



PROJECT MUSE®

“I Said unto You When You Were in Your Blood, Live”: Yoram Kaniuk’s Tasha”h

Amir Eshel

Jewish Social Studies, Volume 18, Number 3, Spring/Summer 2012,
pp. 70-84 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press
DOI: [10.1353/jss.2012.0017](https://doi.org/10.1353/jss.2012.0017)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jss/summary/v018/18.3.eshel.html>

“I Said unto You When You Were in Your Blood, Live”: Yoram Kaniuk’s *Tasha’h*

Amir Eshel

ABSTRACT

This essay examines Yoram Kaniuk’s acclaimed 2010 fictionalized memoir, Tasha’h (1948) in the context of Hebrew literature’s reaction to the War of Independence and to the Nakba. Placing an emphasis on the narrative’s multiple connections between historical memory and the narrator’s contemporary position, the essay points to crucial moments of literary ethical and political reflection. Building on my recent work on futural aspects in Hebrew literature’s reaction to 1948, the essay places Kaniuk in the tradition established by such authors as S. Yizhar, Amos Oz, and A. B. Yehoshua, among others. At the same time, the essay highlights Kaniuk’s implicit understanding of 1948 as a modernist event: as one of the man-made catastrophes that came to define the modern era.

Keywords: Israeli War of Independence, Nakba, modernist event, memory, trauma

Hebrew literature’s grappling with the watershed year 1948 demonstrates the capacity of the arts to broaden our political and ethical horizons not only by unveiling repressed aspects of our histories but even more so by drawing attention to the past’s effects on our present and its possible impact on the future. Shortly after the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, in the novella “Hirbet Hiz’ah,” the writer S. Yizhar presented this war to his Israeli readers in a provocative manner, challenging, deepening, and broadening public perceptions of the war and subsequently generating a lively debate on the war’s meaning for the young Jewish state. “Hirbet Hiz’ah,” Anita Shapira has

Amir Eshel, “I Said unto You When You Were in Your Blood, Live’: Yoram Kaniuk’s *Tasha’h*,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 18, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2012): 70–84

shown, redescribed what most citizens of the young Jewish state saw as an untainted victory of the few over the many by presenting a much more complex set of events that also included the expulsion from their homeland of unarmed Palestinian civilians.¹ After depicting the war as a brutal struggle in the course of which young Israelis defended their state but also engaged in war crimes, Yizhar concluded “Hirbet Hiz’ah” with a powerful allusion that tied the war’s atrocities to Israel’s possible future. The novella ends with the image of the emptied Palestinian village as the site of a coming visit:

And when silence had closed in on everything and no man disturbed the stillness, which yearned noiselessly for what was beyond silence—then God would come forth and descend to roam the valley, and see whether all was according to the cry [*hake-tsa’akatah*] that had reached him.²

The last word in Yizhar’s novella, *hake-tsa’akatah* (“whether all was according to the cry”), is taken from Genesis 18:20–21.³ There, God addresses Abraham, telling him that the outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so grave that he will visit these cities to see whether their citizens have acted as unlawfully as the outcry suggests. God’s visit to Sodom and Gomorrah unleashed severe rage and punishment, ending with the cities’ complete destruction. Concluding “Hirbet Hiz’ah” on this note, the novella suggests to its readers the possibility that the actions carried out by Israeli soldiers in places such as the fictional Hirbet Hiz’ah may lead in the future to a catastrophic punishment similar to the one that struck Sodom and Gomorrah.⁴

“Hirbet Hiz’ah” was thus not merely a depiction of the 1948 war but an invitation to its readers to expand their view of what they regarded as their “War of Independence.” Yizhar’s work challenged them to reflect on the war’s effect on the ongoing conflict over the land and perhaps to consider their own ethical and political convictions. The questions, whether all *is* according to the cry and what may happen in the land if the cry is indeed as awful as it seems, remained for the readers to answer with new thinking and, possibly, with new forms of action.⁵

During the decades following 1948, many Hebrew writers and poets followed Yizhar’s path in associating the events of this year and the establishment of the Jewish state with repercussions and resonances in the present and possible futures. In 1952, the poet Avot Yeshurun published the elegy “Pesah ‘al kukhim” (Passover on Caves), a work that brought into proximity the fate of Yeshurun’s family during the Holocaust and the pain of Palestinians in 1948.⁶ Alluding to Yehuda Halevi’s

[71]

