The Split Language: Jewish Multilingualism and the Horizon of Revival

The split condition of Modern Jewish subjectivity, as portrayed and negotiated throughout Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s discussions, has left its mark not only on the discourse of Hebrew revival, but also on the ways in which the relationship between Jewish languages has been experienced and imagined ever since. As Yitzhak Laor has argued, “Hebrew literature… inherited a rift between its cultural and spoken languages that it has been unable to repair.”¹ That rift, which Laor terms “schizolingua,” is the legacy of “the tear in the heart” (בלבש ערקה) and the continuous struggle of the split Jewish self. While the famous dispute between Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky did not revolve directly around the question of Jewish multilingualism, each of them addressed this question in his writing. A close examination of their approaches, particularly as they pertain to the fraught relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish, reveals an unexpected reversal in their positions towards the particularity of Jewish subjectivity and the anxiety of cultural assimilation.

In essays such as “The Spiritual Revival” (1902) and “The Language Dispute” (ביר״תונושל (1910), Ahad Ha’am has made the case that there can only be one national Jewish language, and that the Hebrew language was the sole authentic reflection of the nation’s mind

and heart. Although he denigrated those who had declared a war on Yiddish and claimed that their anxiety-driven abhorrence was absurd, he nevertheless maintained that the fate of Yiddish was (within two or three generations) to die out and be forgotten. Yiddish was destined to clear the path for Hebrew, a language that would ultimately encompass all the realms of national Jewish life, according to Ahad Ha’am. Berdichevsky, on the other hand, had developed a more nuanced approach, which tolerated Jewish linguistic multiplicity but insisted on a strict separation between different languages. His understanding necessitated a sincere identification on the part of writers. They had to be clear about the language in which they were writing and about whether or not their work was published in translation. Berdichevsky’s own experience as a multilingual writer, who throughout his career published in Hebrew, Yiddish and German, had undoubtedly shaped and affected his approach. Naama Rokem links Berdichevsky’s movement between languages to his experimental narration modes, arguing that his multilingual exploration provided his writing with a horizontal logic that produced narratives of contingency rather than linear, progressive ones.

In a collection of essays published in 1911 under the subtitle “Language Matters” (Language Matters) Berdichevsky translated his conception of “the tear in the heart” and the oscillation between radically different parts of the self into a series of theoretical reflections on language. The essays discuss a range of topics, from multilingualism and translation to colloquialization,

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2 Ahad Ha’am, “Riv leshonot (The Language Dispute),” *Al parashat drakhim: Kovets ma’amarim (On a Crossroad)*, vol. 4 (Berlin: Jüdische Verlag, 1921 [1910]), 120.
3 For further discussion of the significance of Berdichevsky’s attempt to become a German writer, see Holtzman, *El ha-kera’ she-ba-lev*, 85–159.
5 Mikha Yosef Berdichevsky, “Inyaney lashon” (Language Matters) in *Ba-shira u-va-lashon* (Warsaw: Tushiya, 1911).
lexical expansion, and pedagogy. Initially written and published separately over the first decade of the twentieth century, these essays largely differ in tone and style from Berdichevsky’s earlier work (particularly, from his essays written at the turn of the century). Most notably, the later essays are less morbid, although they definitely gesture toward the possibility of a perilous horizon. While the basic notion of a “tear,” which governs and dictates the life of the nation, the people and the language(s), emerges as an organizing principle throughout these texts, it no longer functions as a torturous source of lamentation and mourning. Vacillating between an existentialist and an essentialist approach to language, Berdichevsky not only articulates his own position, but also records his observation of an ongoing linguistic permutation, one that is both liable to occur and is already underway. It is this ambivalent, disapproving recognition of an uncontrolled transformation that Berdichevsky shares with Ahad Ha’am. Both of their reflections thus pave the way for a conception of something that they simultaneously reject, and from which they constantly look away. On the horizon of these reflections are glimpses of the unborn, a fulfillment brought about despite and due to the efforts of those laboring to create it.

