

Abstract

Over the past 300 years, of all the ways of telling an all-encompassing story consisting of a variety of characters and a plotline that binds them together in complex relationships, the European novel has been the most popular. Its popularity has risen and fallen, and there have been various transformations to its basic features over the years, but the traditional conception has always maintained that it has several stable criteria, most importantly the story. Since time immemorial, the novel has always embodied contemplative elements, and over the years these became more dominant and challenged the plot as the driving force of the characters in the novel. At the start of the 20th century, the novel experienced a retreat in the face of the short story, but after World War I, it experienced a true renaissance, while undergoing fundamental modifications, as part of the spirit of modernism that swept through the narrative arts (in parallel to the plastic arts), with a range of modernist novels changing the European literary landscape. This included the phenomenon of the essayistic novel, in which the captivating and “interesting” storyline is set aside in favor of the contemplative axis, paved with thoughts and reflections, sometimes totally detached from the existence of a causal world of phenomena. The all-embracing canvas and the interacting characters remain, yet the same plotline, which bound them together through significant events, happenings and movement in the space that impeded them to act, was weakened in favor of a chain of deep and contemplative thoughts that do not respond to the dictations of the outside world. These novels appeared mostly in the German-speaking world, for example *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann, which simultaneously conveyed a general thought, for example about concepts of time, and discursive Platonic dialogues that continue for many pages, especially in *The Man Without Qualities* by Robert Musil, the exemplar of an essayistic novel.

The Hebrew novel was largely an artificial product of the educational “maskilic” forces that sought to include the “beauty of Japheth” in the “tents of Shem”, as approval for the Jewish people’s inclusion within the community of Western nations. In addition, the Hebrew novel, which originated in the 19th century, lumbered and stuttered behind foreign literature, and for years was asked to represent Jewish experience, often a national one. Between World War I and II, the narrative-essayistic genre had an exemplary modernist representative in the form of the writer and essayist, Eliezer Steinman (1892-1970), who wrote several unique essayistic novels, based on a reasoned and orderly worldview. To appraise the literary and aesthetic value of Steinman’s works, especially the novels, it is important to understand the circumstances of their creation, since most of them are poignant artistic statements. This is doubly true when examining Steinman’s two-facedness: both a writer and an essayist. This can be seen in each of his works separately, but especially when examining his work as a whole. Steinman himself was aware of life and its echoes and gave them expression in his writing, also autobiographically, but mainly in the conceptual

sense, from the standpoint that he took, both in his essays and through his literary existence. Furthermore, the years relevant to this study were tumultuous both personally and literarily for Steinman, a period that left its mark clearly in his writing, not only in the simple biographical sense, but also in the way in which he formed his artistic standpoint. This formed the basis for both his essays and his fiction.

Since there is fundamental importance to a writer's biography, and because there is no suitable monograph to rely on, **the first chapter** of the thesis will be devoted to Eliezer Steinman's life. His close friend Meir Yanai (1928-2009) quoted him as saying: "If I write an autobiography, they will say that I am tying the garlands of glory of a sage and prophet to myself. Those reading about my meetings with Bialik, Berl Katznelson and others will say that I'm exaggerating. That I'm not telling the truth. I don't want to quarrel. To shatter idols."¹ In this sense, the collection *Dod M'Dod Y'Ematz*, which contains pseudonyms and stylish literary form based on life wisdom and philosophical questions from his vividly depicted uncles, was the closest thing to a reliable autobiography, and even there Steinman did not seek to teach about his life. "There is a sick evil among writers who seek to place everything on the tip of the tongue and to dip it in ink, everything, they seek to drown the entire life of the soul in ink," he wrote. "They don't even imagine that there are treasures of life that are best kept in the sacred halls of the soul, that the main point is beyond all verbal communication, that all that is dear and holy is best kept out of public view, and he who contains within himself a singular perspective, surrounds himself with bounty, fenced away from the eyes of the many, and is silent."² The sole autobiographical details that he volunteered were always in context, or involved memories of others intertwined with personal experiences, or anecdotes accompanying his engrossing essays. These are always found on the margins and must be carefully reduced into a clear and coherent whole; they were always considered marginal in relation to the person or theme that he wrote about, and these were few and far between considering the importance he gave to the people he appraised.