Yoram Kaniuk’s
Tasha’’h

●
Amir Eshel

canonical poem “Tsiyon ha-lo tishali” (Zion, Wilt Thou Not Ask), Yeshurun turns in this work to his readers—Jews living in modern Zion, in Israel. Using *tishali* (“you will ask”), the future form of the verb *lishol* (to ask), Yeshurun’s poem prompts Israeli readers to ask, to inquire and possibly pay greater attention to the fate of the exiled Palestinians—to come to terms with their own ethical and political responsibility for the pain of the exiled Palestinians.⁷

In the early 1960s, a writer of a younger generation, A. B. Yehoshua, offered in “Mul ha-ye‘arot” (Facing the Forests) a thorny parable of Israel’s attempt to cover up the exile of Palestinians during 1948 by planting pine forests over the ruins of their villages.⁸ The dramatic conclusion of Yehoshua’s work—the arsonous burning of the veiling forests—suggested that the historical event many Israelis wish to conceal—the 1948 flight and expulsion of Palestinians—is hardly a distant past. The image of the burning forest suggested, furthermore, that this part of Israel’s history will return to haunt Israelis and Palestinians alike with ever-greater brutality.

Tying the fate of Palestinians during and after 1948 to Israel’s political present and possible future, S. Yizhar, Avot Yeshurun, and A. B. Yehoshua have set an example for numerous writers across genres, styles, and generations.⁹ Although in the 1970s Hebrew literature rarely dealt with the plight of Palestinians during 1948, from the mid-1980s onward a number of writers confronted their readers with new renderings of these painful realities. In light of the 1982 Lebanon War, the Intifadas, and the stalled peace negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, Amos Oz, David Grossman, Yehoshua Kenaz, Yitzhak Laor, Daniella Carmi, and Michal Govrin, to name only a few, presented 1948 and (with ever-growing attentiveness) the fate of Palestinians during and after the war as a touchstone of Israel’s ethical and political integrity.¹⁰ In recent years, even authors born an entire generation after 1948, such as Eshkol Nevo in *Arba’ah batim ve-ga’gua’* (Four Houses and a Longing, 2004) and Alon Hilu in *Ahuzat Dajani* (The House of Dajani, 2008), have displayed in successful and acclaimed works how the newly established Israel not only witnessed the flight of numerous Palestinians from their homeland (as the collective memory still suggested) but also actively engaged in what Palestinians and increasing numbers of Israelis call the Nakba, the catastrophe of Palestinian expulsion and ongoing exile.¹¹ As was the case with their literary predecessors Yizhar and Yeshurun, the symbolic thread that runs through the work of these younger writers indicates that accounting for the Nakba will have a critical impact on Israel’s future.¹²

The literary interest in the Nakba never took place in a political vacuum. From S. Yizhar's 1949 "Hirbet Hiz'ah" to Alon Hilu's *Ahuzat Dajani*, Hebrew literature has been part and parcel of the much broader scholarly and cultural-political discourse surrounding 1948 as it affects Israel's present and future.¹³ Though Israeli historiographers, sociologists, and left-leaning politicians embraced a more nuanced historical memory as reflected in the writing of Yizhar and others, right-leaning scholars, writers, and especially political actors pursued an opposing course. In May of 2009, a ministers' committee of the newly elected Israeli government under Benjamin Netanyahu decided to support the draft of a law that would outlaw the commemoration of the Nakba on Israel's Independence Day.¹⁴ After a hefty public debate, in March 2011 the Israeli Knesset approved an amendment to a budget regulation making it possible for Israel's Ministry of the Treasury to reduce the funding given to public institutions if they choose to commemorate the Nakba on Israel's Independence Day.¹⁵

Amidst this most recent public dispute surrounding the Nakba, the writer Yoram Kaniuk published one of the most remarkable literary works on 1948—his fictionalized memoir *Tasha'h* (1948 represented in Hebrew letters)—a work that justifiably brought him the distinguished Sapir Prize.¹⁶ Written in the first-person singular, *Tasha'h*, much like S. Yizhar's "Hirbet Hiz'ah," reflects the writer's war experiences—his attempt to personally account for the war's political and ethical implications for the individual and the nation alike. In contrast to Yizhar, however, Kaniuk was only 17 years old when he joined the Palmah in 1947 to fight in the war.¹⁷ Furthermore, in *Tasha'h* Kaniuk returns to his youth not immediately after the events but from the perspective of a 78-year-old man who lived to see the war's outcome on Israel's future—a writer who experienced the 1967 and 1973 wars, the Jewish occupation and settlement of the West Bank, the Intifadas, and the failed attempts to come to a peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Relating to the distant past and offering numerous moments that tie historical memory to the present, Kaniuk's *Tasha'h* recounts 1948 in a set of vignettes organized in a loosely chronological fashion. Aware of the failures of human memory, Kaniuk frames his testimonial work in several significant ways, beginning with a striking visual component: the cover of the book.

