arc* 13. The prose sketch of the Jerusalem-based writer ends with the British-born narrator lifting the commemorative mug of the

<sup>22</sup> Green & Margolis, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>23</sup> Linda Grant, *When I Lived in Modern Times* (London: Granta, 2000): 55.

<sup>24</sup> Grant, *When I Lived in Modern Times*, 106.

<sup>25</sup> *When I Lived in Modern Times*, 106.



coronation of Elizabeth II, which he brought along to Israel, and aiming it at the kitchen wall. "At that precise moment," he says,

the years of psychological and emotional colonialism unwind inside me. The memories and nostalgia that have shackled my heart and soul pour out and turn into wings. I open the window and test the air with my new lungs. Weightless, I step out of the room and slowly, effortlessly, rise.<sup>26</sup>

What the narrator has finally achieved is *aliyah*. (The Hebrew word referring to Jewish immigration in the Land of Israel literally means 'to ascend, to rise'.) Beck's prose sketch chronicles three stages of *aliyah*, during the first of which the narrator perceives himself unredeemably as the 'Other', indelibly, as it seems, conditioned by his British upbringing: "Israel, says one of my inner voices, will always remain in parentheses, will never be the thing itself."<sup>27</sup> The second stage he experiences as one of transition: "How long does it take to make this aliyah – the internal ascent – the transcendent sort that allows you to look back and down at what you were before and continue on your way? I haven't, it seems, reached that point. I'm in permanent transition."<sup>28</sup> Doubts are the corollary of this stage: "But do I really want to be transformed so radically; isn't all this talk of 'ascending' just a metaphysical trap, a necessary myth justifying mundane realities?"<sup>29</sup> In the end, it is trivial divorce news from the British royals which makes him recognize: "So they're human after all!"<sup>30</sup> The myth sustaining his own continuing Britishness shattered, he gropes for the fated mug.

The question remains, however, what the narrator in Beck's prose sketch actually rises to. Obviously, he still adheres to English as his preferred language of artistic expression, although it is central to the foreignness he experiences, as he had suggested earlier: "Between the unresolved yearnings, I wonder exactly what is it that I can't get rid of. Is it the English language,

<sup>26</sup> Mordechai Beck, "My Aliyah Story (In Three Parts)," *Arc: Journal of the Israel Association of Writers in English* 13 (1999): 24.

<sup>27</sup> Beck, "My Aliyah Story," 22.

<sup>28</sup> "My Aliyah Story," 22–23.

<sup>29</sup> "My Aliyah Story," 23.

<sup>30</sup> "My Aliyah Story," 24.

with its delicate cadences and subtle turns of phrase, the rich allusions of its poetry, the hard clarity of its no-nonsense, sceptical philosophy?"<sup>31</sup>

In his poetry collection *Giving Myself Away* (2001), Jeffrey M. Green, writer, poet, and translator (and the co-editor of *Arc* 13), originally from Greenwich Village but now living in Jerusalem, addresses the language issue most explicitly in "Trains, the English Language, and the Jewish Imagination."<sup>32</sup> The first part of the poem reiterates a 'Jewish' joke: of the Nazi ordering a Jew in a fully occupied train compartment to remove his suitcase from the seat it is perched on. When the Jew, reading a Yiddish paper, doesn't show himself to be impressed, the Nazi gloatingly heaves the suitcase out of the window – the punch-line being, of course, that the suitcase was not the Jew's at all. The (in view of its historical setting) rather ambivalent story then provides the material for an extended metaphor which the poet engages to reflect on his own 'loquation':

Do you have to love a language to use it well  
Why should I care more about your English  
Than the Jew in that joke  
Cared about the stranger's suitcase?

The English language, it is implied here, is foreign to the Jewish poet; it is the language of the Other ("your English") and, it seems, expendable like the stranger's suitcase. How it came to be the language of the Jewish poet talking here is explained in the following lines:

Two stops ago, my lucky grandparents  
Boarded the American train.  
Where it came from meant little enough to them,  
And what has its destination to do with my history?  
I never felt at home with English.<sup>33</sup>

The metaphor of the train not only connotes an essential foreignness in the diaspora. It also constitutes an attempt to divorce the anglophone diaspora

<sup>31</sup> Beck, "My Aliyah Story," 23.

<sup>32</sup> First published in *Arc: Journal of the Israel Association of Writers in English* 14 (2000): 62–64.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey M. Green, "Trains, the English Language, and the Jewish Imagination," in Green, *Giving Myself Away* (Tel Aviv: Sivan, 2001): 6.

