“Lights in the Darkness”: Prostitution, Power and Vulnerability in Early Twentieth-Century Hebrew Literature

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“Lights in the Darkness”:
Prostitution, Power and Vulnerability in
Early Twentieth-Century Hebrew Literature

ILANA SZOBEL

This article explores the juxtaposition of prostitution, masculinity, and nationalism in the works of Hebrew writers at the beginning of the twentieth century. By discussing the psycho-poetical elements that underlie David Vogel’s depiction of prostitution and the ideological elements in Gershon Shofman’s work, and by exposing their dialogue with Hayim Nahman Bialik, this project explores power, vulnerability, gender, sexuality, and nationalism in Hebrew literature of the first half of the twentieth century.

My study argues that the trope of the prostitute enables writers of early Hebrew literature to negotiate questions of strength and weakness in the Jewish world. Although Bialik’s option of sovereign masculinity became the norm for the Zionist discourse, Shofman, Vogel, Brenner, Reuveni and others expressed different perceptions of gender and power. Hence, in order to understand the intensity of the poetic, national, and gendered dilemmas and struggles of this generation, this study offers to listen not only to their concepts of revival, renewal and empowerment, but also to their expressions of weakness, frustration, loss, anger and aggression.

“A WOMAN LIKE THAT”

On one of his nocturnal wanderings, Gurdweil, the protagonist of David Vogel’s novel Hayei nisu’im (Married Life; 1929), is solicited by a prostitute. Rejecting her proposition,

[He] hurried away with a disagreeable feeling of oppression. He could not overcome this disgust, and was angry with himself because of it.
They were poor, miserable creatures, and there was no reason to be
disgusted by them, he said to himself. But it did not help. This was the
first time he had ever spoken to a woman of the streets. Whenever one
of them accosted him he would mumble something unintelligible even
to him and hurry past. Or he would make a wide detour when he saw
them in the distance. His boyhood fear had never left him, and needless
to say, they never gave rise in him to the faintest stirring of desire. As far
as he was concerned, they scarcely belonged to the female sex. And
although he had made up his mind on a number of occasions in the past
to go with one of them—both because his attitude seemed to him
unmanly, morbid, and childish, and because he believed it his duty as a
writer to penetrate every corner of life—as soon as he was about to take
the plunge he found some excuse to put it off.¹

A plethora of feelings and insights emerges from this single paragraph: encoun-
tering the prostitute arouses fear and revulsion in the protagonist, to the point that
he negates her womanhood (“they scarcely belonged to the female sex”) and, no
less important, his own manhood (“his attitude seemed to him unmanly, morbid,
and childish”). At the same time, he considers going to prostitutes as part of his
duty as a writer, but what exactly is that duty? Is he being loyal to a European
conception of prostitution as a life experience that a writer must undergo, or is he
perhaps expressing an attitude more characteristic of Hebrew writers of his gener-
ation, of compassion for prostitutes (“they were poor, miserable creatures”)? I
would ask, too, why our alienated protagonist begins to stammer when he encoun-
ters a streetwalker. What is it about a prostitute that gives rise to such stammering?
Whence this stammer of the turn-of-the-century writer? What disjuncture—
linguistic, poetic, or cultural—is expressed in the representation of a prostitute? In
other words, what associations are conjured by Vogel and other contemporaneous
Hebrew writers between prostitution and manhood, poetics and nationality?

Although prostitution was not a frequent subject in modern Hebrew literature
of the early twentieth century, a not inconsequential number of female figures who
plied the prostitute’s trade are found in the works of some major writers, among
them Gershon Shofman (1880–1972), Yosef Ḥayim Brenner (1881–1921), Aharon
Reuveni (1886–1971), Levi Arieh Arieli (1886–1943), and David Vogel (1891–1944). These writers’ attitudes toward female prostitution were not all of a piece, but ranged from scorn, revulsion, and disgust, on the one hand, to pity and even identification with them, on the other. Yet, despite their differences in style and poetics, these early twentieth-century writers share a basic empathy for the marginal status of the prostitute. Their representations of prostitutes construct a narrative of otherness, aberration, and exploitation.²

This attitude contrasts with the stance found in European and particularly Russian, French, and German literature of the same period, which tended toward idealization and romanticization of the prostitute.³ European literature frequently employs the image of the prostitute as a means of challenging the complacent bourgeoisie. Charles Baudelaire and Thomas de Quincey, the latter author of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), celebrate the prostitute’s impropriety and deploy her image to glorify what Walter Benjamin calls “the asocial.” The prostitute’s world also embodies perceptions of urbanization at the turn of the century and the excitement, as well as the terror, aroused by the great city.⁴ Deborah Nord, in discussing the ambivalent attitudes expressed in Victorian literature toward cities and urbanization, describes a dialectic between senses of isolation and of overcrowding, of liberation and of entrapment, of the masses around one as remote and alienated or as stifling and threatening. At the center of this dialectic is the image of the prostitute, the fallen woman, the woman of the streets, who plays a major role in molding the nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban milieu. Her representations in European literature, too, are not monolithic: she is a symbol of social distress and debasement, but also of empowerment, pleasure, and liberation. Even as a writer uses her to expose society’s decadence, she reflects the solitary roamer’s own lonesome, tormented soul.⁵

How are we to understand the distinctive, nontrivial stance of the Hebrew writers, who, though active in the European milieu and nurtured on its literature, frequently display striking sensitivity toward the women of the streets? Did that sensitivity stem from poetic–emotional identification, such that these Jewish writers perhaps saw in the prostitute an embodiment of the Diaspora’s corrupted, perverted life? And if so, what was the nature of this identification? Beyond that, did the writers of the revival generation tend to relate to prostitution as a mark,
symbol, or metonymy of a moral, social, and national crisis within Jewish society? Or did they perhaps, antithetically to the European tradition within which they had grown up, refuse to assign symbolic value to prostitution and refrain from exploiting it for other purposes?

I will examine several of these issues in Vogel’s and Shofman’s representations of prostitution, focusing on the cultural and national underpinnings of their constructions. By discussing the psycho-poetical elements that underlie Vogel’s depiction of prostitution and the ideological elements in Shofman’s, and by exposing their poetic dialogue with Bialik, I will investigate issues of power, gender, nationalism, and, primarily, victimhood and vulnerability in the Hebrew literature of the first half of the twentieth century.

The Hebrew writers’ sensitivity to women engaged in prostitution, and their attitude toward prostitution as a distress situation, is perhaps attributable to the minority status of Jews in Europe, which may have made these authors more sensitive to the vulnerability inherent to that occupation. This is surely true of the telushim, the members of the “uprooted” generation, who were cast off by their familial surroundings and were often bereft of economic, emotional, and intellectual support. The Hebrew writers’ sensitivity may also have to do with their textual-cultural background: while they were well versed in European literature (and sometimes were also its translators) and were greatly influenced by the Western culture within which they lived, they were, of course, also well versed in the Jewish sources that were an integral part of the Jewish education they had received.

According to Tali Artman-Partock, who has compared conceptions of prostitution in Christian and Jewish texts, early Christianity considered prostitution to be a “natural” occupation of woman, as women were considered to be temptresses by nature; therefore, the only possible path of rehabilitation for a prostitute was for her to forswear her sexuality altogether and become a nun. Rabbinic literature, by contrast, saw prostitution more as a situation in which a woman might be caught up against her will, an abject plight that might be ended by a change of circumstance, allowing her to return to her own social and familial surroundings without being permanently marked. Thus, while Christianity essentially linked prostitution to femininity, rabbinic literature regarded it not as an identity but rather as an occupation or profession. In the Mishnah and the Talmud, prostitution is understood as a temporary
distress situation, a lapse. Moreover, unlike in Christianity, the Rabbis ascribe concupiscence not to the prostitute but to the man, her client. In stories from rabbinic literature, it is the man who is lustful and fulfills his desires by seeking the services of a prostitute. Studying the representations of prostitution in the writings of Shofman, Vogel, Brenner, and others discloses an affinity between them and rabbinic conceptions of prostitution: in the literature of the revival period, prostitution is not seen as an embodiment of female seduction; indeed, dominance (or the drive to dominate) in the prostitute–client relationship is always the role of the client.