Kaniuk's 1953 oil painting, featured on the book's cover, recreates Israel's flag as two lines of hazy blue and a muddled, oversized Star of David. Refracting the stylistic plainness of the actual Israeli flag, Kaniuk's banner is dotted with blotches of red that clearly evoke blood.

[73]

Yoram Kaniuk's
Tasha'h

●
Amir Eshel

The visual evocation of blood returns in the book's motto—"And when I passed by you, and saw you polluted in your own blood, I said unto you when you were in your blood, Live; yea, I said unto you when you were in your blood, Live" (Ezekiel 16:6). The bloodstained flag also points to the book's dedication:

To my dead and alive friends from the Harel Brigade, and to Hanoch Kosovsky, the hero who loves who I am, and who is my enemy; the man of the land, a bloody man, like all of us, with great love to all those who were there in the hell of slaughter, and yes, we also established a state.¹⁸

Though the motto from Ezekiel frames Kaniuk's *Tasha"h* in a highly dramatic manner (a claim I will return to toward the end of this essay), his dedication expresses the realization that he and his fellow soldiers of the Palmah's Harel Brigade established in 1948 not merely a state in the narrow sense of the modern nation-state, but rather a homeland, a refuge for Jews only three years after the end of the Holocaust. Kaniuk's words also acknowledge, however, the ethical paradox of the soldiers and their actions. It states what the book's narrative bluntly unfolds: that they were also "men of blood." The idiom *ish damim* ("man of blood") in the dedication alludes to 2 Samuel 16:7, in which Shimei, believing that David's troubles are a direct result of crimes David committed against the house of Saul, curses David: "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel!" Kaniuk's allusion thus suggests viewing those who fought the war not as flawless national idols but rather as akin to the biblical David: heroic, complex, and at times flawed.

Kaniuk's bloodstained flag, the motto, and the dedication unsettle the glory of the modern nation-state, the idea of Israel as a "normal" example of that entity (the claim that the establishment of Israel means the normalization of the Jewish people was a staple of Zionism). They also upset the one-dimensional image of the unblemished Israeli soldier. The following narrative reiterates this move: "It [the 1948 war] happened or not. No memory has a state [*medina*]; no state [*medina*] has memory. I may remember or invent a memory, may invent a country or think that in the past things were actually different."¹⁹ *Tasha"h* begins as the conscious attempt to deprive of its purity, exclusivity, and presumed accuracy the national-collective narrative regarding 1948. Rather than deliver a precise account of what happened, *Tasha"h* offers a personal reflection on 1948—a lyrical, candid examination of the events as an acrimonious whole.

The narrator-writer attempts in the following pages to make distinctions, to show how conflicted 1948 must have been for the different

groups whose fate it determined. He explores a variety of emotions and truths to see if one may still pass ethical judgment in light of such diverging memories. To do so, Kaniuk's narrative turns time and again to the readers, asking them to join in this poetic investigation. "And so it happened to us," writes the narrator at a crucial junction.

[75]

*Yoram Kaniuk's
Tasha'h*

●
Amir Eshel

We went to bring Jews by way of the sea and we found ourselves creating a state in the mountains surrounding Jerusalem. Since we hardly knew how to establish a state, it is a mistake to say that we fought for it. How could we have known how one does so? . . . The first thing we know in the history of our people is that Abraham escapes his homeland because he heard God telling him, "Go from your country, your people, and your father's household!" So, how can we know what love of the homeland is?²⁰

Addressing the "we" in gestures such as "we know in the history of our people," *Tasha'h* invites its readers to explore from new viewpoints the events that transpired between the November 29, 1947, United Nations vote on partition and the end of the war. Through its similes, allusions, metaphors, and allegories, the unnamed "we," the readers, participate in an attempt to unveil as-yet unrecognized elements of 1948—to absorb its repressed features. Reading means potentially participating in the narrator's attempt to express the painful personal and collective truth. Thus, Kaniuk's narrative recounts the arrival of Holocaust survivors on the shores of Palestine and their sense of salvation. At the same time, it records how the writer in 1947 witnessed a helpless Palestinian lynched in plain sight in Tel Aviv. The narrator remembers thinking, after the November 1947 U.N. vote, that two thousand years of Jewish persecution, humiliation, and expulsion had come to an end. Soon after, however, he recounts with similar emotional intensity the deportation of the Muslim Bosnian inhabitants of Qisarya (the Arabic name for Caesarea):