In the different texts included in “Language Matters,” Berdichevsky presents a linguistic model based on duality. That duality takes different forms and variations, but the basic notion of a split self, now manifested in the form of two (or more) languages, is maintained in all of the texts. The oppositions are familiar: there is the language of poetry and the language of thought; lyric language and epic language; prophetic language and common language; the language in which “our people” listens and the language in which it speaks. These are always read as diametrically opposite attributes of something that should have been one, but is inevitably double or even multiple.
In an essay titled “Regarding the Language” ("ינושלה רבדב"), for instance, Berdichevsky introduces a rigid opposition between Hebrew and Aramaic. Both languages are understood as conveying the national spirit, but they are depicted as radically different from one another. While Hebrew is presented as lyrical, heroic, sublime, and beautiful, Aramaic is said to be the language of fable, proverb and morality. Whereas Hebrew reflects sovereignty, force and battle, Aramaic is said to be the language of religion and subservience; “the language of the Jews.”

Berdichevsky thus reiterates a dichotomy similar to the one that has informed his past work. While the category of “the human” is now substituted with “Hebrew,” “Aramaic” designates its “Jewish” counterpart. Berdichevsky maintains both categories as essentially static, and his conceptualization of “Jewish” yet again rests on the shadow of a past diasporic Rabbinic textual tradition. However, Berdichevsky insists: “we are Hebrew-Aramaic in our tongue.” Despite the uneven comparison, in which Hebrew is apparently privileged over Aramaic, Berdichevsky refuses to let go of either side. The one thing that remains crucial for his argument is not favoring one language over the other, but rather maintaining the tension of the binary.

When Berdichevsky begins to elaborate on the roles of these languages within modern Hebrew literature, it becomes clear that his opposition between “Hebrew” and “Aramaic” does not designate the chronological division between the ancient biblical language and the later Talmudic one. It rather signifies an essential, more critical difference between two sentiments or personas that inhabit modern Hebrew literature simultaneously. In other words, Berdichevsky describes Hebrew itself as inherently split between two affiliations, which he names “Hebrew” and “Aramaic/Jewish.” Hebrew writers, he argues, are divided between these two affiliations.

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7 Berdichevsky, 40.
according to their own natural inclination. Abraham Mapu (the well-known Haskalah
romancier), for instance, wrote in Hebrew, while Yitzhak Erter (a well-known Haskalah satirist)
wrote in Aramaic. Despite the fact that both are considered Hebrew writers, Berdichevsky
categorizes them as belonging to separate linguistic traditions. Moreover, he mentions different
authors, both past and present, who actually write in both “languages” simultaneously.

What determines the categorization, according to Berdichevsky, is not “the idiom and the
words” of each language, that is, not its historical layers or linguistic components. Rather, they
are differentiated by “the soul that is latent in them.” As members of a torn nation, he states,
“we” are necessarily split between two souls and two languages: “A Hebrew man said this, and a
Jewish man said that, and the difference between them is greater than the difference between
Israel and Edom, Ammon or Moab,” he concludes. Berdichevsky contends that this internal
difference must not be blurred or overlooked. On the contrary, it must make itself visible.
Hebrew, which is understood as always already double, must sustain the linguistic tension that
constitutes it as internally split.

In other essays, Berdichevsky substitutes the opposition between Hebrew and Aramaic
with the more current opposition between Hebrew and Yiddish. Similar but not identical to
Aramaic, Yiddish then occupies the “Jewish” category, against which Hebrew is measured. In
fact, Berdichevsky never uses the word “Yiddish,” but consistently refers to the latter as
“Jewish” (landırıl), stating that this language accurately embodies the folkloric essence of Judaism.

8 Ibid.
9 Berdichevsky argues, for instance, that the writer Naphtali Herz Wessely wrote his scholarly
work in “Aramaic” and his poetry in “Hebrew.” Similarly, he claims that Y.L. Gordon wrote his
prose fiction in “Aramaic” and his poetry in “Hebrew.” Ibid.
10 Ibid., 39.
11 Ibid., 40.
When the opposition between Hebrew and Yiddish is introduced, Aramaic is pushed back into Hebrew, and Berdichevsky addresses the dichotomy between Yiddish and Hebrew while acknowledging that Hebrew itself is internally split. An extensive part of “Language Matters” is devoted to establishing the essential difference between Hebrew and Yiddish. Once again, Berdichevsky’s stance against “the mixing of the turfs” is highlighted. A multilingual writer himself, Berdichevsky does not object to writing in multiple languages or to the cohabitation of multiple “Jewish” literatures. Instead, it is blurring the borders between these different languages and literatures that he resists. Berdichevsky therefore struggles to assert the coherent and stable character of each language, presenting the difference between them as a law that must be obeyed.

