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Futurity: contemporary literature and the quest for the past by Amir Eshel

Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past.* Chicago and London: Chicago UP. 2013. ISBN 978-0-22692495-3. Pp. 355.

Sometime around 1900, the century of history gave way to an age of memory. Modernist thinkers and poets—Nietzsche and Freud, Proust and Hofmannsthal, Schnitzler and Kafka, Benjamin and Agnon—not only wrote about memory, but developed poetics of recollection, creating a set of forms and ideas that became all the more vital in the second half of the twentieth century. By the 1980s, words such as trauma and post-memory, testimony and counter-monuments, virtual memory and, of course, *Lieux de Mémoire*, became ubiquitous in our culture. Our thirst for stories and films and histories, and for new and creative forms of remembering, does not seem to have abated, in particular with regard to the Holocaust and the Nazi period.

In his intriguing study *Futurity,* Amir Eshel proposes that alongside, or as part of this phenomenon, works of recent fiction and memoirs draw out ethical and political lessons from catastrophic events. Those works take us beyond mourning and memorialization to show how human beings behave in times of extremis, with the hope of teaching us something about what we can and must do in the here and now. Such works disturb us by forcing us to look beyond the fixed images of The Past. But they also give hope by mitigating fatalism, giving us "maps of the world in its becoming."

Eshel focuses on two areas: German fiction about Nazism and the Holocaust written after1945 and since1989, and Israeli writing about *Al Nakba*, the expulsion of the Palestinians from the land of Israel in 1948, mostly published since the 1980s. Wisely, he also includes works from the Anglo-American tradition by Ian McEwan, Paul Coetzee,

Paul Auster, Phillip Roth, Cormac McCarthy and others, thereby highlighting the relevance of the German and Israeli quests for the past for world literature and within the English language context. Because the topic relates to ethics, Eshel draws ideas from thinkers Arendt,Rorty, Slavoj Zizek and Alain Badiou. Theorists of the postwar novel such as Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, Andreas Huyssen, Walter Benn Michaels, Judith Ryan and Amy Hungerford. The diversity of examples helps the reader of this book nail down its central concept that is sometimes hard to nail down. The title of the Coda, "Toward a Hermeneutic of Futurity" (245), best captures the contribution of the book as a whole.

Futural works have three criteria: they provide a vocabulary, or narratives, that are constitutive of individual and communal identity; they present "ethically and politically ambivalent situations" (4); and they illustrate the power of human action (for good and for bad) in frightening times. With regard to their audience: futural works do not preach or moralize; they give us answers and questions in the same breath. They remind us that "what is a factual or objective circumstance is not to be mistaken for necessary" (227). Unlike Futurism, which exudes confidence in human potential, futurity hinges present, future and past, as in the past subjunctive tense: *Had I known A, I would have, could have, should have done B*. We are not in the domain of Rainer Maria Rilke's "you must change your life" ("Archaic Torso of Apollo") but rather, of Paul Coetzee's *are we prepared to act*, and "who is this 'we' in whose name we should act" (172). Futurity is that quality of art that gives us our own agency as a gift, or in the image of Sebald's *Austerlitz*, a key.

Where is Futurity to be found? Following Eshel's interpretive method, one can conclude that Futurity is not simply plot-driven; it inheres in interstices and gray areas, in parody, gestures, motifs, material objects (photographs, maps, sketches), experimental forms, polyphony and repetition; in symbolic and parabolic episodes. Like Kafka's Odradek, it is an uncanny hybrid of the old, the forgotten and the repressed. It is not expressed by individual characters, but it emerges in the interpersonal. Like Martin Buber's concept of the *Zwischen* (Between), Futurity enters into the text unpredictably and opens up an unforeseeable outcome. When W. B. Sebald's Jacques Austerlitz gives his German friend the key to his house in London, it is both a test and a sign of confidence, a burden and a challenge. He will have to order the photographs and write his friend's life.

One especially provocative argument about Futurity is that it provides an alternative to "symptomatic" (11) or moralizing interpretations, whereby critics fault writers for not taking a clear moral stand: for depicting perpetrators as victims, and the guilty as, if not innocent, than impotent, as human as the rest of us. Eshel does not quite convince me that to debate whether works such as Grass' *Crabwalk,* Schlink's *The Reader,* or Yehoshua's *Mr. Mani,* succeed or fail, are just or unjust in their engagement with the past, leads to "paralysis" and complacency. However, the sheer array of novels, plots and techniques assembled in this book, all of which employ (or ask the reader to apply) a "multidirectional" hermeneutic, make a compelling case for an additional set of questions, that are no less relevant to ethics. Does a book or interpretation forge a bridge from yesterday to today, from plot to action? Does it push to us to change *our* direction?

These debates and questions are becoming more and more vital for teachers of literature today.

I cannot over-emphasize the fascinating insights that emerge out of Eshel's juxtaposition of the German and Israeli cases as exemplary contemporary sites of Futurity, in light of the stark differences in the two trajectories. In Germany, which now celebrates sixty years of unprecedented partnership with Israel, the literature of Futurity followed a period of angry confrontation with the Nazi past, of atonement and repentance. In Israel, the process of shaping the future out of the origins of the Zionist State remains urgent and raw. S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh* (1949) and A. B. Yehoshua's "Facing the Forests" (1968) were far ahead of their time in engaging with Palestinian history, but it was writers like David Grossman, and of course, the Israeli New Historians, who broke new ground in the 1990s. In recent decades, numerous Israeli writers, filmmakers and artists have followed suit, including many women writers, Nurit Govrin, Daniella Carmi. Films such as Cedar's *Beaufort* and Folman's *Waltz with Bashir,* and Oz's memoir *A Tale of Love and Darkness,* are must-views and must-reads for must read for those who follow the futural turn in Middle Eastern Culture.

One of many ancillary topics Eshel's book illuminates is the oddly parabolic character of so much modernist and postmodern fiction. It is no coincidence that he chooses Franz Kafka's 1920 "A Little Fable," ("You must only change your direction") as a primal scene. By the final discussions of McEwan's *Atonement* and apocalyptic fables such as McCarthy's *On the Road*, Eshel persuades me that the futural dimension of literature is deeply parabolic, which is also to say, rooted in biblical or religious territory. As Gila Safran Naveh has written, parables implicitly trigger a listener's desire to decode

the message. Because the message is always also ambiguous, winning is never certain. Futural novels, like parables, teach that one needs to keep one's feet moving, change direction, without telling us what that direction might be.

Above all, *Futurity* is a rich and stimulating meditation on contemporary literature of all stripes. Beyond making a strong case for the concept as a hermeneutic for grappling with twentieth-and twenty-first century culture, individual chapters are instructive and entertaining, and Eshel's generous footnotes contextualize the argument within scholarship, engaging in dialogue with the large body of criticism on the histories of Germany post-45 and Israel post-48. In its closing pages, the book turns to monuments and memorials: Peter Eisenman's "Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe" in Berlin, and in Israel, artist Yigal Shtayim's "Archival Photographs" painted on houses in Haifa. This epilogue reminds us that Futurity, however defined, remains intimately connected to arts of memory, debates about history, and our undiminished need for new forms of commemoration.