They [the expellees] wore coats and hats and already looked like ants making their way in the sand. At the edge of the procession I saw a little girl in a green jacket holding a doll. She looked back, and was dragged away by the Arab, whom I recognized as a Bosnian, a friend of my father, and I was sad but I didn't do a thing. What I saw still did not have a name. . . . [T]he convoy looked ever smaller and lost.²¹

Remembering 1948, in this scene as in the entire book, involves presenting what occurred—the expulsion—and reflecting on one's own responsibility through the narrator's failure to act. In another

[76]

*Jewish
Social
Studies*

●

Vol. 18
No. 3

memorable scene, Kaniuk recalls entering the cities of Ramle and Lod shortly after their Palestinian residents were forced from their homes:

Ramle, the capital of the sands; Ramle the lively city, with its beautiful homes, wide avenues; the city whose streets were filled with acacia and ficus trees seemed like a murderous storm passed it, leaving only the buildings to stand. Lost donkeys were roaming the deserted streets. A camel chewed slowly, not knowing where its owner had disappeared to. Palm trees and bushes of prickly pear, and the smell of burned food. In the homes one could see tables that were arranged for a meal. Food that dried up on the plates. Hungry dogs nervously searched the remains of the trash, while barking that seemed like screams in an empty echo chamber resounded. A huge broom swept over the city, taking all with it: children, the elderly, women, the young, leaving only their shadows behind.²²

Kaniuk shifts from a mixture of journalism and lyricism to ethical reflection. Recording the silence that ensued after the abrupt departure of the city's Palestinian population, he comments on his emotional confusion, his struggle to navigate his role as a soldier, and his feelings of regret, anger, and shame:

The emptiness of the city made me sad. Despite the horrors of war I experienced recently, I couldn't remain untouched by the sight. But, to my shame, I could not still be really angry. I was young. I saw friends die. I saw atrocities on both sides. I felt as though I didn't have feelings. . . . We stayed in Ramle for a few days. In nights that were silent because of the painful hush, I felt I could hear the cement moving.²³

The narrative's dithering in regard to ethical responsibility continues to build toward the depiction of the desolate Lod:

At the back of my mind, I began to hear the steps of those who fled these cities. . . . Near a long concertina I noticed a crowd gathering. The women were crying. They howled and begged. Children screamed in anger and pain. Men shouted and cried as well.²⁴

The testimony then morphs into both communal and self-judgment. Asking a soldier standing guard in order to prevent Palestinians from returning to their homes, "Who are these people?" Kaniuk hears that they are "just Arabs!"²⁵ The soldier stresses that Kaniuk should not be so foolish as to ask who ordered the Palestinians to remain on the outskirts of town. The city may have been theirs in the past, but it is

no longer. Kaniuk abandons his distant perspective with language that brings to mind the internal monologue of Yizhar's soldier in "Hirbet Hiz'ah":

[77]

I was angry with myself because when I entered the city I felt its emptiness only formally; I was angry because I didn't think what was here before the city was emptied. Now I could see the faces, flesh, pain. Clothes. Children. Old women spread over thorny shrubs, screaming. Men in suits but not always with shoes on their feet, begging. Pain. Longing. Humiliation. I felt like an accomplice; that the conscience of my youth, on which I could always count, fell asleep at the most crucial moment. What could I have done? Fight against the army of the country that I had just helped found?²⁶

*Yoram Kaniuk's
Tasha'h*

●
Amir Eshel

Twice Kaniuk's narrative breaks in this scene, preventing the sheer brutality of the events, the magnitude of the pain, from being subsumed in a soothing explanation. Using anthropomorphic nouns—"faces, flesh, pain"—the writer fills the city's void with attributes we associate with suffering human beings. It is he alone who can spell out what the military violence erased. The elliptical sentences—"Pain. Longing. Humiliation."—that give voice to the experiences of the defeated resist any rationalizing account. Kaniuk's narrative turns here as before to the readers, with a question that only seems rhetorical: "What could I have done?" may be answered in different ways. Those who will absolve the narrator of his responsibility will become, like him, accomplices to the act of expulsion. Significantly, the following pages also do not offer any answer to the question of what the narrator could have or should have done. It is the readers who should fill in the gap, consider if the soldier-witness could have, in fact, done something to help prevent or lessen this massive suffering and terrible national legacy.

