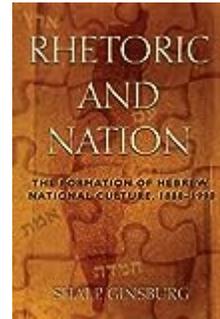




**Shai P. Ginsburg.** *Rhetoric and Nation: The Formation of Hebrew National Culture, 1880-1990.* Judaic Traditions in Literature, Music, and Art Series. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014. 484 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3333-4.



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## Fragmentation from the Margins to the Core of Modern Hebrew National Literature

*Rhetoric and Nation* situates Hebrew national literature at the nexus of several fields of study as well as several theoretical frameworks. Shai P. Ginsburg's reading of the reception of Hebrew national literature argues that we cannot fully understand literature in isolation from several other genres. His skill at integrating several genres into his study of literature opens his work up in relevance to scholars beyond the field of literary study, especially to those interested in the history of Zionism. Chapter 6, "History and Mourning: The Reception of Moshe Shamir's *He Walked through the Fields*," for example, considers how critics have read the novel with Berl Katznelson's eulogy for Joseph Trumpeldor, the former second lieutenant in the Russian army whose death at Tel Hai has been a staple of Zionist and Israeli nationalism, "in the back of their minds" (p. 246). The eulogy itself was an adaptation of the Yizkor prayer, included in Jewish liturgy since the twelfth-century Crusades. Through this layered example of literary reception, Ginsburg addresses the place of literature in the ongoing production of Jewish secularism, and examines

how authors have figured and appropriated tropes of Hebrew literature such as death. Ginsburg also illuminates the influence of texts beyond the confines of the Yishuv and later State of Israel, such as Christian genres, narratives, figures, politics, and practices, without reducing Hebrew national culture to those influences. Rather, he interrogates the ways that the literary works and authors he analyzes use but also subvert and move beyond those influences.

Against seeing modern Hebrew national literature as a unified or coherent body, Ginsburg argues that any literature is fragmented, and this fragmentation and anxiety over it is at the core of Hebrew national literature, not just at its margins. Focusing his study on Hebrew discourse (distinct from Zionism, though the two sometimes overlap), Ginsburg traces "exchange between texts of varying genres," paying careful attention to three "major genres" or "canons": prose fiction, literary and cultural criticism, and political and ideological writings (p. 6). When read together, these genres reveal something new about all of them and about Hebrew discourse as a

larger body. But this is not to suggest that all Hebrew national texts share a logic. To the contrary, Ginsburg notes that "each text presents its own singular logic," and he traces the fissures and fractures within and across texts. These collective moments, however, do not weaken the power of Hebrew national discourse. When the discourse is "incoherent and disjointed," Ginsburg argues, it is "stronger" precisely because "it can accommodate and contain distinct, disparate moments without disintegrating." Although Ginsburg argues in favor of discerning these disparate moments, he also acknowledges that there is an "effect of unity of the Hebrew discourse of the nation," which "lies in the rearticulation of key terms." Though authors of Hebrew national discourse are not united, they may appear to be because of the "redeployment of signs within divergent discursive moments and contexts" (p. 19).

The book is arranged chronologically as well as thematically. The first three chapters, focused especially on the 1920s, are Ginsburg's argument for and analysis of the failure of Hebrew national literature to link language and territory and to link the two in tandem to the project of Jewish nationalism in Ottoman Palestine. This central failure and fragmentation, he argues, perpetually haunt all of Hebrew national literature, a commonality among Ahad Ha-'am, Moshe Smolensky, and Joseph Hayyim Brenner—whatever antagonisms and differences they have articulated among themselves. Moving forward to the 1940s, the second three chapters analyze "what is entailed in *return to history*," or "the articulation of history and myth in the Hebrew discourse of the nation" (pp. 154, 28). The labor movement became central to Hebrew national discourse, especially through David Ben Gurion, Meir Yaari, and Moshe Shamir. The final three chapters attend to the legacy of pre-State literature during the early State, especially from the 1960s to 1977. For Ginsburg, 1977 marked the end of the hegemony of the labor movement and the beginning of an increasing voice for previously marginalized, often right-wing discourse. Through works by Amos Oz, Yaakov Shabtai, and Dan Miron, Ginsburg analyzes various ways that aesthetics have been central to Hebrew national discourse.

