

Artikel erschienen in:

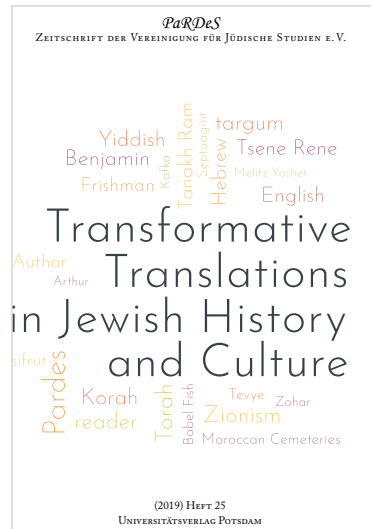
Markus Krah, Mirjam Thulin, Bianca Pick (Eds.)

**PaRDeS : Zeitschrift der Vereinigung für
jüdische Studien Band 25.
Transformative Translations in Jewish
History and Culture**

2019 – 198 S.

ISBN 978-3-86956-468-5

DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-43262>



Empfohlene Zitation:

Danielle Drori: A Translator against Translation, In: Markus Krah, Mirjam Thulin, Bianca Pick (Eds.): PaRDeS 25, Potsdam, Universitätsverlag Potsdam, 2019, S. 43–56.
DOI <https://doi.org/10.25932/publishup-44591>

Soweit nicht anders gekennzeichnet ist dieses Werk unter einem Creative Commons Lizenzvertrag lizenziert: Namensnennung 4.0. Dies gilt nicht für zitierte Inhalte anderer Autoren:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

A Translator against Translation: David Frishman and the Centrality of Translation in Early 20th-Century Hebrew Literature and Jewish National Politics

by Danielle Drori

Abstract

This article explores an instructive case of translation critique against the background of the rise of Zionism in Europe at the turn of the previous century. It seeks to answer the question: Why did David Frishman, one of the most prolific Hebrew writers and translators of the late 1890s and early 1900s, criticize Vladimir Jabotinsky's Russian translation of Hayim Nahman Bialik's Hebrew poems? Both Bialik and Jabotinsky were major figures in the field of Hebrew culture and Zionist politics in the early 1900s, while Frishman generally shunned partisan activism and consistently presented himself as devoted solely to literature. Frishman perceived literature, nevertheless, as a political arena, viewing translation, in particular, as a locus of ideological debate. Writing from the viewpoint of a political minority at a time in which the Hebrew translation industry in Europe gained momentum, Frishman deemed translation a tool for cementing cultural hierarchies. He anticipated later analyses of the act and products of translation as reflective of intercultural tensions. The article suggests, more specifically, that it was Frishman's view of the Hebrew Bible that informed his "avant-garde" stance on translation.

1. Introduction

David Frishman left an indelible mark on early 20th-century Hebrew literature and Zionist culture. A writer, editor, poet and translator, he became a prominent voice in the growing field of Hebrew *belles lettres* at a critical moment of transformation. Shortly after his death in 1922, the journalist and Zionist lobbyist Nahum Sokolov wrote of Frishman that he was a unique figure in Eastern European Jewish thought. Frishman came of age, as Sokolov noted,

during the final years of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, and took an active part in the literary movement of the *tehiya*, the “renaissance” of Hebrew literature in Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Sokolov also praised Frishman, specifically, for his unparalleled contribution to the enterprise of Hebrew translation in his time. He defined Frishman as one of the most prolific Hebrew translators of his generation, lauding his productivity as well as his taste:

“A fountainhead and ever-flowing river, he [Frishman] translated Bernstein, Lippert and tens of excellent stories. He gave us Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, the most precious pearl in the necklace of his translations [. . .]”¹

While Sokolov emphasized Frishman’s German-to-Hebrew translations of non-fictional works, the list of Frishman’s Hebrew translations was significantly longer and more diversified. Frishman translated poetry, plays and novels, by William Shakespeare, George Eliot, Lord Byron, Oscar Wilde, Alexander Pushkin, and Charles Baudelaire (to name a few). More critically, Frishman wrote extensively *about* translation, grappling often with the ties between ideology and cultural transfer.