Tasha'h's exploration of 1948 peaks with the account of what occurred in the Palestinian village of Beit Yuba—a fictive name the narrator gives to the actual community in the mountains near Jerusalem that once enjoyed the shade of thick-crowned cypresses. It is there that the young Jewish soldiers discover the body of one of their unit—mutilated and humiliated, dangling from a tree. At the sight of this horror, one of the soldiers, N.—a good friend of the lynched soldier—explodes with rage. His hatred targets both the Palestinian civilians who remained in the mostly deserted community and the narrator himself, whom N. regards as a leftist and a softy in all matters relating to Palestinian civilians. N. hates Kaniuk's "screwed justice,"²⁷ his belief in a binational resolution to the Jewish-Palestinian

conflict. This hatred soon turns into blind violence: N. hammers an old woman and a younger woman who rushes to her aid. Then he stabs the young woman, screaming, “All Arab women are nothing but means of production for the creation of murderers.”²⁸ As Kaniuk jumps to help the woman, his fellow soldiers hold him back, reminding him that he, too, who believes in the brotherhood of man, has shot numerous Arabs in the war.

Unrelenting, Kaniuk sees N. grabbing the eight-year-old son of the woman, holding a knife to his throat. A wave of “rage and remorse” sweeping him, Kaniuk aims his machine gun at N., saying, “Either you leave the boy or I will shoot you.” N. does not surrender: “Either you, Kaniuk, shoot the boy or I slaughter [*shohet*] both him and his mother.”²⁹ Kaniuk aims his weapon at N., knowing that he is “just [*tsodek*]”:

This justice flexed muscles I never thought I had before, . . . and I thought about . . . the binational state . . . that I thought then as I do now is the only reasonable solution, but one I can’t live in, and I aimed at N. and heard a shot. . . . And N. stood there safe and sound while the child fell, at the beginning like a butterfly and then . . . like a stone.³⁰

As in earlier scenes involving an ethical verdict, Kaniuk’s narrative is not a self-confident indication of what justice is but rather an exploration of the war crime, of the circumstances that led from the rage over the lynching of the Jewish soldier to the murder of helpless Palestinian civilians. *Tasha’h* details how Kaniuk reported N.’s actions to his superiors, how instead of pursuing the case and bringing N. to justice they merely staged a mock trial in which Benny Marshak, who was known as the *politruk* (political commissar) of the Haganah defense force, served as the reluctant judge. This veneer of justice soon dissolves into a sweeping justification of the killing through stories about leftist Zionists who thought that they had developed friendships with Palestinians only to be betrayed by them later. The notion of the brotherhood of man simply cannot work between Jews and Palestinians.

This moral pretense does not reassure Kaniuk, however. Directly following the events, he inflicts on his own flesh a sign of Cain: he shaves his head with an old blade that leaves visible slits on his head: “No one [of his fellow soldiers] said anything about the ugly bald head. What they knew they remained silent about. I knew. And I remained silent as well.”³¹ Although Kaniuk’s narrative breaks at this point without expressing a clear condemnation of this moral dumbness, it nevertheless echoes the narrator’s “shame,” his sense of guilt.

Yoram Kaniuk's narrative in *Tasha'h* is not confined to the description of the Palestinian expulsion and to the tracing of ethical contingencies alone. What lends this book crucial depth is its attempt to capture the broader scale of the tragedy and the complexity of 1948 without resorting all too quickly to moralism and predictable judgments. Rather than allowing the narrator to present himself as a moral apostle, the work sets him as a prism that refracts different aspects of what occurred in 1948, most important the proximity if not the immediacy of the forced departure of Jews from Europe following World War II and the Holocaust and the flight and expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland in 1948. In fact, immediately after the scene with N. discussed above, the narrator describes how a convoy of trucks carrying Holocaust survivors arrives in Ramle only a few days after the eviction of the city's Palestinian population. Coming out of the trucks are

people like I have never seen before. . . . They wore odd hats like I used to see in old movies. They shouted. They spoke a mixture of languages: Bulgarian, Polish, Russian, Yiddish, German, Greek. They dragged their screaming children and carried their scruffy bags with suspicion. They looked like locusts attacking the city. They did not walk toward the empty houses, they jumped at them! They attacked them hungrily while the previous owners of the houses stood by the fence, hoping to return or already proceeding in long convoys toward the unknown.³²