Ginsburg combines his own interpretive readings with a study of the history and reception of Hebrew national literature. He examines each of the texts he includes "on its own" and "rhetorically," as affirmation of political and ideological significance" (pp. 8-9). This strategy reveals his "so-called post-structuralist and postcolonial theory." The importance of this theoretic-

cal approach, for Ginsburg, is to "critique the desire for mastery and closure" (p. 9). He maintains this posture throughout his book, arguing against stable meanings or totalizing understandings. This power of theory does not cancel or dismiss the significance of "locality" for Ginsburg. While Hebrew national discourse has been influenced by European national discourse and can be better understood through theories applied to diverse regions and phenomena, Ginsburg maintains that Hebrew national discourse must also be read within its own place "geographically, historically, religiously, conceptually" (p. 12). He calls this negotiation of local, international, and theoretical "a spatial transposition of theory" (p. 13). This is exemplified by chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 analyzes Shamir's *He Walked through the Fields* (1947), in particular its use of European models of history or, rather, historiography to construct national myth. Ginsburg argues against seeing *He Walked through the Fields* as a successful fulfillment of national ethos. However, while he wishes to reread the novel, he does not dismiss the importance of reception and "public debate," which "was anything but univocal" in this case—further demonstrating the fragmentary and multivalent nature of Hebrew national literature. He argues that debate over whether Uri was the ideal Hebrew man or whether his story marked a critique of the Labor Party establishment shows the extent to which "Uri's symbolic and mythic value was *not yet* determined" (p. 239). In so doing, he traces not only the history of a key novel of Hebrew national discourse but also the ways in which communal memory is constructed in political and social context. And in this case, Ginsburg argues that critics can only argue for the novel's univocality—and implicitly national consensus—by ignoring its reception.

Playing with questions of space and time allows the many authors of Hebrew national discourse to make claims about the nation. Setting an important pattern during the early Mandate, Ahad Ha-'am spatially rejected and thus critiqued the new Jewish colonies, which he claimed replicated the conditions of exile in Jerusalem. This replication was a matter of time for Ha-'am as well: "the Jewish colonization project has also failed to secure the antithetical relationship between past and present, thus emptying the future of the hope for deliverance" (p. 53). Spatial and temporal constructions also create the possibility for conceptualizing difference between Palestine and the United States, wherein the United States becomes "the land of the Jewish masses" (p. 56). In the 1940s, Ginsburg writes, the kibbutz occupied a prized position in Canaanism as the idealized site of national and

social transformation. As such, the kibbutz marks the coexistence of a (negated) past and a visionary future yet to be realized. As a *moment of transition*, the kibbutz depends upon the perception of both past and future, and the cancellation or realization of either would annul it (p. 232). Through this study of imagined past and future, Ginsburg brings into relief the construction of Hebrew national subjectivity and difference in contradistinction to other Jewish movements in Europe and the United States, local Palestinian populations, and Christian Europe. Constructions of time are one of the key ways that he examines the construction of national history not as the product of ... a single, coherent program but, rather, as an interplay of divergent programsâhistorical as well as mythical (p. 205).

Ginsburg pays close attention to gender, including the construction of masculinity and to women as characters or foils to men in Hebrew literature. For example, in chapter 8, he argues explicitly for the centrality of women in Shabtai's *Past Continuous* (1977), against the grain of other critical interpretations of the novel. As characters, women are minor, Ginsburg acknowledges, and thus instead points to how they epitomize the grammar of the novel and provide a radical alternative to the logic of male grammar (p. 326). In chapter 9, he criticizes Miron for reduplicating the marginalization of women that Miron opposes in the history of Hebrew national literature in Miron's own literary review essays. Yet Ginsburg's text is structurally parallel to Miron's writing.

Ginsburg characterizes Miron's criticism as the psychologization and gendering of history. In identifying the stages of Hebrew literature, Miron turns to paradigmatic male figures that he locates as characteristic of each stage (p. 353). Similarly, Ginsburg deconstructs the emphasis on masculinity in the history of Hebrew national literature, including the role of women as characters, and thus his text offers a call to locate women in Hebrew literature amid the fragments of masculine Zionism. But Ginsburg's critique of Miron's marginalization of women poets in Hebrew national literature concludes with a reading of Hayim Nahman Bialik rather than of the poetry of the women whose absent voices Ginsburg laments. The popularity and canonization of authors who are men in Hebrew national literature has often excluded women, thus Ginsburg's attention to popular reception is naturally skewed toward men. This may suggest the limits of reception as a lens for diversifying literary criticism. However, given the acknowledged importance of women as Hebrew poets, even reception could provide the opportunity to analyze the significance of women for literature and nationalism.

*Rhetoric and Nation* skillfully reframes scholarly assessment of Hebrew discourse of the nation in new genres, politics, and meanings. Ginsburg's careful study shows how we can talk about modern Hebrew discourse of the nation without collapsing that discourse with Zionism or treating Hebrew discourse of the nation as an unfragmented, monolithic body of literature.

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