(particularly America) and its language from both collective and individual Jewish history or, at the very least, to highlight its episodic character in that history. This, of course, goes right against William D. Rubinstein's argument that the English-speaking world provides an "appropriate matrix for Jewish history."<sup>34</sup> To the speaker, the English language ostensibly is merely a useful tool, because:

Were I not to the language born,  
I'd have had to learn it,  
Envyng native speakers, maybe  
Having more fun with the language.

It is precisely the global currency, the common, and almost 'indecent', availability, of English hinted at here which adds to the speaker's unease with the diasporic language:

But where's the intimacy  
When so many speakers tongue it?  
Talking English is like making love  
With the bedroom door wide open and the shades up.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, still, the speaker remains saddled with his English. In the fourth, concluding, section of the poem he acknowledges his bond to the language and, it seems to me, the at least partial validity of ascriptions of this bond from the 'outside'. Furthermore, the reference to the common Jewish vernacular of the generation of his grandparents may even hint at its replacement with English as, in the terms of Cynthia Ozick, a "New Yiddish"<sup>36</sup>:

I'm a Hebe, and the Goyim didn't have it all wrong.  
My grandparents read Yiddish papers on the train.  
But that's my valise in the luggage rack above my head.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> W.D. Rubinstein, *A History of the Jews in the English-Speaking World: Great Britain* (London: Routledge, 1996): 1.

<sup>35</sup> Green, "Trains, the English Language, and the Jewish Imagination," 7.

<sup>36</sup> Cynthia Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish," (1970) in Ozick, *Art & Ardor: Essays* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983).

<sup>37</sup> Green, "Trains, the English Language, and the Jewish Imagination," 7.

However, like many of his fellow Israeli writers in English, Green seems to find it difficult to find a market for his work in English, and this raises the question at whom the voice of anglophone writers in Israel is directed. In an academic book of his, *Thinking through Translation* (2001), Green refers resignedly to his own literary production in English: "Since I live in Israel," he says, "far away from the literary markets of the English-speaking world, I cannot hope to interest publishers in projects of my own."<sup>38</sup> Later, in the same book, he adds:

I identify much more strongly with Israeli culture than with American or British culture. So much so that I have begun to write and publish in Hebrew, although this remains difficult for me. I will never master Hebrew the way I know English, yet I want to address the people where I live, whom I know, in their own language, rather than speak to people abroad, who are strangers to me.<sup>39</sup>

Although, to the uncharitable critic, this may seem like making a virtue of necessity, Karen Alkalay-Gut confirms in her essay on English writers in Israel that there is hardly a readership for anglophone Israeli literature in that country: "English readers in Israel do not seem to need speakers for their cause, and prefer their country of origin when it comes to literature, assuaging their cultural hunger with imported books."<sup>40</sup> On the other hand, it seems difficult for Israeli writers in English to reach a significantly large audience in the anglophone world.

However, recently, as Karen Alkalay-Gut notes, "the Web has not only validated the use of English in Israel and provided English writers with a stage, a market, and an audience, but has also give[n] the means to fulfil a sense of political purpose, whether for dissension and/or support."<sup>41</sup> Of course, some Israeli writers in English are published in anglophone countries, not least among them Karen Alkalay-Gut herself or, to name two authors not affiliated with the IAWWE, Simon Louvish and Naomi Ragen. Louvish has been published in the UK by Heinemann and other well-established publishers in hardcover and in paperback editions. Yet, it may be symptomatic that his novel *The Days of Miracles and Wonders* (1997), first published in

<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey M. Green, *Thinking through Translation* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2001): 86-87.

<sup>39</sup> Green, *Thinking through Translation*, 89.

<sup>40</sup> Alkalay-Gut, "Double Diaspora," 462.

<sup>41</sup> "Double Diaspora," 457.