That approach is demonstrated in Berdichevsky’s ardent attack against the writer Y.L. Peretz, who is said to have crossed that strictly defined border. Berdichevsky rejects the attempts to modernize Yiddish or turn it into a “literary” language, denouncing what he conceives as its purported literary renaissance. For Berdichevsky, Yiddish literature must stay lowbrow and capture the life of the people. It must reflect the people’s speech and absorb the simplicity of everyday life. The “real life” of Yiddish, he claims, “is an oral matter,” and its defining principle is “the life revealed in it.” In Yiddish, he further argues, “it is not only the tongue that speaks, but the entire body, all of the organs.” This is why, according to Berdichevsky, Yiddish literature could never express the lyrical. Much like liturgical poetry, it conveys a collective utterance that stems from the people as a whole, capturing an oral, bodily quality. Berdichevsky states that “some lives are grasped by the hand and do not require a vessel.”

12 Berdichevsky, 63.
13 Ibid., 64.
14 “יש חים נחפשים בדים והם צרכי לשים פרחים.” Ibid., 62.
They exploit the language and turn it into a mediating instrument, in order to “address the people and educate it, instead of learning from the people’s soul.”

Elsewhere in the volume, Berdichevsky expresses a similar concern with what he sees as a misguided use of Hebrew. But his concerns regarding Hebrew respond to an opposite development. Berdichevsky attacks the recent attempts to transform Hebrew into a language spoken in everyday life. Referring to the pedagogical debates about Hebrew education within the Jewish settlement in Palestine, he rejects the idea that Hebrew could ever be taught in Hebrew, that is, colloquially rather than in translation, without the necessary mediation that characterized traditional Orthodox education. Berdichevsky insists that Hebrew must be taught in translation and by means of the text. He states that such a distance, which consciously maintains Hebrew’s “bookish” character, is necessary when approaching this language.

The conclusion is twofold: while those who attempt to modernize Yiddish and turn it into a literary language risk obliterating its unique character, those who advocate for the colloquialization of Hebrew in Palestine rob the language of its life. The two languages must be kept separate. They must remain loyal to their essential qualities, and stay distinguishable from one another. Whereas Yiddish is a language that demands no mediation, Hebrew, in fact, requires it. As opposed to Yiddish, Hebrew does not emanate from the body of the people. On the contrary, it is the language by which the singular prophet addresses the people from above. Hence for Berdichevsky, the recent peculiar experiments, by which Hebrew is forced into the mouths of ordinary people, is a dangerous precedent. “The book was our mother tongue . . . and

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15 Ibid., 63.
16 Ibid., 43–45. Berdichevsky’s argument against spoken Hebrew will be further discussed in the fourth chapter.
wherever the mother and the teachers speak Hebrew, we have but a shadow of a Hebrew language with no language,” he asserts.17

Invoking the concept of mother tongue when debating a language in which the maternal aspect seems to be distinctively lacking might appear as an odd rhetorical move. And yet, Hebrew meta-literary discussions of the time were filled with references to maternity and gendered personifications of language.18 Deploying the notion of “mother tongue,” writers often produced alternative narratives of linguistic familial bonds and rearticulated the relationship between language, body, and gender. In “The Spiritual Revival,” Ahad Ha’am used the notion of mother tongue to describe the attachment between a people and its historic national language:

No man can regard as his own natural speech any language which he has learned after arriving at manhood. His language is that in which his cradle-songs were sung, that which took root in his being before he knew himself, and grew up in him together with his self-consciousness. Similarly, a nation has no national language except that which was its own when it stood on the threshold of its history, before its national self-consciousness was fully developed.19

According to Ahad Ha’am, a national language must always precede the nation’s coming into being. National temporality thus entails the precedence of language, and it is in and through language that a collective becomes a nation. The same is true for individual life: “natural speech” can only occur in one’s mother tongue, in the language of one’s upbringing. Even in the extreme case of aphasia, in which “the patient forgets all the languages that he has ever learned from books…” the mother tongue prevails and “[the patient] remembers his native language—his mother tongue—and can use it with ease, even though he has not spoken it since his