As most of his contemporary literary intellectuals, Frishman attributed to translation the power to revolutionize Hebrew culture and Jewish national politics. He treated translation as a prism through which both literary and political questions could be examined, discussing the act and products of translation – in essays, letters and reviews – as a locus in which intellectuals shaped or, rather, revealed their aesthetic and ideological visions.

Valuing translation as an arena of intellectual probing, Frishman criticized, throughout his career, a number of specific translations that served, from his viewpoint, the “wrong” goals. Tellingly, Frishman’s first lengthy review in the Hebrew press focused on a translated work: the first (and to date, the only) Hebrew translation of Benjamin Disraeli’s 1847 novel *Tancred*. A dramatization, in part, of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity through the story of a young Englishman who travels to the Holy Land, *Tancred* was hailed by its Hebrew translator, Judah Leib Levin (a proponent of the Haskalah), as a work of great importance.² Frishman found Levin’s translation

¹ Nahum Sokolov, “David Frishman,” Ben Yehuda Project, accessed August 2018, <https://benyehuda.org/sokolov/037.html>. My translation.

² Benjamin Disraeli, *Tancred*, trans. Judah Leib Levin (Warsaw: Alexander Ginz, 1883, Hebrew).

and his introduction to the work to be politically tone-deaf. In addition to accusing Levin of making poor idiomatic choices, Frishman chastised him for turning *Tancred* into a “Zionist” work by cutting parts of the novel that did not take place in the Land of Israel.

Frishman disapproved of the very act of publishing a partial translation without explicitly announcing it. He also questioned Levin’s knowledge of English, hypothesizing that Levin had in fact translated *Tancred* from its German translation. This was not an uncommon practice at the time of the Hebrew Haskalah, yet Frishman dubbed it inappropriate.³ The more meaningful aspects of Frishman’s critique of Levin’s translation related, however, not to Levin’s use of a “mediating” language or to the scale of his translation. Rather, Frishman criticized Levin’s brand of Zionism and his favorable representation of Disraeli’s ties to Judaism. Levin claimed, in his introduction, that *Tancred* was a novel that attested to Disraeli’s connection to the Land of Israel. He even believed that it validated the connection between Judaism and the land. From Frishman’s perspective, this description not only hinged on a misreading of Disraeli’s biography, but also reflected a despicable trend of using literature to spread a superficial form of Zionist ideology.

As scholars of Frishman’s work have shown, Frishman aspired to separate Hebrew literature and Zionist politics. He often denigrated, accordingly, authors of both the Haskalah and the *tehiya* movements who overtly sought to disseminate Zionist ideas through literary means. Still, Frishman’s relationship with Zionism – both in its nascent form as the 19th-century movement of *Hibat Tsiyon* (*Fondness of Zion*) and in its later diplomatic and territorialist forms of the second and third decades of the 20th century – may be best described as ambivalent.⁴

³ Frishman’s review of Levin’s work attested to a change in the perception of Hebrew translation norms, which Frishman helped advance. For a discussion of this change see: Svetlana Natkovich, “Elisha Ben Abuya, the Hebrew Faust: on the First Hebrew Translation of Faust within the Setting of the Maskilic Change in Self-Perception,” *Naharaim* 8.1 (2014): 48–73; Gideon Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012).

⁴ Menuha Gilboa, *Between Realism and Romanticism: David Frishman’s Way as A Critic* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uhad, 1975, Hebrew); Shalom Kramer, *Frishman the Critic: A Monograph* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1984, Hebrew); Iris Parush, *Literary Canon and National Ideology: David Frishman’s Literary Criticism Compared to Klausner’s and Brenner’s* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1992, Hebrew).