Notwithstanding these writers’ sensitivity to the prostitutes of whom they write, the story isn’t the women’s story, but that of the males who gaze at them. Thomas Heise has remarked that representations of the underworld enable sociologists and criminologists to give us a glimpse of the milieu of others who share our world, but those representations are also what enable us to misrecognize such others and not have to deal with their subjectivity. Similarly, representations of prostitution in the literature of the revival period clearly tell us less about prostitutes than about the desires and terrors of those who write (and read) about them. Even the moments when these deracinated young men identify with the prostitute do not yield expressions of the women’s own voices. I wish to examine the specific way in which the relative sensitivity of these early twentieth-century writers to the image of the prostitute is channeled toward them to meet their own emotional and ideological needs.

“AND YE SHALL SUCK ONE FROM THE OTHER”: GERSHON SHOFMAN AND HAYIM NAHMAN BIALIK

For Vogel, Brenner, and Reuveni, the theme of prostitution is mostly at the margins of their prose, functioning as a kind of symbolic backdrop to the plot. Shofman, however, sets this world (with its panoply of characters: prostitutes, madams, pimps, and johns) at the center of his writing and even devotes whole stories to it, such as “Katnut” (Trifles; 1904), “Henia” (1908), “Bekitsvei hakerakh” (The City’s Edge; 1914), “Bein laylah leyom” (Between Night and Day; 1918) and “Orot ba’ofel” (Lights in the Darkness; 1922). Joseph Klausner saw in Shofman’s representations of prostitution a means of conveying unvarnished reality, which “in all its plainness and ordinariness could drive one from his senses.” By contrast, Shalom Kraemer,
noting that Shofman’s whores are not Jewish, concludes that his aim in describing the degenerate non-Jewish world was to glorify the life of Jewish communities, illustrating a “humble, downtrodden Jewry, holding fast to its innocence even within the cold gentile environment.”16 Yeshurun Keshet argues that Shofman’s representations of prostitutes do not focus on the women themselves; rather, they are a means for describing “the man who goes to a harlot,” that same “man wandering lost in the life of the city,” “the ravenous bachelor, giddy with stimulation, in the thrall of a tainted physicality.”17 These interpretations see in Shofman’s representations of prostitutes a symbol or image by which he expressed his views on loftier matters: the brutality of existence, relations between Jews and non-Jews, and the difficulties faced by the deracinated male. Rivka Gorfein is the only scholar to relate to the compassion Shofman shows for these half-grown women and to his revulsion for their pimps.18

To Shofman, prostitution is not a matter of unfortunate happenstance, but a product of broad-ranging social collusion. In a contemporary theoretical context, we might say that his position rejects the notion of prostitution as a choice and sees prostituted women as victims.19 Although Shofman does not, of course, take direct part in the theoretical discussion of whether prostitution can ensue from free choice, his stories reflect an unequivocal view of the prostitute as a victim. For Shofman, prostitution is never conceived as a chosen trade; it is, rather, a symptom of weakness and oppression. Psychological trauma and distress, violence, and economic and gender inferiority are inherent to prostitution, which is represented as a predicament from which there is no escape. Women, girls, and children who engage in prostitution, in Shofman’s view, are victims by definition—and not only because they may have been entrapped into “white slavery” or experienced direct physical violence. The social–gender determinism worked by Shofman into his prostitution stories is expressive of an ethical-ideological conception according to which prostitution is not a consequence of choice, mainly because the concept of choice itself is irrelevant to the lives of the girls who have been caught up in it. In these stories, Shofman shapes the image of the prostitute as a product of social determinism, and she is therefore always, necessarily, a victim.20

“Henia” (1908),21 perhaps the best-known of Shofman’s prostitution stories, sketches the brief life story of such a woman: her childhood in a country village, her adolescence and move to the big city, her slide into prostitution, and her premature
death in the brothel where she “worked.” At first sight, this story would seem to belong to the widespread European literary genre of tales of innocent country girls whose move to the great city leads to their moral and physical demise. But a closer look at Shofman’s story shows that this genre, for him, was mainly a vehicle for dealing with the phenomenon of prostitution itself—the women enmeshed in it, its causes and its significance, from the point of view of the victimized position embodied by the image of the prostitute and the issues of power and weakness with which the Jewish world was preoccupied at the turn of the twentieth century.

Shofman’s breed of social determinism might seem to make “Henia” and his other stories “universal,” expressing a kind of generalized critique of violence and of the exploitation of adolescent girls in a society that lacks the wisdom to channel its life potential and appetites in worthy directions, and so has become corrupt, aggressive, and exploitative. However, the closing statement in “Henia,” which links human apathy to an indifferent cosmos—“Water splashed out, burbling and gushing, and the cricket chirped” (179)—alludes to a well-known couplet in Bialik’s famous poem “Be’ir haharegah” (In the City of Slaughter): “For God has called forth Spring and Slaughter at once: / The sun has risen, the acacias have bloomed, the slayer has slain.” Shofman thus set his “universal” discussion into a nation alist–Zionist context as well.

“Be’ir haharegah,” written in the aftermath of the 1903 Kishinev pogrom and first printed, due to Russian censorship, under the title “Masa Nemirov” (The Vision of Nemirov), has been read by scholars as a call to arms that led to a fundamental change in the agenda of Jewish national life. It is seen as an enormously influential text in that it brought about a change in the way the Jewish world at the turn of the twentieth century understood power. The poem sharply censures the Jewish mindset, which its speaker presents as one of condemnable weakness and cowering. In their book Be’ir haharegah: bikur me’ubah (Revisiting “In the City of Slaughter”), Dan Miron, Hanan Hever, and Michael Gluzman take on the difficulties raised by this conception, particularly in relation to the speaker’s dispassionate attitude toward the victims of the pogrom. Miron is appalled by the poem’s dehumanization of the victims and by Bialik’s ability to distance himself from their separate individuality; Hever investigates the structure of the Zionist discourse that allowed, and perhaps even demanded, the blaming of the victims,
and asks how the paradox of Bialik’s simultaneous recognition of the suffering and condemnation of the sufferers might be resolved; while Gluzman offers a nationalist–gendered–biographical explanation for Bialik’s rejection of identification with the victims and the transformation of that rejection into rage.  

As Miron remarks, the cruelty and indifference found in Bialik’s poem evoked discomfort even at the time of its publication, as can be seen, for example, in the sharp response it evoked from S. Y. Abramovich (Mendele Moykher-Sforim). In this context, Shofman’s “Henia” might be regarded as an additional response to Bialik’s poem—an indirect, poetic response addressing not only the issue of rage as opposed to identification with and empathy for the victims, but also addressing the very significance of victimhood. 

The composition of “Henia,” like that of Shofman’s other prostitution stories, took place in a Jewish ideological milieu of nationalist stirrings and new ways of thinking about issues of power, weakness, and responsibility. To bring the discussion back within the concrete intertextual limits that constructed Shofman’s world, these stories were players in the nationalist–cultural–poetic struggle embodied in the two almost contradictory responses penned by Bialik to the Kishinev pogrom. The first, “Al hashehitah” (On the Slaughter), written in Odessa when word of the pogrom first reached there, is a cry of empathetic identification with the victims (“Heavens, beg mercy for me!”). The second, “Be’ir haharegah,” published some two years after Bialik’s visit to Kishinev, castigates Jews for their passivity and channels the narrator’s feelings of identification into rage against the victims:  

And your tears you will have stored up, tears not spilled,  
And you will build on them a fortress of iron and copper wall  
of deadly wrath, hell-like hatred, and pent-up enmity,  
Caught in your heart and nurtured there like a viper in its nest,  
And you will suckle from each other and you will find no rest. (2:205–209)  

To be sure, Shofman and Bialik are dealing with different traumas, but they share a similar posture in relation to them: both observe the trauma rather than experience it personally or directly. However, their emotional (and, necessarily, poetic) responses are utterly different: Bialik rages; Shofman empathizes.
Bialik, in Gluzman’s words, “gendered the massacre.” Raging, he reads the scenes of the pogrom as expressions of womanlike passivity, embodied not only in images of the violated women, but primarily in the responses of the men, who do nothing to defend them:

Lay husbands, bridegrooms, brothers, peeping from the holes
While holy bodies quivered beneath asses’ flesh,
Being strangled in their impurity and swallowing in the blood of their throats,
And like a man dividing his delicacies so the abominable goi divides their flesh—
Lying down in their shame and seeing—
neither stirring nor moving (2:70–75)

Exposing this weakness was meant to address both the survivors and the readers of the poem with a call for a reordering of national and gender priorities. The rage thus provoked was meant to arouse their own masculine activism, their male instinct to respond physically and defend themselves:

Let them raise their fists at me and demand their shaming’s recompense,
The shaming of all the generations, first to last,
Let them batter heaven and my very throne with their fists.

