

Anticipation, Hauntology and Nostalgia: Israeli Novels of the Post-Oslo Era

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My talk will present a current trend in the mainstream of contemporary Israeli literature which may reflect the state of the withered liberal left in Israel, and that is nostalgia for a lost anticipation, a lost hope for the future signaled in the Oslo accords that had been signed between Israel and the Palestinians in the early 1990s.

From the very beginning of its formation, Zionism has been a movement motivated by anticipation. As a revolutionary movement, it directed its focus to the future with enthusiasm. The seminal text to inspire the Zionist vision was a utopian novel written by Theodor Herzl, the visionary of the state of Israel, titled *Altneuland* (1902), a novel that imagines life in Palestine as a Jewish state with an exemplary welfare society, peaceful and prosperous. In fact, the foundational figures of the Zionist literature revolve around anticipation: such is the figure of “the seer for the house of Israel”, a notion coined by the writer Isaac Erter at the middle of the 19th century, and became an idiom noting the role of the Hebrew writer with regard to his nation, and the prophetic mode assigned to this position; such is also the Israeli national anthem, “The Hope” (*Hatikvah*), written in 1877 to express the wish to reclaim the land of Israel as a sovereign nation state, more than 70 years prior to its establishment in 1948, and yet chosen as its anthem at the very moment of the so-called fulfillment of its vision. Indeed, the anticipatory mode of Zionism had always been mingled with looking far into the past, and the very oximoronic title *Alt-Neu-Land* points to that exactly. It is this trait that marks Zionism in general, and Israeli literature in particular, with a sense of Hauntology (to follow Derrida’s term in *Specters of Marx*, 1994). In fact we can see that early literary works, written shortly after the establishment of the nation state, reflect a strong sense of haunting. As soon as the vision has been fulfilled, its specters started to haunt the central cultural agents, expressing nostalgia for the visionary stage.

I argue that the mainstream of Israeli literature today is haunted by the lost anticipation to an overall arrangement that will end the conflict with the Palestinians. The sequence of violent events since the signing of the Oslo agreements in 1993 - the assassination of prime minister Yitshak Rabin in 1995; the collapse of the 2000 Camp David talks and the October 2000 riots; the second war in Lebanon; the deportation of The Palestinian Authority from Gaza strip; and the series of clashes between the Israeli army and Gaza, among other events – all resulted in a political impasse in negotiations and produced a public conviction, shared by both Israelis and Palestinians, that the conflict cannot be compromised or reconciled. This conviction has been fortified by the rise of right wing parties to power over the past decade. The resolution of the conflict fell into a political deadlock (Ghanem, Mustafa and Brake, *Israel in the Post Oslo Era*, 2019).

The hauntological tendency grows stronger in the post-Oslo era, and with greater vigor over the past few years, with the unavoidable retreat from the two-states solution and the recognition that Israel circles in a loop of nationalism and populist conservatism. I will focus on the years 2014-15, when some of the most central and successful novelists in Israel published novels that express the way Israeli cultural Elite is haunted by the specter of the lost future inherent in the vision of Oslo accords. These novels try to re-live a lost anticipation for the future by looking back to the past. They express the sense of “a time out of joint”, but by that they also renounce the anticipatory mode and withdraw the position of ‘the seer for the house of Israel’ that looks forward, for their anticipation is blocked by a nostalgic gaze looking backwards. Anticipation in these novels is sealed by the sense of ‘End of history’ (Fukuyama, 1992), signaled in the liberal-democrat false vision of the Oslo accords. It seems that the nostalgic mode – especially through Svetlana Boym’s interpretation of the term (Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001) - and the refusal to neglect the lost future, prevents these novels from imagining new and other – possible and impossible – futures. Nevertheless, the nostalgia for the lost vision of Oslo is also a nostalgia for the very mode of anticipation and hope that identified Zionism ever since.

I will shortly survey a few of the main Israeli novels published during 2014-15 – all of them had been translated to foreign languages and are largely regarded worldwide as the face of Israeli literature today:

My main discussion would center on David Grossman’s well known novel, *A Horse Walks into a Bar* (2014, winner of the Man Booker international prize) as an hauntological novel that recreates a performative anticipation while mourning a lost future. The whole novel stages a stand-up show, where the stand-up artist tells an episode from his teen years: while spending time at a youth camp in the southern border of Israel, he is called to return home because of a sudden death in his family. Being an only child of Holocaust survivors, he does not know which of his parents died. He reconstructs his journey as an anticipation shared with the audience, and brings us back to the point where fate has been preordained, in a way that haunts the present of the performative act.

Other novels to be mentioned:

Judas by Amos Oz (2014, nominated for the Man Booker international prize): a novel trailed by ghosts of historical and mythical past. Oz is occupied with the question of treason and writes a statement of defense on the political left. Scholars identify this novel as a macabre version of Herzl’s *Altneuland*; *All the Rivers* by Dorit Rabinian (2014): Staged in New York 2002, this novel fantasizes a romance between an Israeli young woman and a Palestinian artist. The novel was condemned by Israel education ministry; *The Third* by Yishai Sarid (2015): a dystopian novel about the destruction of a third temple and the end of Israel, due to its withdrawal from the striving for peace; *Pain* by Zeruya Shalev (2015) and *The Extra* by A.B. Yehoshua (2014).