In multiple essays and reviews, Frishman expressed blatant anti-Zionist sentiments, conceiving of the Jewish national collective as cosmopolitan. He emphasized openness to world cultures as a principle that Jews should have always upheld, interpreting the rise of Jewish nationalism in his time as an aesthetic rather than a political revolution. At the same time, as Menuha Gilboa and Shalom Kramer have pointed out, many of Frishman's poetic works favorably toyed with the same Zionist ideas that Frishman rejected in his essays. There was palpable tension, for example, between Frishman's antagonistic approach to *Hibat Tsiyon* and the instances in which he himself described the yearning for Zion as the permanent position of the Jewish people. Similarly, Frishman's translations were often preceded, as David Fishelov has suggested, by prefaces that challenged the assumption that Frishman was an anti-Zionist writer.⁵

Out of the major scholars of Frishman's work, only Iris Parush has seen the refusal to deploy literature as an ideological tool as key evidence of Frishman's overarching anti-Zionism. Viewing the ideological contradictions in Frishman's poetic and essayistic corpus as negligible, Parush has stressed Frishman's insistence on creating non-didactic literature at a time in which Zionist ideology and the production of Hebrew literature seemed inseparable.⁶ As the following analysis shows, Frishman was often more didactic than he had hoped to be. In his writings about translation, in particular, he tended to preach against the very act of preaching, demonstrating that it may be impossible to detach literature from politics and vice versa.

2. A Zionist Russian Translation

By the time Levin published the second installment of his translation of Disraeli's *Tancred*, he had read Frishman's acerbic review. Reacting to it in his preface, Levin insisted that Disraeli's Jewish origins, coupled with his stature, infused his literary work with sufficient relevance to the Hebrew readership

⁵ Examining, specifically, Frishman's translation of Lord Byron's dramatic poem *Cain*, Fishelov has maintained that Frishman used this translation to lament the "wandering" of the Jewish people at large. See David Fishelov, "Frishman's Translation of *Cain* and Its Meanings", *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* (2011): 125–142 (Hebrew).

⁶ Iris Parush, "Melekheth Makhshevet: Tehiyat Ha-Uma," *David Frishman: An Anthology of Articles about His Work*, ed. Menuha Gilboa (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uhad, 1988), 211–247 (Hebrew).

of 1880s Europe. Levin ignored, in other words, Frishman's foundational assumption in his early essay: that every translation inevitably reflects a set of power relations between religious or ethnic groups, and that it should be read and published as such. Throughout his career as a critic, Frishman continued exploring the manifestations of this assumption, which has since become a common conviction in the field of translation studies.⁷

In a particularly instructive case of critiquing the cultural and political consequences of a specific work of translation, Frishman attacked the prominent Russian-Jewish journalist and Zionist activist Vladimir Jabotinsky. The latter had published, in 1911, a volume of forty poems, translated into Russian, by the well known and much admired Hebrew poet, Hayim Nahman Bialik. Jabotinsky had added to his translation a preface in which he introduced Bialik to Russian readers. This introduction was indeed cited in the Russian press, in a number of reviews.

As Frishman confessed in his own review of Jabotinsky's translation – published in 1912 under the title “Bialik's Poems in Russian Translation” – it was one of the negative Russian reviews of Bialik's poems that prompted him to react to Jabotinsky's translation.⁸ Frishman objected, as he had done in his review of Levin's translation of *Tancred*, to Jabotinsky's very choice of a literary work for translation. He posed the same question he had asked about Levin's work: For whom was the translation intended, and what political purposes did it serve?

As Jabotinsky noted in the preface to his translation, his motives combined literary veneration and the distinct political goal of disseminating new and forceful Zionist ideas. An avid reader of Russian, French, Italian, and English literatures, Jabotinsky considered Bialik's poems remarkable within the landscape of modern Hebrew literature. He regarded them as artistically

⁷ As the translation scholar Michaela Wolf has recently pointed out, translation studies is a discipline that has “gone social” in the past few years, with growing scholarship about the ways in which the act and products of translation reflect and reinforce social, cultural and political hierarchies. See Michaela Wolf, *The Habsburg Monarchy's Many-Languaged Soul: Translating and Interpreting, 1848–1918* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2015). A more specific discussion of the issue of translation and socio-political power relations can be found in an anthology edited by the translation scholars Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler *Translation and Power* (Amherst and Boston, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

⁸ David Frishman, “Bialik's Poems in Russian Translation”, *David Frishman: Writings* Vol. 8 (Warsaw: Shtibel, 1924), 187–191 (Hebrew). All translations from Frishman's essays are mine.

ingenious, as well as ideal for understanding the collective emotional and political transformations that Jews in Russia were undergoing in his time.