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17 “הפש ילב תירבע הפש לצ קר ונל שי ,תירבע םירבדמ םירומהו םאהש םוקמבו . . . םאה תפשל ונל היה רפסה״. Ibid., 44.
18 The following chapter of this book discusses the feminization of the Hebrew language and its political significance at length.
19 Ahad Ha’am, Selected Essays by Ahad Ha’am, 281; Ahad Ha’am, “Tehiyat ha-ruah,” 126.
childhood.” Beneath all acquired knowledge, Ahad Ha’am suggests, the language of the mother is latent as an unbreakable bind. It is a space to which one can always return, an attachment that can always be reenacted.

And yet, Ahad Ha’am’s objective here is to invalidate Yiddish as a national language. Against recent attempts to crown Yiddish as the language of the people, he insists that no language other than Hebrew might ever be considered a Jewish national language. Hence, strikingly, in Ahad Ha’am’s rhetoric, which attempts to translate the realm of personal life into that of the nation, “mother tongue” comes to mean something quite different. Just as one can only speak “naturally” in one’s mother tongue, he argues, a nation can only express itself in the language in which it initially developed, even if this language differs from the spoken language of individuals: their very own mother tongue. For Ahad Ha’am, then, “mother tongue” (and with it the mother) fades into nothing but an empty figure. It stages a scene in which Yiddish becomes a metaphor for Hebrew, considered and taken into account only in its metaphorical value. In fact, through this metaphorical exchange, Hebrew is bound to eventually replace Yiddish, which, according to Ahad Ha’am, is destined to sink into oblivion: “this jargon, though it is to-day the language of most Jews, is gradually being forgotten all over the world, and will have disappeared some generations hence.”

Unlike Berdichevsky, Ahad Ha’am does not allude to a horizon in which Yiddish and Hebrew may cohabitate as long as they stick to their linguistic roles. For Ahad Ha’am, there may only be one national language, and it is the fate of Yiddish to diminish and dissolve, as Hebrew takes precedence. By stressing the primacy of the mother tongue, Ahad Ha’am underscores the

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20 Ibid., 283; 127.
21 Ibid., 282; 126.
incongruity between national and individual Jewish existence. In this respect, his metaphor resists, so to speak, the argument it purportedly supports.\textsuperscript{22} Turning to aphasia, Ahad Ha’am summons the persistent memory of the mother tongue only to claim a future of forgetfulness. To become a Jewish national subject, according to this logic, is to eventually forget one’s mother tongue. It is, more accurately, to temporarily concede the set of promised attachments that proper national life (in its “healthy,” European form) is said to secure.

As Ginsburg has shown, a similar logic traverses Ahad Ha’am’s literary and territorial visions. Just as his territorial proposition of an elite cultural center based in Palestine (in lieu of the more popular view of Jewish masses flooding the land) depicts a “politics sans populace,” his literary vision excludes the most popular literary genre, offering “literature sans literature.”\textsuperscript{23} To that list of exclusions, we may add Ahad Ha’am’s linguistic vision. The sole Jewish national language is the one language that the people do not speak. It is a language that rejects the mother, the body, and the immediate biological affiliation that the national tongue purports to provide. In his only ever published Yiddish text (his only text to be written in a language other than Hebrew), Ahad Ha’am insisted that “we, zhargon-Jews [jargon-Jews], may be the only people in the world accursed not to know the sweet taste of a dear mother tongue. The language in which we were raised, through which we received our first impressions and expressed our earliest childish feelings—this language we ourselves don’t value or consider to be ours.”\textsuperscript{24} In Ahad

\textsuperscript{22} This is yet another example of what Ginsburg calls, following Mintz’s analysis: “the problematic closure of the Ahad Ha’am essay,” which repeatedly surfaces the “strain between dialectics and figuration.” Ginsburg, \textit{Rhetoric and Nation}, 50.

\textsuperscript{23} Ginsburg, 57, 62.

