

## A Comparative Reading of Israeli and Polish Literatures in the Aftermath of the Holocaust

Rachel Feldhay Brenner

My response to Leora Bilsky's and Rachel Klagsbrun's article proposes that the issue of Jewish cultural genocide transcends the narrow category of a national, either Israeli or Polish, loss and thus does not accord with the legal discourse of the Genocide Convention. In order to pass the restitution law, the law must institute formulae and criteria of ownership. However, the Israeli and Polish national literatures demonstrate that the issue of Jewish cultural ownership transcends the constrictions of the law; they assert a cultural interconnectedness which disavows the idea of a single owner. The literary representations expose interrelations which transcend nationally and politically driven cultural boundaries. Since cultural entities are fluid and constantly change, definitions of cultural losses elude the clear-cut criteria which characterize legal ownership. Readings of the Israeli and Polish literary representations of the destroyed Jewish Diaspora culture illuminate the moral and emotional impact of the Jewish Diaspora's cultural genocide for both the Israeli and Polish national cultures. The literary texts demonstrate the futility of the attempt to determine the ownership of the remnants of the Jewish culture.

The indelible memory of the prewar European culture pervades Israeli literary responses to the Holocaust. Ironically, Israeli literature born out of the Zionist idea and written in Hebrew, the language of the Zionist project, subverts the ideology of the new Jew. While Leah Goldberg's drama *The Lady of the Castle* commemorates the European culture of the Enlightenment which united the progressive Jewish and Christian scholars with a common endorsement of scientific progress, Shulamith Hareven's short novella "The Witness" instils the memory of the destruction of the Jewish Diaspora into the mentality of the new Jew. While Ruth Almog's *Exile* seeks a remedy for Israel's interpersonal brutality and quasi-religious militarism in the European postwar reaffirmation of universal humanism, Aharon Megged's *Foigelman* demonstrates how the negation of the Diaspora Yiddish culture presages the collapse of the Zionist idea of Jewish renewal.

As Polish wartime literary works and those of the immediate postwar period demonstrate, the mass murder of the Jews on Polish land undermined both the religious and secular mainstays of Polish culture. The Catholic writers lament the disappearance of the Jewish-Christian God (Leopold Buczkowski), bemoan the loss of hope for salvation (Czesław Miłosz), and mourn the demise of *caritas* (Stanisław Rembek), all resulting from the mass murder of the Jews. They understand that the destruction of the Jewish faith irreversibly diminished Polish Catholicism. At the same time, the secular writers, such as Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz and Zofia Nałkowska, observe how the destruction of the Jews collapsed the humanistic values of equality and justice. Like Israeli literature, Polish literature refutes the demand for recognition

of Poland as the sole legal owner of the remnants of Jewish culture. But just as the Zionist state has failed to “Zionize” the survivor, so Poland cannot “Polonize” the prewar Jews and their destroyed cultural heritage.

The above examinations of literary responses to the lost Jewish heritage indicate the intercultural dimensions of the loss. The literary insistence on investigating the destruction of the Jews and its cultural impact seems to draw upon the sphere of psychology and ethics, rather than that of the law. The solution to the controversy over the ownership of cultural genocide lies in surrender to the emotional need to remember and commemorate the lost culture in the context of inclusion, rather than in inflexible and immutable legalistic exclusion.