If the speaker’s rage in “Be’ir haharegah” preserves and reinforces gender stereotypes associated with the victims and with responses to victimhood, Shofman’s empathy for them enables him to mold a different kind of gendered conception of victimhood, unlike either the total identification of “Al hasheḥitah” (“Hangman! Here’s a neck—to the slaughter! Break my neck like a dog’s; yours is the mighty arm with the axe”) or the victim-blaming of “Be’ir haharegah.”

Just as Shofman’s “Henia” can be seen as a response to Bialik’s poem, so Vogel, too, responds indirectly to “Be’ir haharegah” in the suppressed poem ”Tavḥiḥi ishti” (I’ve butchered my wife; October 10, 1923):

I’ve butchered my wife
and burnt my home—
Now let me drink
and my dead bemoan.

The rain has pierced me with its needles;
The world has shed its splendor.
It’s time for me to heave off my days,
to have done with this futile endeavor!

I’ve allotted my eyes to the night—
may the lights thrive on ever more,
to shine upon all of the burdened with grief
for what’s been and is gone, never more.³⁴

The prophecy of doom referenced by Vogel at the end of the poem—together with the prophecy of doom in Jeremiah 19:6: “Assuredly a time is coming—declares the Lord—when this place shall no longer be called Topheth or Valley of Ben-Hinnom, but Valley of Slaughter [gei habaregah]”—is the scriptural source of Bialik’s coinage, “Be’ir haharegah.” Vogel’s poem issues, as it were, from the throats of the men accused by Bialik of impotence and feminization. Vogel’s speaker blames himself for the slaughter and the conflagration and internalizes the feminization imposed upon him by Bialik’s attitude (“The rain has pierced me with its needles; / The world has shed its splendor”). Yet he simultaneously adopts the attitude of a leader and visionary; he is the pillar of smoke lighting the way for those burdened with grief in the dark world in which they are imprisoned. The “womanish,”³⁵ deflowered leadership, so familiar with grief, rejects the attitude adopted by the poet Bialik, that of a wrathful prophet hammering accusations at the victims. The biblical God demands of his prophet: “As for you, do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry of prayer on their behalf” (Jeremiah 7:16). Bialik, seen by many interpreters as a modern prophet,³⁶ takes that divine imperative upon himself and does not pray for the victims. Sara R. Horowitz argues that “In the City of Slaughter” is an anti-narrative, anti-liturgical poem, refusing for the most part to tell a story or to turn that story into a prayer.³⁷ Vogel, by contrast, refuses the divine imperative, the law of the Father, the disciplining power; he sounds the wail of those burdened with existential grief, making no move to suppress or disregard their suffering. Rather than ignoring
Jewish history or the emergent Zionism of his time, as Glenda Abrahamson has argued, Vogel suggests an alternative way of relating to the same events, by refusing to collaborate with the discourse that appropriates the victims’ distress for the purpose of national revival.

In a brilliant analysis of “Be’ir haharegah,” Hamutal Tsamir shows how the speaker in Bialik’s poem presents two different uses to which the distress and pain he experiences in confronting the people’s suffering might be put—the one shameful and the other constructive. The first possibility, identification and pity, is viewed as whining, while the second, hoarding the pain and tears to turn them upon the people in fury, is seen as a process that will enable the people to make a genuine move toward rectifying their situation. Bialik identifies with this latter position, which, according to Tsamir, embodies Zionist ideology. Shofman’s poetic response, and in many senses Vogel’s as well, reveals the negotiation that played out over the character of that Zionist ideology, or ideologies. But reading the Zionist ideology as utterly rejecting of a victimized, feminized way of being is, I believe, marred by anachronism—by a reading of Zionist currents of thought at the time in light of what was to become the dominant position, namely, the type of nationalism advocated by Bialik and the (imagined) “sabra” attitudes of the Palmach generation.

Preserving the dichotomy between weakness, passivity, and victimhood, on the one hand, and power and activism, on the other, Bialik seeks to exchange the position of weakness for one of strength. Shofman, by contrast, calls for blurring this distinction and recognizing an identity that at once embraces both weakness and strength. Writing about prostitution allows Shofman to move through a range of options, including strength, weakness, and victimhood, and to experience them simultaneously, without any one cancelling out another. Very much as in the theory of fantasy put forward by psychoanalysts Jean Laplanch and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, Shofman’s representations of prostitution—that is, the ways he fantasizes the prostitute into his writings—allow him to oscillate among a variety of identities without tying himself down to any one of them in particular. According to Laplanch and Pontalis, fantasy is not a direct, one-dimensional, metonymic expression of the desires of the fantasizing subject, for fantasy “is not the object of desire, but its setting.”

Fantasy does not mark a specific object of identification;
rather, it presents an array of images within which the fantasizer is entangled. The fantasizer, then, is not posing the object of his desire, but is participating actively in a scene—or more precisely, a mise-en-scène—of desire. The fantasy is a kind of Rashomon, “a scenario with multiple entries” in which the subject can wander among various identities and perspectives. The fantasy does not necessarily attest to the subject’s specific location or to identification with a particular object within the fantasy; it is, rather, an arena of multiple possibilities. Laplanch and Pontalis give the example of a fantasy of a father seducing his daughter, in which the fantasizer may position himself as the daughter, the father, or the seduction itself. In other words, the subject’s identifications are not necessarily fixed in one dimension of the fantasy; they may rove among different images, attitudes (authority/weakness, activity/passivity, maturity/childhood) and gender patterns. To be sure, emphasizes Teresa de Lauretis, this location is not entirely random; it is conditioned by gender, society, race, sexuality, and personal history.

The mise-en-scène shaped by Shofman in his prostitution stories enables him to formulate a multidimensional notion of victimhood, one that combines gender and national sensitivities. As a man, he is able to retain the dominant position while writing about the image of the prostitute, for the “man with the money” is ever the man in charge; the client is in a position of physical, economic, gender, and social power. At the same time, the prostitute, by definition, enables the fulfillment of desires (not only sexual ones) and therefore allows the client to fantasize about loss of control; she allows him, as it were, to lose his position of power. More precisely, the image of the prostitute allows him to play with the option of losing control and to test the limits of his power. Like in the Freudian game of fort-da, in which the baby on the one hand relives the painful situation of abandonment and on the other hand controls it, so the prostitute offers a convenient poetic image for thinking about issues of power, control, and victimhood without risking loss of the position of power, but also without denying the position of weakness.

Moreover, the image of the prostitute allows Shofman, along with other male Jewish writers such as Brenner and Reuveni, to identify from a gender point of view with the client (the man, the victimizer) and from an ethnic/national point of view with the prostitute (the weak woman, the victim). In other words, the image of the prostitute allows both the writers and their fictional characters to move in a
not necessarily dichotomous way between the positions of strength and weakness, victimizer and victim. This type of identification with both the client’s position of strength and the prostitute’s position of weakness can be seen, for example, in L. A. Arieli’s story “Herpatka’ot shel ahavah” (Adventures in Love), which tells of sexual encounters between a Jewish youth and three Russian women. Varia, one of the women he sleeps with, filches the money in his wallet; when he finds out about it, he steals all her money, but after a while feels ashamed and regretful (73–74). Varia is not overtly a prostitute, but the story is a variation on the theme of prostitution: at the beginning, the woman steals the young man’s money, thus demanding cash in consequence of their relations (making her the prostitute and him the client), and afterwards the tables are turned. The power relations between them are thus ambiguous: the protagonist has the advantage over Varia from a gendered and economic point of view, but from an ethnic/national point of view, as a Russian living under her uncle’s roof, she is better protected than the Jew.