As in the previous scene, the narrator struggles with his conscience and implicitly invites the readers to participate in exploring what should have been the ethical course of action. He notes that these refugees belonged to "a different cosmology," that they were beyond "moral calculation" (*heshbon musari*).³³ Coming from "history's garbage bin," Kaniuk reflects,

they are right because they survived. By which I want to say that they felt like sinners who do not possess the right to judge. . . . The sight of the Jews that nabbed the houses was dreadful, but it also contained some beauty that does not allow for judgment. The last time that any one of them owned a house or an apartment was in the 1930s. . . . These children, who were born in German or British camps, did not know what homes that are not surrounded by barbed wire look like. No one gave them the houses they entered now; they simply broke in. They were stronger than the Israelis [who arrived in Palestine before the Holocaust]. . . . They felt that they were victorious because they had survived. They dismantled the barbed wire fences like kids opening bars of chocolate. They took. They remained.³⁴

[79]

Yoram Kaniuk's
Tasha'h

●
Amir Eshel



One could read Kaniuk's weaving-together of the two images—the expulsion of the cities' Palestinians and the entering of Jewish Holocaust survivors—naïvely, as a more or less direct attempt to balance the plight of Palestinians with that of Jews, as a thinly veiled attempt to avert questions of guilt and responsibility toward Palestinians. Yet, tempting as such a moralizing reading may be, it is hardly satisfactory. Much more than sublimating the pain of Palestinians by invoking the plight of Jews (in the sense of a Hegelian *Aufhebung*), Kaniuk's narrative suggests that *Tasha''h* consisted of several interrelated tragedies and miracles. There was the tragedy of the fate of Jews in modernity, the Holocaust. But there was also the miracle of survival against all odds. Ensuring that the Jews living in mandatory Palestine and Jewish Holocaust survivors would have a homeland brought about a violent clash between Jews and Arabs, between Israelis and Palestinians. It also meant, simultaneously, the Palestinian disaster, the Nakba. Kaniuk's narrative weaving together of the two scenes allows us to see that this fateful year that signaled hope for Jews was also a catastrophe for Palestinians. Kaniuk's *Tasha''h* presents 1948 as one of the “modernist events” that came to shape the twentieth century. Modernist events, Hayden White has argued in a seminal essay by the same name, are man-made disasters such as the world wars, genocide, the implementation of weapons of mass destruction in warfare, mass expulsions, and ethnic cleansing such as those we have often witnessed in the twentieth century.³⁵ Characterized by the unprecedented use of modern technology, these events have shattered communities, cultures, and our entire ethical framework in ways we are still grappling with. As images stemming from modernist events are disseminated through omnipresent media outlets, they function in our collective awareness in a manner similar to the working of trauma in the psyche of individuals. Modernist events cannot be forgotten or remembered, White underscores, without a significant impact on our ability to engage constructively with the present or envision our future. In other words, due to their scope and impact, “modernist events” make it difficult for us to order them as “processed past” and thus to positively imagine our future.

According to Hayden White, modernist literature (by which he means literary works like Kaniuk's *Tasha''h*) is uniquely qualified to help us come to terms with events such as 1948 and to begin to “positively imagine our future” because it does not restrict itself to representation. Rather, self-reflective modernist literature allows us to reengage with the past and to connect that engagement to our future horizons and possible actions. In the case of *Tasha''h*, this means reengaging

with 1948 and locating the political and ethical challenges that the Nakba presents today. Kaniuk's *Tasha'h* is the attempt to let memory speak, yet it is also an effort to warn of a future that will perpetuate the past and, moreover, to imagine a different kind of future. Earlier in this essay, I mentioned the book's motto: "And when I passed by you, and saw you polluted in your own blood, I said unto you when you were in your blood, Live; yea, I said unto you when you were in your blood, Live" (Ezekiel 16:6). Kaniuk returns to this motto in the concluding scene of *Tasha'h*, in which he recounts how he was invited as "an old man" to speak to schoolchildren about 1948. Kaniuk describes the beauty, youth, and softness of the young students, their bracelets, earrings, and tattoos. He recalls how they quietly listened to his testimony. Finally, he notes, as he walked away from the school, he stopped for a moment at the entrance and said to them, in his heart and "with sadness," "unto you when you were in your blood, Live!"³⁶

