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Alina Molisak, Shoshana Ronen, eds.. *Polish and Hebrew Literature and National Identity.* Warsaw: Elipsa, 2010. 310 pp. 42.00 zł, cloth, ISBN 978-83-7151-901-7.

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A red Star of David emerging from a red Polish eagle with outspread wings is one of the symbols created by the Israeli artist Yael Bartana, designated to represent Poland at the next Venice International Art Exhibition. For some years, Bartana in installations and filmed events has *recreated* a fake past and an (im)possible future for Polish-Jewish coexistence. The artist is not among the authors included in *Polish and Hebrew Literature and National Identity*, but her oeuvre could be a kind of representation for the enterprise promoted by the editors from the University of Warsaw, Shoshana Ronen, professor of Hebrew language and literature, and Alina Molisak, assistant professor of Polish literature.

In October 2009, an international meeting organized by the University of Warsaw gathered twenty-six scholars from Poland and Israel, for the purpose of exploring the profound similarity between their national literatures and their construction of national mythologies. Actually the cultural topoi that unite the two nations are many: messianism above all (whose countless mutual influxes still need a thorough examination), but also other issues more connected to historical circumstances (e.g., the constant feeling of isolation and siege, the conviction that survival relies on one's own strength, and the myth of national insurrections). The common motifs that rely on folklore and mystical tradition are also numerous (e.g., the co-presence of the living and the dead and the bond with past generations). In recent history, there are many visible and tactile aspects of Polish presence in Israel, even without discussing chassidim and their dress, explicitly inspired by the clothing of Polish nobility. It is enough to think of Menachem Begin (in Poland, Mieczysław Biegun), a former brave soldier in General Władysław Anders's Polish army, in a white shirt unbuttoned at the neck, his prophetic look, and his entire ***body language***, which were modeled on Polish romantic bards. And who knows if the Women in Black against Israeli occupation did not draw their inspiration from the Polish dames, who, after the failed insurrection of 1863, decided to dress uniquely in black, until Poland could be free of the three imperial powers.

The Warsaw conference, rather than individuating and exploring transversal themes, more often aimed at placing descriptions of texts and authors belonging to each of the cultural areas side by side. But even the same contiguity of different cultural situations is sufficient to open new unexpected spaces to analysis and reflections. Thus the great variety of themes included in the book makes a synthesis of the whole a particularly difficult task. To begin, it is necessary to quote the preliminary definition taken by the editors: "in our

understanding what defines a literature as Polish or Hebrew is the language of the work and not the national-religious identity of the writer" (p. 9).

The linguistic border, apparently a transparent one and the easiest to apply, may present some kinds of opacity: to whose ***nationality*** does a translation belong? In her contribution, "Hebrew Literature and the Creation of the Zionist Narrative," Anita Shapira dwells on the importance of translated novels--and therefore of "foreign," non-Jewish contributions--in the creation of the Zionist canon. Among the fundamental texts in the upbringing of whole generations of young Israelis Shapira indicates the romantic-patriotic-insurrectionist frescos by Henryk Sienkiewicz, while "every Palmach soldier" carried with him, as reported by the author, not books by such national writers as Haim Nahman Bialik or Yosef Haim Brenner, nor even texts by the soldier-hero Josepf Trumpeldor, but a novel by a non-Jewish Soviet author, Aleksandr Bek's ***Panfilov's Men*** (1960) (p. 26).

On the Polish side, the contributions are impartially divided between those that explore Jewish authors and themes and those aimed at showing, from a generally very critical point of view, the formation of Polish national myths. To this group belong the essays devoted to the harsh anti-Semitism by Count Zygmunt Krasiński, one of the Polish romantic bards (Aleksandra Sekuła); to the creation of consolatory legends on the national past discussed by Adam Mickiewicz in his Paris Lectures on Slavic Literatures held at College de France (Monika Rudaś-Grodzka); and to the meaning of borderlines and the "flagging" of national territory in a widespread book of songs of the interwar period (Eugenia Prokop-Janiec). Contributions by Stanisław Obirek on Witold Gombrowicz's ***Diary*** (1953-68) and by Mieczysław Dąbrowski on nationalism in contemporary emigrant literature also deal with Polish myths, but we are already aware in the second half of the twentieth century and at the turn of the twenty-first, that these writers, with Gombrowicz at their head, are resolute and often pitiless critics of Polish nationalism in all its aspects.

Five contributions treat the double Polish-Jewish identity. Ronen's essay on Jehoshua Ozjasz Thon describes the life and thought of the rabbi of the progressive synagogue in Krakow who was also a philosopher, a journalist, a literary critic, and a Zionist activist. This outstanding figure is mirrored in the essay of the other editor, Molisak, devoted to Jakub Appenszlak, who was among the protagonists of Polish-Jewish culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Appenszlak, also a writer, a cultural activist, and a Zionist, was above all a journalist and the editor in chief of some of the most important Polish-Jewish periodicals. A fierce enemy of any kind of assimilation, he was at the same time a partisan of a Jewish and Zionist culture that, together with the Polish language, maintained the specificity of Polish Jewry. Dealing with double identity are also the essays by Maria Antosik-Piela on Roman Brandstaetter, the writer who moved on from Polish to Jewish nationalism and from Zionism to the fight against anti-Semitism, and who became, after the war, one of the leading Christian poets of his country; the article by Tomasz Żukowski on the terrible confession written by the Otwock ghetto policeman Calel Perechodnik, and Kazimiera Szczuka's contribution on the literature of the second generation (in this case, literary texts that describe the relationship between daughters and mothers who were Holocaust survivors). The essay by Andrzej Zieniewicz, "Between an Exile and Redemption," traces the origins of the phenomenon of double identity in assimilationist narratives: "the most crucial fact," writes the scholar from the University of Warsaw, "is that assimilation, in all its aspects, created and propagated the highly important and extremely 'prolific' in literature question of a double Jewish-Polish and Polish-Jewish identity, an identity that was 'a real bond,' a practical, historical and process-like fulfillment of what seemed to be 'impossible,' indefinable and contra-