\textsuperscript{24} Ahad Ha’am, quoted in Ruth R. Wisse, “Not the ‘Pintele Yid’ but the Full-Fledged Jew,” \textit{Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History} 15, no. 1 (January 1, 1995): 35–36. Ahad Ha’am’s essay was published in 1899 as an open letter to Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, the editor of the newly established Yiddish periodical, \textit{Der Yid}. 
Ha’am’s account, then, Yiddish is stripped of its traditional role as *mame loshn* and is depicted instead, in the first person plural, as a “yellow badge of shame.” To assert his linguistic view of Hebrew as the exclusive national language of the Jews, whose aesthetic aspirations and colloquial evolution shall be temporarily suspended, Ahad Ha’am must cancel Yiddish as a viable alternative. He therefore gestures towards a horizon in which Hebrew will encompass Jewish national life and would thereby bring about a new national self that would be founded on forgetting.

For Berdichevsky, however, it is precisely the fraught existence in between the two languages that must be perpetuated. Hence, the memory of each linguistic tradition prevails in its persistent stagnant form. As we have seen, it follows from Berdichevsky’s argument that the language in which the people is addressed must be distinct from the language in which the people speaks. He states quite explicitly that “when we are talking to the people,” Hebrew is appropriate, but “when we are talking from the people, the Jewish [Yiddish] language has the upper hand.”25 This discrepancy demonstrates the gesture of self-alienation that is at once the fulfillment and the effect of national literature’s “voyage toward the self.”26 At the heart of this project lies a moment of miscommunication. The production of aesthetic knowledge about and for the self is differentiated from the self’s own capacity to speak. It is a “conversation” in which one is forced to listen in a language one is prevented from speaking.

In maintaining the divide between the two languages, that is, maintaining both a war and an interplay, what is at stake for Berdichevsky, as opposed to Ahad Ha’am, is the preservation of cultural traditions that are at risk of being dismantled. He is particularly concerned that Yiddish

25 Berdichevsky, “Inyaney lashon,” 47. (My emphases.)
might be overpowered by the major languages that surround it. Berdichevsky warns that the attempt to modernize Yiddish will eventually result in its dissolving into either German or Hebrew. That concern is notable particularly against the background of Berdichevsky’s aesthetic approach to Hebrew, which, throughout his debate with Ahad Ha’am, advances universal values and is largely unthreatened by cultural assimilation. Yet, when it comes to the prospects of conflating Hebrew and Yiddish, the particularly fragile dynamics of Jewish subjectivity appears to be endangered. For Berdichevsky, it becomes clear once again, every part of the split-self, even those parts that are deemed most despised and abject, must be safeguarded. While internal war in itself is desirable, it must never be allowed to lead to complete annihilation. The violent gesture that is inherent in the aesthetic project is hindered; it must halt midway. According to Berdichevsky, conflating Yiddish and Hebrew necessarily obfuscates the liminal, precarious particularity of the Jewish self and its eternally split identity.

This claim against universalism locates Berdichevsky in an unexpected position. In taking a stand against the transformation of both languages, he is no longer able to ground his position in an existentialist approach. As Miron has argued, Berdichevsky’s romantic essentialism ironically situates him in close proximity to Ahad Ha’am: “clinging to abstract and pure essences, falling into the trap of setting the rules, being restrictive, pontificating, and expecting of objectively unstoppable developments to somehow fall in line and correct themselves.” Over a decade after his heated debate with Ahad Ha’am, Berdichevsky observes the efforts to standardize Hebrew and Yiddish with grave concern. Just like his adversary (albeit from a different perspective) he calls for the suspension of transformative processes of which he

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27 See, for instance, Berdichevsky, “Inyaney lashon,” 62, 73.
28 Miron, From Continuity to Contiguity, 97.
himself was an instrumental igniter. Facing the anxiety of losing oneself in the midst of an alteration of cultural conditions, Berdichevsky struggles to preserve Jewish multilingualism as the fragile mark of modern Jewish subjectivity.