Prior to translating a significant number of Bialik's poems, Jabotinsky had translated Bialik's narrative poem "Massa Nemirov" (known in English as "In the City of Slaughter") in which Bialik famously protested against Jewish passivity. "In the City of Slaughter" was Bialik's response to a series of anti-Jewish riots in the Russian town of Kishinev in 1903 that resulted in the murder of more than forty Jews.⁹ The narrative poem has often been interpreted as a call for Jewish political action, and as an artistic representation of the fundamental principles of some versions of Zionism; notably, the idea that Jewish communities, living as minorities across the world, should find a way to control their own fate by developing a strong and belligerent national consciousness.

As Svetlana Natkovich has shown, Jabotinsky's translation of "In the City of Slaughter" reflected Jabotinsky's interpretation of Bialik's narrative poem as a lyrical crystallization of Zionist activism.¹⁰ The translation targeted an audience of Russian-Jewish readers who could not read Hebrew and whom Jabotinsky, as a Zionist politician in the making, hoped to "recruit." The audience of Jabotinsky's later translation of Bialik's poems was presumably the same, as were Jabotinsky's political goals. In the preface to the later translation, Jabotinsky indeed presented Bialik as the voice of a generation of Jewish men who could no longer keep silent about Jewish suffering across Europe.¹¹ These men once found their intellectual and political home, as Jabotinsky maintained, in the movement of *Hibat Tsiyon*, yet the movement became outdated, according to Jabotinsky, due to its limited political horizons.

Writing in 1911, Jabotinsky provided his audience of Russian readers a brief summary of the rise of Zionism in the final decades of the 19th century; of the temporary decline of the movement in the early 1900s; and of its newly gained energy at the time of the translation's publication. Interweaving

⁹ In the wake of the pogrom, Bialik was sent to Kishinev by an association of Jewish writers to collect notes for the Hebrew press. The notes became the basis of Bialik's long, widely read poem "Massa Nemirov," mostly known by its later title "In the City of Slaughter" ("Be'ir Ha-Harega").

¹⁰ Svetlana Natkovich, *Amongst Radiant Clouds: The Literature of Vladimir (Zeev) Jabotinsky in a Social Context* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2015, Hebrew).

¹¹ Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky, "Preface to Bialik's Poems", trans. Moshe Ettinger, Ben Yehuda Project (Hebrew), accessed October 2018, https://benyehuda.org/zhabotinsky/bialik_bio_ater.html.

literary and political statements, Jabotinsky did not hide his view of his translation as an act that merged aesthetic appreciation with Zionist activism. He depicted Bialik explicitly as the poet who expressed most persuasively a discursive turn in Jewish national thought: From a universalist hope to be integrated, passively, into European societies, to a particularist, collective understanding that Jews ought to actively determine their destiny as a nation. While this interpretation of Bialik and his poetry was not unusual, it was one of the main reasons behind Frishman's rejection of Jabotinsky's translation.

Frishman recognized that Jabotinsky's translation was a labor of literary love as much as it was a conscious attempt to issue a call for political action. He also agreed with Jabotinsky, as his earlier writings show, that *Hibat Tsiyon* offered very little to Jews by way of redefining the ties among them in national terms. Frishman was alarmed, nevertheless, by the scale of the audience that the translation ultimately reached, and did not agree with Jabotinsky's militant interpretation of Zionism. According to Frishman, it should have been clear to Jabotinsky that not only like-minded Jews would read his translation of Bialik. Inevitably, Jabotinsky made Bialik's poems available for non-Jewish Russian readers, exposing Bialik to anti-Semitic critique.