dictory" (p. 183). As divided and painful, impossible to live with and even impossible to describe is the double, Israeli-Polish, identity, described in the essay by Iris Milner on the basis of Yehudit Hendel's work.

Several authors treat the eternal theme of Polish anti-Semitism in different ways. Małgorzata Domagalska explores Polish anti-Semitic novels at the turn of the twentieth century; and Bożena Keff examines the meaning of Jewish women characters in current Polish literature and poses the question whether in today's Poland "the word 'Jew' is neutral or offensive" (p. 202). Somewhat apart from the other essays by Polish scholars is the contribution by Elżbieta Janicka, which analyzes Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz's last novel ***Kinderszenen*** (2008). Rymkiewicz, an influential and controversial author, is the well-known author of a novel-essay on Warsaw's Umschlagplatz in which the writer, acting as a porte-parole of the Polish national conscience, assumed the responsibility for the Holocaust. In ***Kinderszenen*** however, Rymkiewicz, who has more recently shared positions of the most extreme nationalism, offers a "holocaustization" of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, which he describes as an exceptional phenomenon, without parallels in the whole of Polish (i.e., of world) history.

On the Israeli side, three essays (by Aminadav Dykman, Avner Holtzman, and Ariel Hirschfeld) are devoted to the figure of the "national poet," embodied by Bialik, and two (by Nitza Ben-Dov and Dan Laor) focus on Nobel Prize winner Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "rightly considered as the most significant spokesman of Polish Jewry in modern Hebrew literature" (p. 106). Two essays (by David Fishelov and Hannan Hever) reveal how canonical authors, such as the Zionist-revisionist Vladimir Zhabotinsky and the Zionist-Marxist Moshe Shamir, in the novels ***Samson*** (1930) and ***The King of Flesh and Blood*** (1954), used biblical figures to create a new concept of nationality although it was unable to set aside the theological elements. The piece by Yael Shenkar on the settlers' literature offers a counterpart to the one by Prokop-Janiec on the mythologization of Polish borders, a place not only apt to delimit the national territory but also, and maybe foremost, devoted to struggles with the enemy. However, in Israel, maintains Shenkar, the religious option could, in a perhaps not too distant future, offer a key for criticizing the ethnicization of this country's nationalism. The last piece to be mentioned here, "In the Trail of War and Guilt" by Nurith Gertz and Gal Hermoni, is devoted to Israeli perception of guilt toward the Arabs, such as expressed in two films: ***Kirbeth Khizeh*** (1978) and ***Waltz with Bashir*** (2008). If in Polish literature the "Other" is the Jew, so argue the editors in their comment to this essay, in Israeli literature the "Other" is doubtless the Arab. But the emotive closeness of the two countries gives also a greater evidence to their differences: it is possible to generalize saying that, while in Poland the prevalent auto-image is still one of purity and innocence, in Israel it is the guilt feeling for having "stopped looking into the face of the other" to inform the greatest part of cultural products (p. 205).

The only flaw in this volume, whose richness and attractiveness I have tried to summarize synthetically, is the relative lack of comparative essays (the only essay to offer a parallel vision of two authors belonging to different cultures is Dykman's, where, however, the Israeli bard Bialik is not compared to Mickiewicz but to the Russian Alexander Puškin). The Warsaw ghetto insurrection, for instance, offered the opportunity for analyzing the ways myths bonded to this event in both literatures. The presence in the national imagery of both countries of a figure at the same time real and symbolical, such as Bruno Schulz, likewise might have been discussed.

This volume underlines the importance of the (perhaps urgent) task of parallel studies of Polish and Israeli national literature. Once the generation of Polish Jews who survived the Holocaust,

people like Chone Shmeruk or Natan Gross or others, men and women who owned the key to both cultures, disappear, younger generation scholars whose knowledge of both the Israeli and Polish canon will suffice to implement parallel studies. Every "invented tradition," to quote Eric Hobsbawn's famous definition that could serve as a good comment on the whole book, needs first of all to lay its foundations on the sense of continuity. And where there is no territorial continuity, or where it has been severed, the continuity given by literature is needed even more. Israeli literature's sense of continuity lays (also) in its rooting in Polish soil and tradition. The continuity and the "mission" of Polish literature lays also, or maybe above all, in its ability to integrate the Jewish element, which has been, for good and bad, a fundamental element in the identity construction of this country, and which still constitutes one of its spiritual compass needles.