Shofman’s story “Katnut” (Trifles) describes the visit of Hillel, an uprooted Jewish youth, to a brothel. As part of the “seduction” game, Hillel and the prostitute tussle with each other light-heartedly, and she compliments him on the strength of his hands (1:95). This bit of flattery seems ludicrous to the reader, to whom Hillel’s frailty and alienation have been obvious throughout the story. Nevertheless, considering the power relations that underpin their situation, this flattering declaration is quite precise: Hillel’s hands, despite his physical frailty, will always be stronger than the prostitute’s. Moreover, her ingratiating words expose the recurrent role-play between man and woman, client and prostitute. Thus, by highlighting the gendered-performative dimension of the behavior of prostitute and client (with the prostitute’s flattering words to the client echoing gender stereotypes and male sexual fantasies), Shofman exposes us to the cultural, emotional, and poetic arena in which gender, sexuality, power, and national identity come together. Moreover, he molds a performative scene that simultaneously embraces the victimhood of the prostitute, the powerful position of the client, the client’s fantasy of power, and his weakness.

Bialik and Shofman, then, both deal with the nexus of gender, identity, and victimhood, but they set different coordinates for mapping and comprehending this subject. The plane on which Bialik moves is that of victimhood and reaction
(that is, victimhood, weakness, and femininity as against reaction, power, and masculinity), while Shofman organizes his concept of victimhood around a dynamic subjectivity that may ponder different positions on the axis of the power relations between victim and victimizer. Accordingly, while Bialik sees a feminine element in weakness, in and of itself, and a masculine (and therefore desirable) element in autonomy, Shofman reads femininity as reflecting a vulnerable social situation and masculinity as a position of social power that exerts violence against women and tramples feminine desires. Shofman thus refrains from creating a dichotomous, one-dimensional relationship between femininity and victimhood, on the one hand, and masculinity and power, on the other. This allows him to shape a conception of identity that can fluctuate between ethnic inferiority and gender superiority while recognizing a diffuseness between the two positions.

Accordingly, the image of the axe serves these two writers in different ways. The axe in “Al hashehitah” is divested of its phallic overtones, returned as it is to the primal image of the hand grasping the hatchet: “Hangman! Here’s a neck—to the slaughter! Break my neck like a dog’s; yours is the mighty arm with the axe.” In “Be’ir haharegah,” by contrast, the axe boils and drips blood, serving as a visual, metonymic image embodying the horror of the rampage of rape and murder:

Groping with your own hand the befouled coverlet and crimsoned pillow
wallow of boars and roost of human stallions
with an axe dripping blood boiling in their hands.

Though the blood of the victims is clearly intended, the image alludes to the ritual of circumcision. The rapes, for Bialik, return the victims (again: the husbands of the raped women, rather than the raped women themselves) to the constitutive moment of the nexus between individual, people, and masculinity. The violent phallic image embodies the people’s feeble masculinity, for the rape of the women is a mark of injury and blemish to its potency and virility. In Shofman’s story, by contrast, “a well-worn, honed axe was stuck” in the garden of Henia’s childhood home—well-worn, perhaps from frequent use, and stuck in a perpetual pose of striking. The phallic quality of the axe and the violence inherent in it do not represent a one-time event, but a recurrent reality; Shofman’s axe thus highlights the
recurrent nature of the injury and, most importantly, returns the focus of the discussion to women’s victimization.52

Exposure to trauma thus evokes opposing responses in these two writers: Bialik calls for a re-arousal of masculine violence, while Shofman critiques that violence and calls for its restraint. To be sure, this wouldn’t seem to be the same violence: Shofman is dealing with men’s violence against women, while Bialik is dealing with ethnic/national violence and calling for self-defense, not violence for its own sake. Moreover, they have different motivations for writing: where Shofman is concerned with the victims of prostitution, Bialik is writing about the victims of a pogrom and the state of the Jewish people; and where Shofman sets sexual violence at the center of his discussion, Bialik uses it to concretize the horrors, since the direct motivation for his writing is to raise issues of national import. Nevertheless, despite the differences, not only do both these writers treat victimhood, violence, and sexual identity, but their juxtaposition also exposes the unbreakable bond not only between ethnicity and gender, but also between ethnicity and gender violence.

“MY SISTER. . .”

When Rost and his friend Enker from Vogel’s Roman Vina’i (Viennese Romance; 2012 [original date unknown]) encounter prostitutes roaming the streets of the city like themselves, Enker muses: “There’s nothing between me and them . . ., just like them, I’m alone at the end of everything, alone and bled dry” (236). Why does Enker declare himself to be “just like them,” and whence springs the contradiction between the identification embodied in that declaration and his equally forceful declaration that he has nothing in common with them?

Abramson, the protagonist of Brenner’s novel Misaviv lanekudah (Around the Point; 1904), despairs of involvement in the Hebrew literary revival and tries his strength at writing a review essay in Russian, on Russian literature. In the process, he sinks into a deep depression that is expressed in thoughts of suicide and the loss of his sanity. For his sustenance, Abramson works in the Jewish library, a well-known center of Zionist activity. After receiving his first salary, wandering the streets dejected and full of self-loathing, he runs into “a woman well on in years, selling her
withered body for scraps of bread and a few sips from the bottle.” He stops her and gives her all his money, thinking to himself, “—she is my sister. . . .” The whore, for him, represents a marginal figure at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, a kind of archetype devoid of any gendered or sexual dimension, as well as a projection of his own feelings of being alone, forlorn, and bereft. And yet, Abramson calls her “my sister.” She is a female embodiment of his own uprootedness. At his lowest point, as he ponders self-destruction, with his masculine agency as it were in tatters, he meets a prostitute and sees in her the uprooted soul in himself.

Abramson gives the whore his wages, a material embodiment of the Zionist enterprise and of the new Jewish masculinity, without even using her “services,” as though she were a beggar. This is less an act of pity than an expression of self-loathing, in which he creates a kind of mirror image of himself. On the one hand, he gives her the money, which, at this stage, he detests for what it symbolizes; on the other hand, in recreating the scene of receiving his own wages, he in effect turns the whore into himself and himself into a whore. In other words, by way of his identification with the prostitute, he not only maintains his own lowly self-image but, primarily, also maintains the ambivalence of being both the client, the man with the money and the power, and the prostitute, the powerless woman.

The writers of the revival generation, for the most part, do not deny the gender, social, and economic chasm between themselves and the prostitutes they encounter, but at the same time they challenge the dichotomy between masculinity and power and femininity and weakness. In Roman Vina’i, Enker, one of the characters, converses with the prostitute, but when she mocks him for not wanting to sleep with her, he gives her a slap on the cheek. Afterwards, he feels ashamed and remorseful for what he has done. The slap he gave the whore had turned his weakness into strength, but the shame that came with it turns his strength back into weakness. Although he understands the slap as an appropriate, impulsive outburst that has likely saved him from “a lengthy route of hesitation, doubt, and self-probing,” this manifestation of a covert violence within himself stirs within him a sense of connection with the whore, “a kind of psychological kinship, or more precisely, a familiar resemblance between those living on the edges of society; the element of defiance, by will or by force, was common to them both; both were unchecked and at liberty. She, just like him, was living unchained from
society” (ibid.). Hitting the whore manifests Enker’s superiority and masculinity, but at the same time it perpetuates his (sexual and emotional) impotence and “effeminacy” and exposes his weakness and dereliction. Vogel, like Brenner, Shofman, and Arieli, was riveted by this oscillation between the positions of femininity and masculinity, power and weakness, victimhood and victimizer.⁵⁷

DAVID VOGEL, “A SUSPECT HATRED”

Upon the first meeting between Gurdweil, the protagonist of Vogel’s Hayei nisu’im, and Thea, who will become his wife, they stroll around the streets of Vienna and run into prostitutes who, like themselves, are “saunter[ing] to and fro” (25). Thea proclaims that she hates them. On the face of it, she might be expressing nothing more than the hatred of a respectable woman for her disreputable counterpart. The prostitute holds up a mirror not only to social respectability and propriety, but also to the enormous dependence of women upon men. Downtrodden, defiled, wretched, and alone, she represents the situation of the derelict woman—that is, the woman bereft of male protection.⁵⁸ Thea, who herself will later turn out to be a woman uninterested in her husband’s protection, loathes this reflection of the dangers bound up with the lifestyle she so desires. Gurdweil’s sensitivities warn him that this is “a suspect hatred” (29). He is unable, at this stage in the novel, to understand that Thea’s hatred for the streetwalkers and the violence they arouse in her (“I hate them! I could kill them!”) attests to his future wife’s repressed fear of sharing a similar fate. He also cannot imagine that the tables will be turned three hundred pages later: overcome with hatred for his wife who has played the whore, he will murder her.