Frishman overlooked the fact that some eminent Russian writers, such as Maxim Gorky, reacted positively to the "universal" aspects of Bialik's work.¹² He himself did not see Bialik's poetry as "universal," but rather as expressing an untranslatable experience of Jewish suffering. He began his diatribe against Jabotinsky, accordingly, by citing a negative review of Bialik's poetry in the Russian newspaper *Novoe Vremya*. Penned by a Russian critic named Viktor Burenin, this review unfolded, as Frishman recounted, a misreading of Bialik's poems, provoking anger in Jewish intellectual circles. While Frishman belonged to those circles, he mocked the Jewish intellectuals who reacted to Burenin's review, purportedly, as if it were a "pogrom." Vacillating between irony and pain, Frishman insisted that Burenin was not the one to blame for tarnishing the reputation of Bialik and, by extension, of modern Hebrew

¹² Gorky shared his positive impression of Bialik's poems with readers of a Zionist weekly in Russian around 1912. In a brief essay, he stated that even in Russian Bialik's poems conveyed a sense of beautiful rage and marked themselves as "universal." Maxim Gorky, "On H.N. Bialik," trans. Zorah Anpolsky, Ben Yehuda Project (Hebrew), accessed August 2018, https://benyehuda.org/bialik/ru_xlat_fore.html.

poetry as a whole. It was Jabotinsky who provided anti-Jewish writers with an opportunity to humiliate Jews.

Frishman revisited Jabotinsky's early translation of Bialik's "In the City of Slaughter" in an attempt to explain why Russian readers should have never gained access to Bialik's poetry:

"We take the greatest and utmost lament that has ever been written for us, 'Massa Nemirov,' and deliver it to the people responsible for the story of Nemirov? And we expect them to feel what Nemirov was. Vanity of vanities! These people do not need a second hand poetic description of the pogrom, its evils, and atrocities. For they know it first hand. They are the principal authors of the pogrom, the real rather than the imaginative authors; who have written this poetry not with pen and ink, like Bialik, but with axe and blood. Should we deliver 'Massa Nemirov' to them, so they could take pleasure in its beauty? I can imagine how appropriate it would have been if one translated Jeremiah's Book of Lamentations into the Roman language and gave it to Titus and his friends, so they would take pleasure in its splendor."¹³

Using the first person plural to speak, ostensibly, in the name of all Jews, Frishman accused Jabotinsky of normalizing the relationship between Jews and non-Jews in Russia through his translation. He thereby described language as shaped by, and reflective of, historical and political circumstances, suggesting that the encounter between Russian and Hebrew manifested a set of power relations that corresponded with the power relations between Russians and Jews.

Frishman reduced Russian to representing a public that persecuted Jews, while portraying Hebrew as an exclusively Jewish language whose history harked back to the days of Jeremiah and Lamentations. Evoking these inter-linked biblical books (*Lamentations* is a series of sermons traditionally ascribed to the prophet Jeremiah), Frishman created an analogy between the contexts in which they had been authored and the context in which Bialik wrote "In the City of Slaughter." It would have been harrowing, he claimed, to see Jeremiah and Lamentations translated for Titus, the Roman Emperor who demolished the Second Temple (some five centuries after Jeremiah's time). It was equally disturbing, for Frishman, to read Bialik's poems in Russian.

¹³ Frishman, "Bialik's Poems in Russian Translation," 188.

3. “A poet that is nearly untranslatable”

Frishman cited more than one reason for the analogy between Jabotinsky’s translation of Bialik’s poems (and its effect on different Russian readers) and the hypothetical translation of Jeremiah and Lamentations for Titus. First, he insisted that Bialik’s poems lost their allure in Jabotinsky’s Russian rendering:

“If I read the Hebrew: “שמים, בקשו רחמים עלי” [‘Heaven, beg mercy for me’], I recall at once, the moment I was sitting in my room [or my *heder*] and the shadows of twilight began to rise and I heard this call for the first time, and my heart started palpitating with tenderness and compassion, and tears came to my eyes. Even now, these words alone bestir me, preparing me for what is yet to come. But if I read the Russian: ‘Небеса, молитесь хоть вы’ [‘Heaven, at least you pray for me’], the call is naught but very weak, making no impression on me whatsoever.”¹⁴

Recounting his first encounter with Bialik’s poem “*Al Ha-shehita*,” Frishman suggested that Bialik’s poetry was too ingrained in both Hebrew language and Jewish experience to be translated successfully. He ascribed to Bialik’s poetry the power “to prepare” him for future events, implying that the text addressed – either mainly or exclusively – people like him: Hebrew readers of Jewish origin. Frishman argued, in other words, for a Hebrew cultural ownership of Bialik’s poetry.