In the essay “Duality” (״תוינש״), Berdichevsky alludes once again to the creative potential that lies in the seemingly regrettable practice of multilingual writing:

The fact that the forces explode and divide within us, that rather than working and developing a whole literature, we have several, incomplete literatures, has not escaped us; we also do not cover up the losses created in the spirit of an author, who is belonged to several authorities and forced, in his poverty, to use the different authorities. But we would go too far if we said that there is no light to be found among these shadows; for with the different pushes and pulls here and there is born also something multicolored, and with the changing of horizons comes the broadening of the horizon.\(^{29}\)

Rokem, who elaborately discusses the metaphor of “linguistic horizon” in Berdichevsky’s essayistic work, argues that the logic of a broadening horizon, which substitutes that of a linear progression, informs Berdichevsky’s literary work and affects his narration. According to Rokem, that horizontal logic allows Berdichevsky to explore the notion of a movement between languages as producing uncertainty and a multiplicity of possibilities.\(^{30}\) This horizontal logic stands in contrast to Ahad Ha’am’s notion of gradual progression that would ultimately lead to a synthesis. But it is in this uncertain horizontal movement that we may also recognize Berdichevsky’s refusal to arrive at the ultimate goal of revival. Within the conflictual space of multilingual Jewish writing, something new is about to be born. According to Berdichevsky, it is the very struggle between languages and different authorities of the self (“with the different..."
pushes and pulls…) that bears a life-giving potential (“there is born also something multicolored”). Hence, to put an end to the internal war that gives rise to that gestation, to dissolve or subdue either of its proponents, is, for Berdichevsky, to put an end to revival.

Berdichevsky’s essays on language reveal that along with what he sees as a broadening, creative and “multicolored” possibility, entwined with the multiplicity of languages and the continuous self-transformation of the multilingual writer, another type of “birth” is lurking on the horizon, the birth of the stillborn, of something that is at once being deprived of life. And so, ironically, Berdichevsky’s reflections on language reproduce an “Ahad Ha’am-ic” argument. For Ahad Ha’am, the attempt to aestheticize Hebrew and recast it into a European model meant producing “artificial creations, made to move by an external, mechanical push.” Similarily, Berdichevsky attacks the mock-revivers of both Hebrew and Yiddish, denouncing their “creation of an unnatural and embellished (פָּסָרָלָה) language.” When he criticizes the elevation of Yiddish, he maintains that “the embellished Jewish [Yiddish] literature . . . is entirely influenced, influenced by external forces.” And when he refers to the youth of the yishuv who are “forced” into Hebrew speaking, he declares that, for these youth, “everything will be like golems, golems with a beautiful form, but without life.” Berdichevsky claims that an enactment of Hebrew in everyday speech renders it a mere instrument and robs it of “any source of life.” In both Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s accounts, then, the attempt to appropriate language and subject it to

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31 Ahad Ha’am, “Ha-lashon ve-sifruta,” 187.
35 Ibid., 57.
pedagogical, ideological, political, and aesthetic means (an attempt in which they both take active part), turn the language into a lifeless creature governed by external forces.

Whether an instrument, a golem, or a puppet made to move by an external push, the figure of a lifeless creature who is the offspring of artificial creation, subjected to an external power while maintaining the appearance of autonomy, emerges in both Ahad Ha’am and Berdichevsky’s depictions of language. Always hinting at a gap between what language is and what it is distortedly made to be, these perceptions also allude to a monstrous horizon, one in which the unnatural, sinful creation of the language might come back to haunt its creators.

This Frankensteinian moment, with its sustained ambivalence, is bound to shape and define the modern Hebrew literary discourse of revival throughout the first decades of the twentieth century. An ever hesitant movement, the proclamation of revival always involves a withdrawal, a progression and a turning back, a rising and falling, a birth and a loss. That moment is perhaps best captured by Ahad Ha’am in his 1890 essay, “The Man in the Tent.”

Indeed, strange and marvelous is the fate of Hebrew literature with regard to the way [Hebrew literature] relates to life. It is a worldly custom for writers to create in their mind a specific ideal and think before they act, and to later endeavor to see that ‘end’ in practice, to realize the ideal in the actual life of their people . . . But in the literature of Israel this is not the case. Here, every time life gets closer to the literature, the literature strays further away, as if it has been startled by the sight of its own creation . . . When the ideal is realized, we begin to observe this new creature with worry and suspicion, and with every day that passes we see that its face is different from that of the “national movement” we had wished for and imagined in our minds.36

36 Ahad Ha’am, “Ha-adam ba-ohel,” 86–87.