Why does Gurdweil suspect his wife’s hatred for the streetwalkers? How does he intuit that it goes beyond the commonplace? It would appear that what Gurdweil intuits is a defect in himself. As the relations between him and his wife develop in a sadomasochistic direction, he grows increasingly afraid of her. On one of the few evenings that they sit together at home, with him resting on her breast, Thea jokingly asks her husband whether he doesn’t worry that she may one day strangle him (280). “A sharp fear [runs] through his body like an electric current,” stirring up in him “his old fear as a child when, at night, he had to pass the only brothel in the little town” (281). Gurdweil goes back to being a fourteen-year-old boy frightened of the raucous
laughter emerging from the brothel, while Thea becomes the very source of that fear, of the place “where people were swallowed up and regurgitated” (ibid.). In Gurdweil’s unconscious, the home they share becomes a brothel, a place of unbridled sexuality, fearful and threatening. But that which can exist in Gurdweil’s emotional world cannot be maintained in their shared world. When Thea fulfills Gurdweil’s worst fears by turning their home into a kind of brothel, in which she whores with a stranger before her husband’s eyes, the violence latent in him erupts, and he stabs her to death. Gurdweil murders his wife not because she has abused and betrayed him, but because she has actualized his fears, forcing him to confront that place “where people are swallowed up and regurgitated.”

What is the nature of this threatening, dangerous place—the place that casts such fear into the heart of Vogel’s protagonist? I believe that we may use Gurdweil’s suspicion as a reader’s guide to the story, offered by the protagonist himself. Just as Gurdweil understands that Thea’s hatred is suspect, so, too, do I see Gurdweil’s fear as suspect. An element of gynophobia—of men’s fear of women, or, in a more colorful variation, of the Freudian “vagina dentata,” representing the imagined threat posed by femininity and female sexuality, of castration and impotence—is, of course, part of the picture. While prostitution, in itself, may have nothing to do with female sexuality, from a patriarchal perspective it constitutes an exaggeration of that female sexuality to the extreme, and as such, it menaces.

To be more specific, not much is told to us of Gurdweil’s background, but we learn in an entirely roundabout way of one of the most humiliating and formative experiences in his earlier life:

Often I would wander aimlessly about in byways and alleys where I had never been before, straying and searching for something indefinable, until it grew dark and I had to go home. At that time I was once attacked by a gang of Christian boys. I fought desperately, as if I was fighting for my life. But I was alone and I was defeated. When I came home battered and beaten, I felt a curious satisfaction, a kind of contentment and peace of mind. Once I was hit by a stone—here, you see?—Gurdweil pointed to his left temple, next to the ear—there’s still a little scar. You can feel it with your fingers. (Hayei nisu’im, 223)
The violence experienced by Gurdweil gives him a sense of satisfaction; it is a repeated source of pleasure, preserved and embodied in the scar that cannot be seen but can still be felt. This remembrance of a gratifying violence is connected, for Gurdweil, to his attraction to the churches of his native town: “By then I already knew about the Inquisition, the Crusades, the persecution of the Jews, and I was constantly afraid that they would suddenly seize me and drag me inside and force me to do something terrible. . . . You might say that in the depths of my soul I was even eager for the thing to happen” (221).

Gurdweil’s weakness as a Jewish boy is replicated in his adult relationship with his abusive Christian wife. But between his boyhood beatings by Christian youths and his marriage to an abusive woman, he had another traumatic experience in his youth: at the age of fifteen, he was raped by the twenty-five-year-old maid working in his parents’ home, who had “glittering eyes, and sharp, shining, little teeth like an animal’s” (224). The event was repeated, “and in the course of time,” he recalls, “I grew accustomed to it and I no longer saw anything wrong in it” (227). As the householders’ son, Gurdweil was in a position of power in relation to the maid, but as a minor coerced into a sexual encounter, he was, of course, in a position of weakness. This traumatic experience underpinned the blurring, in Gurdweil’s adult life, of issues surrounding power, weakness, and sexuality.

It could be this experience that enables Gurdweil to visualize the scene of Lotte, another character in the book, being sexually assaulted by her uncle in her childhood. Although Gurdweil might seem to display a great deal of sensitivity upon hearing of Lotte’s traumatic experience, it is not clear with whom he actually identifies. Is it with the weakness of Lotte the child, both as someone who had a similar experience in childhood and because his wife Thea often relates to him as a baby? Or does he identify, rather, with the “failure” of the attacker, whose “cane [falls] to the ground” (225)—that is, with the crumpling of the phallus? Or, on the contrary, considering the use Gurdweil makes of his “open penknife” at the end of the novel to murder his adulterous wife (501), does he perhaps identify with the attacker’s aggression?

These pendulum swings between strength and weakness, violence and victimhood, are evident as well in Gurdweil’s relations with his wife, which are ambivalent
from the outset. At the end of his first nighttime tryst with Thea, he roams the streets of the city and sees streetwalkers waiting for the tram:

With lusterless eyes he looked at the two prostitutes waiting there, and the picture of the hotel room in which he had spent the night rose up before him. The memory gave him such a disagreeable feeling that he was forced to avert his eyes. But at the same time he was filled with a great longing for Thea. (39)

Gurdweil’s whole relationship with Thea will be that of a man with a woman who has played the whore on him, an unfaithful wife. Their intimacy, from the very beginning of the novel, is unconsciously bound up with prostitution. But Gurdweil’s position is ambivalent: the prostitutes may remind him of that first night with Thea, but can we conclude from this that Thea looks to him like a prostitute? Or, considering his passivity, is it, rather, that he understands that Thea is “using” him, “consuming” his body as though the whore were none other than himself?

The trauma of Gurdweil’s childhood rape is scripted by way of his transformation from a powerless victim (a boy who was raped) into someone who, as it were, gets pleasure from illicit intimacy (a classic scene of the master of the house having sex with the maid). Similarly, throughout the entire novel we witness the complex, violent relations between Gurdweil and Thea, who abuses, cuckolds, humiliates, and even beats him, while Gurdweil responds to it all with abjection and acceptance of the punishment meted out to him. Gurdweil is described throughout the novel as an effeminate man—weak, lovelorn, lost, and nurturing the baby, while his wife is depicted as mannish, violent, aggressive, and adulterous. But this overturning of the genders is “solved” when Gurdweil’s restrained, repressed anger, which grows ever more powerful toward the end of the novel, bursts out with the thrust of his open penknife into his wife’s body.

The murder, then, is an act of revenge not only upon his wife, but also, or perhaps especially, upon the maid who raped him in childhood, and upon his own weakness and effeminacy. Gurdweil redirects and internalizes the strength and rage that he cannot hurl against his oppressors. What he internalizes is not the force that the Christian youths, the maid, and Thea used against him, but his rage at his own
impotence in these humiliating situations. Gurdweil’s repressed violence and thirst for revenge erupt in the murder of his wife, but they have been present all the time in his complex attitude of simultaneous identification with and fear of prostitutes.

Gurdweil’s aggressiveness toward the whore—and mainly toward his “whoring” wife—should, to my mind, be understood as terror of his own weakness, or, to use the term coined by Melanie Klein, as paranoid anxiety—the fear of annihilation, of being utterly effaced, of being invaded by evil. The evil experienced as coming from without in fact emanates from the infantile death instinct. According to Klein, the infant, in the earliest stages of its life, must split his external world (both the objects in it and himself) into two dichotomous categories: good (gratification, satiety, love) and bad (frustration, hate, mistreatment). This splitting protects the infant in his early stages and enables him, later on when his ego is more developed, to internalize the good, create a hierarchy of good and evil, and incorporate ambivalent positions, as well as to deal with conflictual situations.