At the heart of Frishman’s diatribe stood his proclamation that Bialik could never be successfully translated:

“Bialik cannot be translated even by the greatest of artists. A poet whose poetic force has reached such rarified heights, who, through words and composition and through the art of verse, can evoke within us varieties of images and emotional associations and childhood memories, and do whatever he wishes to us – such a poet may be nearly untranslatable.”¹⁵

In the beginning of “Bialik’s Poems in Russian Translation,” Frishman stated that Bialik’s poetry should never have been translated into Russian because of the power imbalances between Jews and non-Jews in Russia at the turn of the 20th century. As his essay unfolded, he depicted Bialik’s poems themselves

¹⁴ Frishman, “Bialik’s Poems in Russian Translation,” 188.

¹⁵ Frishman, “Bialik’s Poems in Russian Translation,” 189.

as impossible to translate. The reason for Jabotinsky's alleged failure was, therefore, not only political, but also metaphysical. Hebrew, for Frishman, possessed a quality that was "nearly untranslatable," at best, and completely untranslatable, at worst.

The analogy between Bialik's poems and the biblical books of Jeremiah and Lamentations sheds light on Frishman's metaphysical claim about the untranslatability of Bialik's Hebrew poems. Frishman was not the first (nor was he to become the last) to equate Bialik's poetry with the genre of biblical prophecy. Bialik himself turned, intentionally and repeatedly, to biblical books such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel to suffuse his poetry with historical and spiritual drama.¹⁶ Ironically, both Jabotinsky and Frishman accepted the notion of Bialik as a modern-day prophet despite their opposing views of the translatability of his poetry. For Jabotinsky, Bialik's poetry *had* to appear in translation *because* it was prophetic. To Frishman, translating Bialik seemed as impossible as any historical attempt to translate the Hebrew Bible itself.

On the issue of translating the Hebrew Bible, Frishman had an unambiguous stance. In one of his most celebrated works of literary criticism, the anthology *Letters on Literature*, Frishman endorsed the famous response of the Hebrew writer Perets Smolenskin to the first Hebrew translation (from the 1870s) of William Shakespeare's *Othello*:¹⁷ "Victory, victory! We avenged the Britons today! They had taken our Holy Scriptures and spread them in thousands among the nations, and we shall take their Shakespeare!"¹⁸

Repeating Smolenskin's statement with unconcealed enthusiasm, Frishman expressed his agreement with the perception of the Hebrew Bible as Jewish property.¹⁹ The endorsement attested, once again, to Frishman's understanding of translation as an arena of cultural battles, as well as to his view of the Hebrew Bible as an exclusively Jewish asset.

¹⁶ Dan Miron has situated this "prophetic mode" of Bialik's poetry in the broader context of the history of modern Hebrew poetics and the influences it absorbed at the turn of the 20th century. See Dan Miron, *H.N. Bialik and the Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ David Frishman, "Letters on Literature", *David Frishman: Writings* Vol. 3 (Warsaw: Shtibel, 1924, Hebrew).

¹⁸ Quoted in Frishman, "Letters on Literature."

¹⁹ Like his relationship with the Zionist movement at large, Frishman's relationship with Smolenskin's work was ambivalent. In the beginning of his career as a critic, Frishman criticized Smolenskin harshly, yet he came to see it as a mistake later. See Frishman, *Writings* Vol. 4 (Warsaw: Shtibel, 1924), 7–33; Kramer.