Edinburgh by Canongate, appeared in the USA in the "Emerging Voices" series of Interlink Books and that Louvish finds it increasingly difficult to have his more recent work published. In contrast, Naomi Ragen's bestselling novels are hugely popular in the USA. Their atypical success may be due, to some extent, to their subject-matter: in many of her books, Ragen explores the world of ultra-orthodox Jewry – arguably, to many American Jews a Jewish 'Other' that holds an ambivalent fascination. Yet in Israel, Ragen became known only after her books were translated into Hebrew.<sup>42</sup>

Certainly, many questions remain: is anglophone Jewish literature in Israel a literature of (im-)migration, of return, or of exile? Or is it truly transnational? And are those who produce it Jewish writers, Israeli authors, Americans or British in exile, or all of these? Which is to say: is the transculturality of anglophone Jewish writers in Israel argued for in this essay an indicator of the validity of the concept of a Jewish literature in English, and is their 'loquation' paradigmatic of the global context? What, if any, are the distinctive features of Jewish literature in English with respect to other literatures in English and to other Jewish literatures? Is there really anything "centrally Jewish," as suggested by Ozick in 1970<sup>43</sup> and implied by the Yiddish critic Ba'al Makhshoves much earlier,<sup>44</sup> connoting an essentialist notion of Jewishness controlling inclusion and exclusion? Shouldn't we, rather, think in terms of the formation of cultural allegiances (in the sense of Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities'<sup>45</sup>), of which an important factor is language? And where will this lead us?

From the outset, I was aware that I would not be able to provide answers to all the questions raised in this article. Rather, it has been my objective to stimulate an awareness of, and an academic interest in, the transnational and transcultural dimension of Jewish literature in English. And if, as Sophia Lehmann argues, to create "a mother tongue which incorporates both history and contemporary culture and experience is tantamount to creating a home within

<sup>42</sup> See Alkalay-Gut, "Double Diaspora," 463.

<sup>43</sup> Ozick, "Toward a New Yiddish," 169.

<sup>44</sup> See Ba'al Makhshoves (= Israel Isidor Elyashev), "One Literature in Two Languages" (1918), tr. Hana Wirth-Nesher in *What is Jewish Literature?* ed. Hana Wirth-Nesher (Philadelphia PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1994): 74.

<sup>45</sup> As Lehmann, "In Search of a Mother Tongue," 104, argues in reference to Carole Boyce Davies' work on Caribbean identity. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, rev. ed. 1991).

the diaspora,"<sup>46</sup> then the very tenacity with which Jewish writers from the anglophone diaspora adhere to their English 'mother tongue' even in Israel may not only prove Lehmann's point. By the same token, it seems to me that the phenomenon of the 'double diaspora' of anglophone Jewish writers in Israel may, in turn, sustain the claim that it is, indeed, reasonable to make the distinction of a Jewish literature in English, precisely because it links those authors with their cultural rather than with their chosen national homeland and because the cultural affinities of the countries of the anglophone diaspora are sustained in the Israeli setting by their work and by their interrelation.

An aspect not mentioned by Lehmann, yet arguably a decisive factor also in the creation of a 'linguistic' home within both the diaspora and the double diaspora, is the future perspective. Future expectations project continuity and are essential for the construction of identities, both individual and collective,<sup>47</sup> and, I would add, for constructions of 'home'. With regard to the 'loquation' of Jewish literature in English in Israel, this perspective is ambivalent: Rooted in the anglophone diaspora, as is the individual past of (most of) those who produce it,<sup>48</sup> its present in Israel is determined by transcultural encounters, merging, as Green and Margolis suggest, memory and present experiences. The question is, however, whether anglophone Jewish writing in Israel has a future. A second generation of writers in English has as yet not developed in Israel, and this is one of the major differences to Jewish writing in English from the diaspora, whose diversity and vibrancy seem to expand continuously across the generations. Of the thirty-eight contributors to *English Poetry from Israel*, only Orit Kruglanski was born in the country (in Tel Aviv), and she writes both in English and in Hebrew.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, time may

<sup>46</sup> Lehmann, "In Search of a Mother Tongue," 115.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Karmela Liebkind, "Ethnic Identity: Challenging the Boundaries of Social Psychology," in *Social Psychology of Identity and the Self Concept*, ed. Glynis M. Breakwell (Surrey Seminars in Social Psychology; London: Surrey UP / Academic Press, 1995): 171.

<sup>48</sup> With a few exceptions: Zygmunt Frankel, who emigrated to Israel in 1952, was born in Poland, deported to Siberia, and lived for a while in Belgium and England; Charles Kormos was born in Romania but later also lived in England before he emigrated to Israel; Gavriel Ben-Ephraim made *aliyah* from the USA in 1970 but is originally from Germany; Eugene Dubnov emigrated to Israel from Estonia in 1971. For biographical details, see Alkalay-Gut, Unger & Frankel, ed., *English Poetry from Israel*, 68–70.