As we have seen, for Gurdweil as for many of his “uprooted” contemporaries, an encounter with a prostitute stirs up his paranoid anxiety—his fear of his own vulnerability. The archetypically “uprooted” prostitute makes it impossible for the uprooted young writer to deny his own weakness. This weakness is grasped both as an external threat to the nascent Zionist enterprise and as the internal threat posed to these European Jewish youths by their inherent debility. Thus, in a milieu in which abandonment of the old world stirred them to a sense of strength and power (along with their terror and confusion), coming together with the many voices within the Zionist world calling upon the Jewish man to shed his weakness and gird himself with a mantle of national power and a muscular body, weakness is turned into an inhibiting element, a kind of evil that threatens to do away with the emergent Zionist enterprise.

Another type of anxiety associated with aggression, according to Klein, is depressive anxiety, in which fear of being destroyed by others is replaced by fear of destroying the other. In the next stage of infantile development, the infant develops the ability to internalize whole objects (as opposed to the previous stage, which was characterized by splitting). Consequently, he understands that his mother is the source of both the “good” and the “bad.” Klein applies the term depressive anxiety to the infant’s terror of the object he has destroyed. While paranoid anxiety
is bound up with fear of the destruction of the self from without, depressive anxiety is bound up with fear for the fate of others, within and without, as a consequence of the fantasized destruction born of the child’s own aggression. In a variation of the integration of the “good” breast and the “bad” breast, the encounter with the prostitute expresses Gurdweil’s acceptance, and that of his contemporaries, of the duality of weakness and strength. Moreover, if, in the paranoid anxiety stage, the fear was of weakness itself, in this stage of depressive anxiety the fear is of violating the weakness, of losing it. Gurdweil’s aggression, then, is not only an internalization of strength or a marker of self-hatred, but an expression of his fear of the destruction of the weakness within himself.

In other words, contrary to the accepted scholarly understanding of the revival generation, according to which its members’ expressed wish was to shake off their exilic past as effeminate “old-time” Jews and turn into “new,” masculine Jews, a different process may be discerned in Vogel’s writings, one of fear of losing his vulnerability. Vogel’s protagonist, then, is not indifferent to the nationalist voices surrounding him; he is terrified of them. The shedding of weakness demanded by Bialik—who came to symbolize the call for empowerment—may be taken as a rejection of what he saw as his own shameful weakness and effeminacy, as suggested by Michael Gluzman, or as a call for the reworking, redirection, and transformation of weakness into strength, as suggested by Hamutal Tsamir. Either way, it was not only Vogel who did not identify with this call by Bialik and others of the same persuasion for the establishment of a new Jewish masculinity, but Vogel also refuses to undergo the transformation that is demanded of him. Like the child trying to resolve his depressive anxiety and the powerful guilt feelings that accompany it by rebuilding his image of his mother on the basis of restorative fantasies and behaviors, so, too, does Vogel refuse to join in the celebration of his own strength. He tries, instead, to recreate the other that he has destroyed, the subjectivity that can simultaneously contain both strength and weakness. This embrace of weakness, concern for its future, and fear of its loss constitute not an inverted response to his own destructiveness, but, rather, sincere expressions of the love and regret that, according to Klein, develop together with the infant’s gratitude for the good that he has received from his mother.
Jessica Benjamin understands penis envy as the yearning of the young child—boy or girl—to identify with the father, who represents the outside world. The father is “the ideal in which the child wants to recognize himself,” because he possesses subjectivity and agency, unlike the mother, who is devoid of desire. I wonder why Benjamin—like most psychoanalytic theorists before her, including feminist ones—assumes that the child’s “natural” desire, its obvious choice, is to identify with activism, strength, and masculinity. The world’s literature, including that of the Hebrew “uprooted” generation, is filled with examples of characters who identify with weakness and impotence. Nor does this necessarily express an abjection opposed to dominance; it may express acceptance or establishment of a subjectivity stripped of agency, or perhaps “agentically challenged.”

According to Benjamin, “the child wants recognition of her will, of her desire, of her act”; in other words, will, desire, and act are almost overlapping terms. There is no such thing as will to do nothing, or desire for a lack of will. Accordingly, the literature produced by the revival generation can be read as having failed at this developmental stage; or it can be read, very differently, as challenging the basic assumptions of Benjamin and her predecessors. Following Daniel Boyarin and others, Hamutal Tsamir rightly argues that the poetry of the revival generation must be understood as poetry that strives to establish the new Jewish man as an individual—universal—national subject, and the concepts of awakening, renewal, and empowerment imbuing that subjectivity must be understood not only as national sentiments but also as having a gendered and libidinous element. What I wish to accentuate in relation to this charged meeting of masculinity, nationalism, and gender is that within the process of establishing the “new man,” efforts were made to test the range of alternatives for masculinity. Even as Bialik’s choice of a sovereign masculinity became the dominant one within Zionist discourse, the voices represented by Shofman and Vogel expressed different notions of gender and power.

In other words, to understand the force of the dilemmas and of the poetic, national, and gendered struggles characterizing the literature of the revival generation, one must be attuned not only to the notions of awakening, renewal, and empowerment expressed in it, but also to the expressions of weakness, frustration,
loss, rage, and aggression that construct that generation’s literary world. In writing about their prostitutes—and fundamentally about themselves and the members of their generation—Vogel and Shofman express pendulum swings between empathy and repulsion, acceptance of weakness and its disdain, embracing vulnerability, and clinging to strength. Their representations of prostitution are a prism refracting their poetic–ideological negotiation of issues of strength and weakness within the Jewish world at the turn of the century and in the aftermath of World War I. Hence, their works formulate a subjectivity that cannot easily be delimited or organized into distinct categories of strength, weakness, masculinity, and femininity.

In Bialik’s evocation of it, the situation of victimhood may be extremely traumatic, but it is in many senses a one-time event, or one whose repetition can be prevented. To Bialik’s way of thinking, at least, it implies the possibility of rehabilitation and establishes a linear narrative that advances from problem to solution, from trauma to healing. Once the people overcome its weakness and “effeminacy,” they will be able to circumscribe the trauma within the bounds of past memory. Bialik’s conception is constructed upon the time lag built into the experience of trauma, the gap separating the traumatic event from its psychological impact, given that a Freudian Nachträglichkeit—“afterwardsness,” retroaction, deferred action—is the primary condition for remembering and bearing witness.

Shofman uses prostitution to deal with victimhood, strength, and weakness. The prostitute’s trauma is not a one-time experience, but a continuous one, a trauma constantly repeated (not in flashbacks of deferred or repressed memory, but as constantly repeated violence). As such, she is denied any Freudian Nachträglichkeit. In other words, this is a trauma that cannot be circumscribed within the bounds of the past or of memory. This absence of the time lag built into the experience of trauma may obviate any place for poetic expression as a vehicle of remembrance and witness-bearing. It also threatens to destabilize any coherent narrative set within a certain time and following the rules of cause and effect. To borrow an expression coined by Raya Morag, this kind of repetitive trauma establishes an anti-memory. It is a chronic trauma that is not-yet-memory, a trauma caught between what-has-already-happened and what-is-about-to-happen. Thus, Bialik in effect calls for overcoming a traumatic memory that, according to Shofman, intrinsically cannot be relegated to the bounds of memory.
This distinction is not rhetorical but essential, and it is connected to the spaces in which subjectivity meets gender. As a cultural symbol, masculinity overcomes its past (as it overcomes pitfalls and other obstacles), while femininity is obliged to oblivion, forgetting, and repression. As Julia Kristeva has shown, femininity is simultaneously repression and its refusal, that which is suppressed and the power that will not be held back, that undermines, bursts out, breaks through, and causes tumult. And if to forget is really to cast off, as we were taught by the nineteenth-century French psychologist Théodule-Armand Ribot (1839–1916), then being trapped in the depths of oblivion is not a mark of failure of the effort to overcome the traumatic past, but is depressive anxiety in the sense defined by Melanie Klein, of fear of violating the weakness itself, of the loss of vulnerability. Shofman and Vogel, like Brenner in such works as Atsabim (Nerves) and Shekhol vekhishalon (Breakdown and Bereavement) and Agnon in Tmol shilshom (Only Yesterday), not only struggle with their failure to live up to the expectations of the Zionist enterprise and with their “doubts, dismissiveness, sarcasm and lack of faith regarding that vision,” but they also set out a different conception of identity and gender (for men, not for women); and they mold a masculinity in which strength and weakness are different facets of identity, without the one necessarily cancelling out the existence of the other. Vulnerability, for Vogel and Shofman, is not “the shadow side of the worthy nationalist male”; their notion of identity is incapable of relinquishing the feminine and the vulnerable within themselves, and also sees no reason to do so.