By extension, Frishman saw Hebrew itself as a Jewish asset and as a language whose sacred sources should not be overlooked. Nowhere was this view clearer than in Frishman's statements about the multiple initiatives to vernacularize Hebrew in his time. In a 1910 essay about Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, the Hebrew lexicographer who would come to be known as "the reviver of Hebrew language," Frishman criticized the enterprise of Hebrew vernacularization vehemently. He compared the so-called "revival" of Hebrew to an act of "sacrifice in the name of a sanctified ideology," donning a prophet's mantle himself.²⁰ Frishman pondered whether Ben-Yehuda fully understood the stakes of his work, accusing him of an offense of divine proportions:

"It is possible that at times of solitude, [...] he himself [Ben Yehuda] will feel [...] how big is the responsibility that weighs on the person who transports a sacred reliquary from the temple [*mikdash*] to the marketplace. It is possible that as long as it [the reliquary of Hebrew] stayed put in its inner sanctums [*kodshey ha-kodashim shela*], it was the one thing that sustained the soul of a whole nation; and now that it has been profaned [*na'asta hulin*], who knows if it will not do more harm than good."²¹

This passage underpins Frishman's repeated attempts to distance Hebrew from the realms of the mundane and the secular.

As Parush has observed, Frishman dubbed Hebrew an "aristocratic" language, capable of supreme poetic expression.²² This definition informed his objection to Hebrew vernacularization initiatives in his time, as well as his perception of translation and inter-lingual relations. Frishman distinguished between Hebrew and other languages both due to the allegedly inherent, elevated status of Hebrew and as a way to demarcate the borders of Hebrew culture and "protect" it from its purported "others." The Hebrew Bible and the so-called sanctity of Hebrew became for Frishman a weapon in a symbolic fight against the "others" of Hebrew culture: Russian speaking Zionists, conservative British converts, or openly anti-Semitic Russian critics.

²⁰ Frishman, *Writings*, Vol. 2, 64.

²¹ Frishman, *Writings*, Vol. 2, 64.

²² Parush, *Literary Canon and National Ideology*, 95–96.

4. Untranslatability and the Language of the Bible

In his book *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, the contemporary writer Abdelfattah Kilito shows how claims of untranslatability often function as a strategic tool for guarding the borders of one's culture.²³ It is not uncommon, according to Kilito, to find violent rhetoric in disputes around translation, especially when biblical languages are involved. As Kilito's translator Wail S. Hassan has suggested, one could look into the etymology of the Arabic word for translation to understand Kilito's idea.²⁴ The Arabic *tarjama*, just like the Hebrew *targum*, is a word that originates in the Aramaic *turjeman*. The latter term presents, in itself, a variation on the Acadian word for shouting, *ragam*. While the Arabic *tarjama* sometimes designates "life" or "biography," its violent echoes are never lost. Prompted, in part, by this etymological network, Kilito has often tackled the ethics of translation in his scholarship.

One instance of resistance to translation that Kilito has examined resonates clearly with Frishman's history of criticizing specific acts of translation. Kilito has discussed and quoted the Arabic poet Amr ibn Bahr al-Jahiz who declared, in the 8th century, that Arabic verse could not be translated. "The gift of poetry is restricted to the Arabs," al-Jahiz wrote, "and to those who speak their language."²⁵ Al-Jahiz's goal, as Kilito has hypothesized, was twofold: He sought to define Arab identity as rooted in the Arabic language, and to draw a clear distinction between Arabs and non-Arabs (chiefly Persians). Al-Jahiz's statement was not unique, but rather reflective of a common use of resistance to translation as a rhetorical device of cultural demarcation.

In a lecture that expounded on the central ideas of *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, Kilito has cited additional Arabic writers who resisted translation:

"In another domain, *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language* could mean: *Thou Shalt Not Read My Literature*. I refuse to be read. I refuse to be translated. I do not desire others to find their way into my intellectual treasures, especially the texts I consider to hold great significance in our culture. I object to transferring these texts into other languages outside of the group to which I belong. Why hold this position on translation? Because I fear that translation would weaken the text, or by contrast, I

²³ Abdelfattah Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, trans. Wail S. Hassan (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

²⁴ Kilito and Hassan, *Thou Shalt Not Speak*, ix.