The past—1948—is tied here to the present: To Israel after the wars of 1967 and 1973; after the Lebanon Wars; after the Intifadas. To Israel that is defined by the weighty debates surrounding the Palestinian refugees, the occupied West Bank, and the ever-elusive prospect of a peaceful resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Just as did Yizhar in his 1949 "Hake-tsa'akatah" and Yeshurun in his 1953 "Tsiyon ha-lo tishali," Kaniuk ties Israel's past to the future through Ezekiel's "unto you when you were in your blood, Live!" Kaniuk's concluding words to the schoolchildren and to his readers are not a mere description of what some see as Israel's fate—to always live a life characterized by the blood of wars, by the conflict over the land. Rather, Kaniuk asks at the end of this remarkable work what it would take for Israelis to rise up from the blood in which they lay together with Palestinians and live a life worthy of humans, a life described in the words of the book of Ezekiel: "I have caused thee to multiply as the bud of the field, and thou hast increased and waxen great, and thou art come to excellent ornaments: thy breasts are fashioned, and thine hair is grown" (Ezekiel 16:7).

[81]

Yoram Kaniuk's
Tasha'h

●
Amir Eshel

Notes

- 1 Anita Shapira, "Hirbet Hizah: Between Remembrance and Forgetting," *Jewish Social Studies* n.s. 7, no. 1 (2000): 1–62, esp. 23–25, 31–41. S. Yizhar published the novella in 1949 with the title "Sipur Hirbet Hiz'ah" in a volume containing both "Sipur Hirbet Hiz'ah" and

- “Ha-shavui.” The novella appeared in English translation as *Khirbet Khizeh*, trans. Nicholas de Lange and Yaacob Dweck (Jerusalem, 2008). Quotations in the text are from this translation. In Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago, 2013), 109–20, I discuss Yizhar’s novella in detail. For further explorations of the significance of Yizhar’s novella for understanding the constellation “1948” in Hebrew literature, see also in this volume the essays of Shira Stav, “Nakba and Holocaust: Mechanisms of Comparison and Denial in the Israeli Literary Imagination”; Todd Hasak-Lowy, “An Incomplete Frame Narrative Revisited: S. Yizhar’s Introduction to ‘Hirbet Hiz’ah’”; Shaul Setter, “The Time That Returns: Speculative Temporality in S. Yizhar’s 1948”; Gil Hochberg, “A Poetics of Haunting: From Yizhar’s Hirbeh to Yehoshua’s Ruins to Koren’s Crypts”; Lital Levy, “Nation, Village, Cave: A Spatial Reading of 1948 in Three Novels of Anton Shammas, Emile Habiby, and Elias Khoury”; and Uri Cohen, “Unraveling the Wars of 1948.”
- 2 Yizhar, *Khirbet Khizeh*, 113.
 - 3 Eshel, *Futurity*, 114–15.
 - 4 On Yizhar’s allusion to the story of Sodom, see Nurit Gertz, *Hirbet Hiz’ah ve-ha-boker shele-maharat* (Tel Aviv, 1983), 77, and Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon* (New York, 2002), 114.
 - 5 Yizhar’s writing itself reflected the sense that the 1948 expulsion of Palestinians remains a facet of Israel’s realities. See, for example, Yizhar’s prose “Shetikat ha-kefarim,” which appeared in S. Yizhar, “Sipur she-lo hithil,” in *Sipurei mishor* (Tel Aviv, 1963), 99–205. The section “Shetikat ha-kefarim” is on pp. 145–64.
 - 6 Avot Yeshurun, *Kol shirav*, 6 vols., ed. Binyamin Harshav and Helit Yeshurun (Tel Aviv, 1995), 1: 81–85. On Yeshurun’s seminal poem, see Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford, 2003), 141–72, and Hannan Hever, “Lo tehat gam mi-penei ‘Al tagidu be-Gat’: Ha-nakbah ha-falastinitit ba-shirah ha-ivrit 1948–1958,” in *Al tagidu be-Gat: Ha-nakbah ha-falastinitit ba-shirah ha-ivrit 1948–1958*, ed. Hannan Hever (Tel Aviv, 2010), 35–41, and Hannan Hever’s essay, “‘The Two Gaze Directly into One Another’s Face’: Avot Yeshurun between the Nakba and the Shoah—An Israeli Perspective,” in this issue. Yeshurun was certainly not the only poet to reflect in his work on the repressed facets of the 1948 war and on the fate of the land’s Palestinian population, as Haggai Rogani has shown in his study *Mul ha-kefar she-harav: Ha-shirah ha-ivrit ve-ha-sikhskh ha-yehudi-arvi, 1929–1967* (Haifa, 2006).
 - 7 My reading builds here on Hannan Hever’s astute reading of the poem. See Hever, “Lo tehat gam mi-penei,” 37.
 - 8 “Mul ha-ye’arot” was first published in the literary journal *Keshet* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1963): 18–45. Later, it was included in Yehoshuah’s second collection of stories, *Mul ha-ye’arot* (Tel Aviv, 1968), and in *Kol ha-sipurim* (Tel