Despite Vogel’s and Shofman’s centrality in Hebrew literature of the time, their multidimensional attitudes toward victimhood, masculinity, and nationalism remained at the margins of Zionist thinking. As Dan Pagis remarked, it seems that “under the blazing sun [of Eretz Israel], the ‘dark gate’ looks rather distant and hazy.” Indeed, after Shofman immigrated to pre-State Israel in 1938, he himself desisted from his poetic exploration of the meeting points between gender, victimhood, and national identity, and he published no additional stories about prostitution. The characters of Henia, Sutra, Stefka, and Olga were all fated to be left behind in Europe, the repressed land of Jewish exile. Trapped as they are in the space of Shofman’s stories, they perhaps bear within them not only the key to understanding a multileveled and multifaceted conception of victimhood, but
also the potential for a different kind of thinking about traumatic subjectivity, time, memory, and history.

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NOTES

☐ I would like to express my deep gratitude to Deborah Greniman for translating this article from the Hebrew.


2 Emma Liggins has shown how sympathy for the prostitute in Victorian literature was often attained at the price of acceptance and replication of stereotypes of working-class women and female sexuality; the same is true of Hebrew literature of the revival period. See Emma Liggins, “Prostitution and Social Purity in the 1880s and 1890s,” Critical Survey 15 (2003): 39–55.

3 For a detailed analysis of representations of prostitutes in literature, theater, cinema, and law, see Shulamit Almog, Nashim mufkarot (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense–Modan, 2008).


5 Timothy J. Gilfoyle notes that although many people attribute the association of prostitution, sexuality, and modernity to Foucault, it was already articulated a century earlier by the British psychologist and doctor Havelock Ellis. See Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “Prostitution in History: From Parables of Pornography to Metaphors of Modernity,” American Historical Review 104 (1999): 135.

6 Nord, 2–3.

7 Much has been written about the connection between the writings of the telushim and the autobiographical experiences of the writers themselves. See, e.g., Gershon Shaked, Hasiporet ba’ivrit 1880–1980 (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad–Keter, 1977–1998); and Nurit Govrin, Keri’at hadorot: sifrut ‘ivrit bema’agaleha , I–II (Tel Aviv: Gevanim, 2002), III–IV (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2008).

9 The sensitivity of the Talmudic and midrashic literature toward prostitutes is encapsulated in their use of the word mufkeret (loose woman) to refer to them, as opposed to perutsah (harlot) or yats’anit (streetwalker). For a discussion of the language issue and the connection between names for prostitutes and ideological attitudes toward them, see Almog, 11–21.


16 Shalom Kraemer, “Darko be’omanut hasipur,” in Govrin, G. Shofman, 145.

17 Yeshurun Keshet, “Nefesh hador o nefesh hayahid?” in Govrin, G. Shofman, 94.

18 Quoted by Nurit Govrin in “Mavo: Mahalakhah shel habikoret al sipurei G. Shofman,” in Govrin, G. Shofman, 28.

19 The abolitionist approach to prostitution, which is rooted in the struggle for the abolition of slavery in the United States, sees prostitution as a form of sexual slavery. Consequently, this conception not only sees prostitution as the objectification of women’s bodies, but it also, by definition, rejects the notion that it could be a choice. It follows that a woman engaged in prostitution is always to be seen as a victim. Moreover, this approach sees in prostitution a violation of elementary human rights and an unmitigated expression of men’s domination of women. Accordingly, as we have said, prostitution is not a choice and cannot be defined as

20 My colleague Amos Goldberg suggests broadening this argument to see in Shofman’s stance a critique of the concept of choice that is so central to the liberal worldview. I am grateful to him for the comment and for his intellectual daring. In my book *A Poetics of Trauma: The Work of Dahlia Ravikovitch* (Lebanon, N.H.: University Press of New England, 2013), I discuss how Ravikovitch’s writings challenge the concept of choice in Western culture in general and in the Zionist enterprise in particular.


Roskies, Arnold J. Band, Lawrence Kaplan, and Asa Kasher, in *Prooftexts* 25 (Winter/Spring 2005), Special Issue: *Kishinev in the Twentieth Century*.

25 Gluzman, Hever, and Miron, *Be’ir haharegah: bikur me'uḥar*.

26 Ibid., 74.

27 Michael Gluzman points out that the gap between the worldviews evinced, respectively, in “Al hasheḥiṭah” and “Be’ir haharegah” is also expressed in the difference between the two suppressed poems “Lakedoshim” (To the Martyrs), written in the aftermath of the anti-Jewish violence in Odessa in 1854, which expresses identification with the victims, and “Ḥazak ve'emats” (Be Strong and Brave), commemorating the victims of the Białystok pogrom in 1907, which condemns the weakness of the victims; see Gluzman, “Hoser koaḥ,” 28–29. Mikhal Dekel has also discussed the differences between “Al hasheḥiṭah” and “Be’ir haharegah.” She notes that in the former poem, the speaker identifies with the victims, while in the latter the act of spectatorship creates a distance between the speaker/witness and the readers, on the one hand, and the victims, on the other. Dekel attributes this attitude of distance to Bialik’s representation of the witness as an emergent tragic figure. See Mikhal Dekel, *The Universal Jew: Masculinity, Modernity, and the Zionist Moment* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 142–43.


32 Sara R. Horowitz points out that the critical and ironic gaze directed at the men in “Be’ir haharegah” does not apply to the images of the raped women. See her “The Rhetoric of Embodied Memory in ‘In the City of Slaughter’,” *Prooftexts* 25 (Winter/Spring 2005): 81, 84.

33 Mikhal Dekel offers an intriguing analysis of “Be’ir haharegah,” according to which the poem establishes a masculinity based on a model of mythical tragedy. Reading
the poem through the prism of tragedy allows her to expose a complex masculinity, a Jewish masculinity that is not active, violent, or vengeful. This masculinity stands ready to act but is simultaneously held in; it is passive but deeply committed to the nation. See Dekel, *The Universal Jew*, 166.

34 David Vogel, *Kol hashirim*, ed. Aharon Komem (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998), 120. I thank Deborah Greniman for this beautiful translation.

35 I am not arguing that Vogel reflects a feminine attitude or expresses a female voice, either in “Tavahî ishtî” (I’ve Butchered My Wife) or in his other texts. As against Dan Miron, who argues that the poetic format of Vogel’s “feminine” poems is no different from that of his “masculine” poems, Naomi Seidman offers a more complex view, arguing that femininity and masculinity in Vogel’s works should be read as meeting points between gender and poetics. In other words, femininity and masculinity in Vogel’s work raise questions about gender identity and about the various types of modernist poetics. See Dan Miron, *Imahot meyasdot, abayot horgot* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1991), 93; and Naomi Seidman, “It Is You I Speak from within Me’: David Fogel’s Poetics of the Feminine Voice,” *Prooftexts* 13, no. 1 (January 1993): 87–102.


39 Dan Miron draws our attention to the stratum of Jewish national meaning in Vogel’s *Hayei nisu’im*, pointing out that “here the two protagonists who come into conflict are not only a man and a woman, but a Jew and a Gentile.” Miron reads this theme in the context of the erotic complex of the Jew’s love for the non-Jew, referring in this regard to Agnon’s “Ha’adonit vaharokhel” (The Lady and the Peddler) and Smolenskin’s “Hagmul” (The Reward). See Dan Miron, “Matai nehdal ‘legalot’ et Vogel?” in his *Hasifria ha’iveret: proza me’urevet 1980–2005* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2005), 102–24.


Laplanch and Pontalis, 22.

Ibid., 22–23.


Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallis point out that, as feminists, we are attuned to the way cultural construction produces a multifaceted female identity, at times infused with splits and contradictions. They argue that we are far less attuned to the way cultural construction dismantles and challenges the image of both the concrete and the symbolic father. See Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, eds., *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), x.