²⁵ Quoted in Kilito and Hassan, *Thou Shalt Not Speak*, 27.

fear that it would make it look more alluring and concrete. And the painful result in this case is that the original language would lose its substantial character and unique advantage.”²⁶

Kilito identifies two possible types of fear: (1) that the translation of a given text would “weaken” it (namely, it would overlook nuance); (2) that the translation of a given text would overly concretize or overly explain the text. Together, these seemingly contrasting fears represent an attempt to fight cultural appropriation, misrepresentation or misunderstanding, betraying a sense of linguistic and cultural exceptionalism, which, in turn, rejects notions of linguistic and cultural equivalence.

Like al-Jahiz’s stance on Arabic, Frishman’s view of Hebrew shaped his double standard as a translator and writer. While he disparaged specific translations both from and into Hebrew, he portrayed some of his own translations from various languages into Hebrew as “restoring the splendor” of the works they transposed. In a letter to a friend from 1911, Frishman took pride in the ease with which he translated Friedrich Nietzsche’s references to the Hebrew Bible in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.²⁷ With Nietzsche, as he explained, he faced the same feeling he had encountered when he translated Lord Byron’s dramatic retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel in 1900; not as if he were creating a Hebrew version of the work, but as if he was “restoring” the work’s “splendor” and placing it back in its “appropriate” place.²⁸

5. Conclusion

On the surface, it is hard to reconcile Frishman’s proclamation about Byron and Nietzsche with the ideas he unfolded in his reviews of Levin’s and Jabotinsky’s translations. The proclamation about Byron and Nietzsche suggests that acts of translation bear the positive potential to revive a literary work in a new cultural context. By contrast, Frishman’s main claims in his reviews of Levin’s and Jabotinsky’s translations assume that works that position themselves in a specific cultural-political context cannot be readily

²⁶ Abdelfattah Kilito, “Thou Shalt Not Translate Me,” trans. Nasser Albreeky, *Arabic Literature in English*, accessed January 2016, <http://arablit.org/2016/01/18/abdefattah-kilitos-thou-shalt-not-translate-me-translated/>.

²⁷ Quoted in Gilboa, *Between Realism and Romanticism*, 155.

²⁸ Frishman used the Hebrew phrase *Hashavat 'Atara Le-Yoshna*.

re-contextualized. In both cases, however, Frishman writes from the viewpoint of Hebrew language and culture, displaying an exclusivist approach to each. It was Hebrew language that had an unparalleled power, for Frishman, to restore literary works inspired by the biblical text; and it was a specific, historically conditioned brand of Hebrew “weakness” that allegedly barred works such as *Tancred* or Bialik’s poems, from being adequately translated into or from Hebrew.

Frishman’s idea that Byron’s dramatic poem and Nietzsche’s poetic philosophy were “put back in their place” when he translated them into Hebrew reflected his overarching exclusivist stance on translation. Any work that alluded heavily to the Hebrew Bible made use, according to Frishman, of a text that belonged to Hebrew-reading Jews. This view of the Hebrew Bible informed Frishman’s writing on translation and vice-versa. The Hebrew Bible was “nearly untranslatable,” for Frishman, as was Bialik’s poetry. The fact that these texts *have been* translated (in the case of the Bible – time and again) merely pointed to their translators’ willingness to sacrifice literature on some political altar.

Ironically, Frishman himself unmasked his politics of Jewish particularism and Hebrew exclusivism in his writing about translation. While he had an ambivalent relationship with the Zionist movement, he inevitably advanced some version of it by writing in Hebrew and by “protecting” Hebrew as a Jewish national asset. Frishman’s writings about translation, which always addressed the alleged uniqueness of Hebrew as an emblem of an “untranslatable” Jewish culture, manifested lucidly his ambivalence toward Zionism. They exposed their author’s politicized understanding of translation, as well as his view of the Jewish nation as a cohesive group in the midst of a cultural revolution. Frishman’s implicit theory of translation serves, therefore, as an example of the built-in power of translated texts not only to represent but also to participate in political disputes. As a translation theorist, Frishman both understood and deployed the tendency of translation to be weaponized in culture wars, producing a corpus of translation critique whose full content is yet to be studied.