<sup>49</sup> See the brief biography of Kruglanski in *English Poetry from Israel*, ed. Alkalay-Gut, Unger & Frankel, 70.

put anglophone Jewish literature in Israel to the test: will it prove to be not only productive but also re-productive? Or will it turn out, in the long run, to be sterile, like some cross-breeds, and dependent on the steady, if trickling, influx of 'expatriates'<sup>50</sup> from the anglophone Jewish diaspora?

In this article I concentrated largely on what appears to be an 'institutional' voice of Israeli writers in English, because, to some degree and against the odds, it is an amplified voice, and intended to be heard. Nevertheless, I am very much aware of the possibility that this voice may be distorted and that it is not necessarily representative of the variety of individual voices of writers in English in Israel. Still, in conclusion I would like to return to the cover illustration of *English Poetry from Israel*.

In the Book of Jonah, the runaway prophet is saved by the fish from drowning, but its belly certainly is not a place in which he feels comfortable. Is this why the IAWÉ writers chose for their self-presentation the image of Jonah in the belly of the fish? Because, like Jonah who was separated by the blubber and the deep seas from his fellow men, they inhabit an uncomfortable place of in-between-ness,<sup>51</sup> a place that is neither here nor there, and a place, perhaps, that makes you wonder who you are and where you really belong? Is that what the experience of transculturality means to them? Is it a trap? Does it spell isolation, imprisonment? Or is it a place of transition, one located in time rather than in space? A place from which *aliyah* will finally be achieved through the gullet of the fish?

The image of the writer in the belly of the fish may call to mind George Orwell's 1940 essay "Inside the Whale" and Salman Rushdie's 'postcolonial' critique of Orwell's endorsement of political quietism. To Orwell, inspired by "the essential Jonah act of allowing himself to be swallowed, remaining passive, *accepting*"<sup>52</sup> (an act he perceives as being performed by Henry Miller):

<sup>50</sup> See Alkalay-Gut, "English Writing in Israel," 13: "That I have concentrated upon dead writers [in this essay] might seem to indicate that the phenomenon of foreign-language writers in Israel is a disappearing one. While this is true of writers using languages such as Polish and Hungarian (whose average age in the Writers' Associations is well over 50), among the English writers there is a constant influx of new talent."

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted from Rushdie, "Outside the Whale" (1984), in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981-91* (London: Granta / Penguin, 1992): 95; cf. George Orwell, "Inside the Whale," in *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, vol. 12: *A Patriot After All 1940-1941*, ed. Peter Davison (London: Martin Secker & Warburg, 1998): 107.

seemingly there is nothing left but quietism – robbing reality of its terrors by simply submitting to it. Get inside the whale – or rather, admit you are inside the whale (for you are, of course). Give yourself over to the world-process [...] simply accept it, endure it, record it. That seems to be the formula that any sensitive novelist is now likely to adopt.<sup>53</sup>

Not surprisingly, Rushdie, in his "Outside the Whale" (1984), emphatically argues against this. "The truth is," he maintains, "that there is no whale. We live in a world without hiding places,"<sup>54</sup> and "outside the whale the writer is obliged to accept that he (or she) is part of the crowd, part of the ocean, part of the storm."<sup>55</sup> Yet for Orwell – and to my mind, Rushdie, intent on emphasizing the writer's political responsibility, does not do full justice to this aspect – being in the whale is also transitional: "until the world has shaken itself into its new shape."<sup>56</sup> These are the concluding words of Orwell's essay and, written in the early years of the war, when literature must have seemed but an inefficient defence against modern arsenals, they may, perhaps, be taken as an expression of hope and of the vision of a time when the enforced quietism would be no more.

Whether a reference to Orwell's or Rushdie's essays be intended by the editors of *English Poetry from Israel* must remain conjectural. More readily appreciated is, certainly, the allusion to the Book of Jonah and it may also serve to answer the question of the value of being 'inside' or 'outside': Questioned by the sailors of the storm-tossed boat, Jonah not only reaffirms his Jewish identity, incidentally giving a concise definition of what it means to him to be Jewish – "I *am* an Hebrew; and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, which hath made the sea and the dry *land*" (Jon 1:9); from the belly of the fish Jonah cries out in utter despair to God: "And the LORD spake unto the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry *land*" (Jon 2:10).

<sup>53</sup> Quoted from Rushdie, "Outside the Whale," 95; cf. Orwell, "Inside the Whale," 111.

<sup>54</sup> Rushdie, "Outside the Whale," 99.

<sup>55</sup> "Outside the Whale," 100.

<sup>56</sup> Orwell, "Inside the Whale," 112.

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