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It is interesting to note, on a purely anecdotal level, that the Hebrew verb *merashresh* (“rustle, tinkle”) makes its first appearance in the story “Katnut.” Bialik, editor of *Hashiloah*, the literary journal in which the story was first published, attests in a 1922 letter to the writer Daniel Persky (published in *Hadoar*, 27 Elul 5694 [September 7, 1934]) that it was he who coined this word and inserted it into Shofman’s story; see Eilon Gilad, “Gilgulah shel hamilah ‘rishrush’: Me’eifo hegi’a la’ivrit hatslil hamatok shel hakeseft?” *Haaretz*, February 22, 2013. The addition of *merashresh* enhances the hedonistic dimension of Hillel’s character, with the aim of...
highlighting his frustration; see Shofman, *Kol kitvei G. Shofman*, 1:90. Symbolically, it is not coincidental that Bialik, in his editorial role, contributed his linguistic wisdom toward balancing Hillel’s impotence and shoring up his clout.

51 It may be the fundamental difference between identification and empathy that underpins these dissimilar attitudes. There is a dimension to identification with weakness that is threatening to the male speaker, while empathy allows not only for a defensive distance, but even for a kind of patronizing that protects Shofman’s speaker from the subversion and distortion of gender relations. On the differences between identification and empathy, see Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004); and Carolyn J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy after the Holocaust* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004).


55 That Abramson pays the prostitute without using her services is fascinating. According to Freud, the prostitute enables the client to fantasize about an all-powerful mother, but the payment simultaneously protects him, in letting him to maintain his position of power. In this context, Abramson’s deed may be

56 David Vogel, Roman vina’i (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2012).

57 The Hebrew writer’s self-image as a whore is connected to the autobiographical experience of having been supported by rich Jews, to the trade in the words of the sacred tongue, as well as to the feminine image of the galut (Diaspora) Jew. It may also be read in relation to the wider question raised by Catherine Gallagher regarding the relationship between art and prostitution. See her “George Eliot and Daniel Deronda: The Prostitute and the Jewish Question,” in Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel, ed. Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 54. I am grateful to Mikhal Dekel for this reference.

58 The speaker in Vogel’s poem “Amarti lagvarim” (I Said to the Men; May 18, 1920) would seem to be a prostitute; through her voice, Vogel expresses the fear she arouses in the “respectable” women who “quaked and fled away” from her (272). Although the speaker’s identity as a prostitute is uncertain, it is certainly not unreasonable to suppose so. According to Miron, the poem “expressed the prostitute’s sense of alienation; no man wants her or her tender ministrations, and everyone shuns her.” Miron, Imahot meyasdot, 93. Naomi Seidman accepts the view that the poem’s speaker is a prostitute; see her “It Is You I Speak from Within Me,” 100.


60 Roland Barthes was among the first to expose the illusory mechanism at work in striptease performances. He argued that striptease is based on a contradiction: the nullification of the woman’s sexuality at the very moment when it is laid bare. A striptease performance, according to Barthes, is not an expression of autonomous female sexuality or of female creativity; it is a performance that uses the female body.
to make a presentation to male eyes, for the purpose of gratifying male appetites. The woman in the performance is conceived not as a subject with a personality, opinions, wishes, desires, and so on, but as an object meant to serve such male purposes as power, possession, and sexuality. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 84–87.

61 The novel does not relate directly to this event as an attempted rape. The principal hint at sexual violence comes in the sentence “but the man thrust both his hands at her as though to fondle her, and his cane fell to the ground” (*Hayei nisu'im*, 172). I agree with Menahem Peri’s argument in his afterward to the novel that the reference is to an attempted rape; see Peri, “He’arot al nosah hasefer,” in Vogel, *Hayei nisu'im* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2000), 332. Interestingly, the character of Lotte, who suffers from her unrequited love for Gurdweil and from depression and ultimately takes her own life, is formed on the Freudian model that sees a direct connection between hysteria and childhood experience of sexual violence. In “The Etiology of Hysteria” (1896), Freud argues that at the bottom of every case of hysteria lies a premature sexual experience. Freud later changed his position, replacing his theory of infantile seduction with that of infantile sexuality, according to which hysteria derives not from real occurrences but from fantasies of sexual relations with the father. See Freud, *Three Essays*, 78; Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 50–81. Sandor Ferenczi rejected Freud’s change, arguing in a 1933 article that childhood sexual traumas are far more prevalent than one might think; see Sandor Ferenczi, “Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child,” trans. Eric Mosbacher, in *Final Contributions to the Problems and Methods of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Michael Balint (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 161. Ferenczi’s point of view is widely accepted today.

62 Eric Zakim locates Gurdweil within the modernistic context of Vogel’s writing, arguing that he is simultaneously both victim and victimizer. See Eric Zakim, “Between Fragment and Authority in David Fogel’s (Re)Presentation of Subjectivity,” *Prooftexts* 13, no. 1 (January 1993): 107.


Robert Cover writes of the terror underlying the process of establishing juridical sovereignty, in connection with the recognition that judicial authority will bring with it conflicts with the sovereign over against which its judiciary autonomy has been established. Similarly, the moment when the Zionist community declares its national independence is (also) one of terror. The thought of sovereignty over themselves aroused fears in members of the revival generation that came to expression in their literary works. See Robert Cover, “The Folktales of Justice: Tales of Jurisdiction,” in Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat, eds., Narrative, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 173–202.

Gluzman, “Hoser koaḥ.”

Tsamir, “Lilit, Hava.”

In what follows I shall focus upon the conceptions of power emerging from “Be’ir haharegah” and “Al hasḥechitah,” but, as Tsamir showed in “Lilit, Hava,” a sense of power courses through many of Bialik’s poems, such as “Lo timaḥ” (Don’t Wipe; 1899, p. 108), “Basadeh” (In the Field; 1893, p. 36), “Pa’amai aviv” (Harbingers of Spring; 1900, p. 96), and “Mishrei haḥoresh” (Winter Poems; 1902, p. 136). Ziva Shamir and Ruth Shenfeld have discussed the elements of national freedom, power, and autonomy in Bialik’s works; see Shenfeld, Gilgulo shel sipur: al darkei babithavut shel sipurei Bialik (Tel Aviv: Katz Institute, Tel Aviv University, 1988); Shamir, Be’ein ‘alilah: sipurei Bialik bem’agolateihem (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998). Hannah Naveh, by contrast, in her discussion of “Aryeh ba’al guf” (Aryeh the Muscleman) and Bialik’s conception of power, emphasizes Bialik’s skepticism as to the chances of “muscular Judaism” inheriting the place of the “old-time” Jew; see Naveh, 119. Hannan Hever, too, reads
“Hahatsotsrah nitbaishah” (The Trumpet Was Abashed) as a text that poses an option for the Zionist narrative and actually affirms Jewish existence as a national minority in the diaspora; see Hever, “Gerush behag ha’hent: Al ‘hahatsortsrah nitbaishah’ leH. N. Bialik,” in Hever, Hasipur veveh’um: kri’ot bikortiyot hakanon basiporet ha’ivrit (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 99–106.

71 “The necessity of looking like an upstanding citizen wears down one’s selfhood,” wrote Vogel of himself in his diary entry for May 25, 1919, quoted in Pagis, “Kavim lebiografiah,” in Kol shirei David Vogel, ed. Dan Pagis (Tel Aviv: Agudat Sofrim, 1966), 13. This surely relates to the need to function within bourgeois European society, but it can also be understood as relating to a wider variety of social and national expectations, such as those of the Zionist enterprise. In a rough paraphrase, then, this multivalent quotation may be understood as saying something along the lines of this: the necessity of looking like an upstanding citizen—that is, hardworking and solid—wears down one’s selfhood, with the weakness at its core.


74 Ibid., 101.

75 Tsamir, “Lilit, Hava,” 137.

76 Consciously or not, Tsamir herself alludes to this option. In a footnote, she circumscribes her argument that the poetry of the revival generation was entirely concerned with various ways of maintaining desire and masculinity: “although it seems to me that only in Bialik does the processing of weakness and its transformation into strength and desire come out so clearly,” ibid., 169 n.89, emphasis in the original.


80 Naveh, 119. It is interesting in this context to recall Gershom Scholem’s characterization of the Zionism reflected in Agnon’s works, particularly Tmol shilshom: “Zionism in Agnon’s writings is basically a noble failure, whereas everything else in Jewish life is a sham.” Scholem, “Reflections on S. Y. Agnon,” Commentary, December 1967, 65.

81 Naveh, 122.

82 Pagis, “Kavim lebiografiah,” 35.