- Aviv, 1993), 99–128. On this novella and its reception, see Eshel, *Futurity*, 121–32.
- 9 The scholarship that emphasizes the Nakba in Hebrew literature as it turns to 1948 is vast. For an overview of some of the major literary works on the issue and the relevant scholarship, see Eshel, *Futurity*, 99–169. See also Yitzhak Laor, *Anu kotevim otakh moledet: Masot 'al sifrut yisraelit* (Tel Aviv, 1995), 115–70, and Yochai Oppenheimer, *Me'ever la-gader: Yitsug ha-'Aravim ba-siporet ha-ivrit vecha-yisraelit 1906–2005* (Tel Aviv, 2008).
- 10 Yitzhak Laor, *Hineh adam* (Tel Aviv, 2002); Daniella Carmi, *Le-shahrer pil: Masa' berihah mi-zikhronot yaldut mefukpakim* (Tel Aviv, 2001).
- 11 Eshkol Nevo, *Arba'ah batim ve-ga'gua'* (Lod, 2004); Eng. trans., *Homesick*, trans. Sondra Silverston (London, 2008); Alon Hilu, *Ahuzat Dajani* (Tel Aviv, 2008); Eng. trans., *The House of Rajani*, trans. Evan Fallenberg (London, 2010).
- 12 On Eshkol Nevo and Alon Hilu's thematization of the Nakba, see Eshel, *Futurity*, 153–60.
- 13 See, for example, my discussion of the public debates surrounding “Sipur Hirbet Hiz'ah” and *Ahuzat Dajani* in Eshel, *Futurity*, 109–15, 159–60.
- 14 See *Haaretz*, May 24, 2009, accessed July 28, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasite/spages/1087791.html> (in Hebrew). On the political and public debate surrounding the commemoration of the Nakba in Israel, see, for example, the BBC reports, “Anger over Palestinian Nakba Ban Proposal,” accessed March 14, 2013, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8066892.stm, and “Israel Passes Controversial Funding Law,” accessed March 14, 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12837953>. On the origins in the 1980s of scholarly and public debate surrounding the Nakba, see, for example, Laurence J. Silberstein, *The Postzionism Debates: Knowledge and Power in Israeli Culture* (New York, 1999), and Uri Ram, “Postnationalist Past: The Case of Israel,” in *States of Memory: Continuities, Conflicts, and Transformations in National Retrospection*, ed. Jeffrey K. Olick (Durham, N.C., 2003), 227–58.
- 15 <http://www.knesset.gov.il/Laws/Data/law/2286/2286.pdf>.
- 16 Yoram Kaniuk, *Tasha'h* (Tel Aviv, 2010). All translations from this book are mine, though for a new English translation, see Yoram Kaniuk, *1948*, trans. Anthony Berris (New York, 2012).
- 17 The acronym Palmah stands for *Pelugot Mahats* (“strike force”). The Palmah was the elite fighting force of the Haganah, the underground army of the Jewish population in pre-state Palestine.
- 18 Kaniuk, *Tasha'h*, 5.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 14–15.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 98.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 172.
- 23 *Ibid.*

[83]

Yoram Kaniuk's
Tasha'h

●
Amir Eshel

[84]

*Jewish
Social
Studies*



Vol. 18
No. 3

- 24 Ibid., 173.
25 Ibid., 174.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid., 115.
28 Ibid., 116.
29 Ibid., 118.
30 Ibid., 119. Kaniuk has struggled with this harrowing autobiographical experience in his oeuvre before. As Yochai Oppenheimer has shown, the protagonist in Kaniuk's novel *Ha-yored le-ma'lah* (Jerusalem, 1962); Eng. trans., *The Acrophile*, trans. Zeva Shapiro (New York, 1961), tries to save an Arab child in a similar situation but eventually fails. Oppenheimer reads that scene as the narrative's probing of the borders of obedience in the course of war. He also, rightly I believe, interprets the guilt Kaniuk's narrator feels in this novel as the embodiment of the writer's remorse over war crimes that occurred during the war. See Oppenheimer, *Me'ever la-gader*, 204–5, 473.
31 Kaniuk, *Tasha'h*, 122.
32 Ibid., 175.
33 Ibid., 176.
34 Ibid., 176–77.
35 Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (Baltimore, Md., 1999), 66–86.
36 Kaniuk, *Tasha'h*, 190.