While Steinman did not write a structured autobiography or relate to his life story directly in an orderly manner backed up by facts, he did write about his memories. In fact, he wrote many memories, full of ideas but thin on details. The collection *Thus Spoke Frishman*, for example, which dealt with his teacher and mentor, is not based on concrete events and quotations from David Frishman, but used deeper and more thoughtful paraphrases which discussed the concept "Frishman" or the idea "Frishman," rather than the person, his work and his life. Thus, there are essays filled with amazement about Frishman, Bialik, Mendele, Mapu and many others, including personal information about them, always delivered as a loose, enveloping framework of content regarding the person under discussion. The writer Natan Shaham (1925-2018), Steinman's son and

¹ Meir Yanai, *Thus Spoke Steinman: Diary of Conversations with Meir Yanai*, Aleph Publishing, 1975, p. 26

² E. Steinman, "Madrigato Shel Anchi," *From Generation to Generation*, Tel Aviv: M. Neumann, 1950, p. 225

winner of the Israel Prize for Literature, addressed this issue when he tried to trace his father's life story following his death. "He didn't tell the family legend," he wrote. "Assume that the main points, the essence...the diamond in the rough, will come to us through the words that he chose to use."³ In this sense the heroes of his novels (Pesach Shalit, Berger) also bore a general similarity to Steinman, but was their essence, that is, their views on the main questions of life; this is the main thing, according to Steinman, and not their coincidental life stories.

This thesis, then, will for the first time reveal in full the life story of Eliezer Steinman, including the *Ketuvim* journal episode (where he was editor) – a key chapter in the Land of Israel literary republic at the end of the 1920s – from Steinman's perspective. The first chapter will lay out the significant milestones in Steinman's literary journey, from his days at the yeshiva in Kishinev to the important Hebrew literary centers (Odessa, Warsaw), and the tumultuous period in the up-and-coming Hebrew center in the Land of Israel. Steinman's artistic viewpoint and method will be described through his exchange of letters with literary associates in the Land of Israel and in exile, and through articles and literary essays. Extra attention will be paid to the period when an all-out battle ensued over the question of Hebrew culture in the Land of Israel, between members of the *Ketuvim* group, led by Steinman (alongside Avraham Shlonsky, Yaakov Horowitz, Yisrael Zemura, and Yitzhak Norman), and the main literary establishment, led (or at least so the writers perceived) by Haim Nahman Bialik. This chapter places Steinman at the forefront of the battle that became a public and personal crossroads for him; the breakup of the group that he led also marked a new path for the writer (as his son testified after seeing the members of his father's household rapidly changing). The breakup of the group influenced his body of work, as he began to express his loneliness through an increased amount of essayistic writing during the 1930s.

The second chapter is dedicated to examining the literary-essayistic compound through a discussion of the essence of the novel, the elusive character of the essay and its history in Western literature, and studies about the essayistic novel. First, I will examine the sources of the European novel through major studies, for example the book *The Rise of the Novel* by Ian Watt, which argues that the modern period emptied literature of faith in God, which led to the fading of the Greek epic, filling the space instead with Cartesian scepticism, facilitating the rise of the novel and paving the way for modernism. The European novel was a product of the Enlightenment, which for 200 years underwent a revolutionary path of secularization, scientific, industrial, technological breakthroughs, social and national foment, entering the pits of the First World War and ending it shaken with post-traumatic stress. During the third decade of the 1900s, the novel, which had slightly deteriorated towards the turn of the previous century, was reborn, presenting a modernist crop of contemplative prose, including the outstanding European essayistic novels.

³ Natan Shaham, *Signed Book*, Tel Aviv: Sifrit Poalim and Kibbutz HaArtzi Hashomer Hatzair Publishing, 1988, p. 20.

The Hebrew novel originated in Eastern Europe, and as mentioned, entered the world against the background of different claims that required it to provide a form of expression that would give voice to modern Jewish life. This literature faced labor pains, and there are disagreements among scholars about which was the first (whether the epistolary anti-Hasidic satirical novel *Revealer of Secrets* by Joseph Perl or Abraham Mapu's popular *Love of Zion*). Important writers, for example Nahum Sokolow, argued that the Hebrew novel wasn't practical because of Jewish exile. This position was shared by other, later writers, for example Dov Kimhi, who wrote at the beginning of the 1920s that a Hebrew novel had never been written and never would be. Steinman took a strong stand against this position, declaring that the Hebrew novel would in fact be written.

While the European novel is a form of modern literature, one of the problems facing the formation of genre boundaries for the essay stems from its stylistic fluidity. Many theorists and literary figures set criteria for the literary essay, and nearly every study dealing directly with the essay as a sui generis form in the literary field opens with apologetics, because by its very nature the essay is free from the shackles of definition, meaning it cannot be easily pigeonholed. Every study that tried to define the essay as a literary genre, including those of scholars such as Adorno and Lukacs and writers such as Musil and Virginia Woolf, emphasized the flexibility of the term, and reiterated that, by its very nature, the essay cannot be precisely defined. Against this background one can diagnose essays in novels negatively, as a foreign element, alienated from the natural stream of the narrative, which is more strictly bound to genre conventions than the essay. Methodologically, there is a need to examine Steinman's unique art of essay writing, which gave him the opportunity to intelligently write a series of essayistic Hebrew novels. My starting point is that Steinman laid the foundations for an explicitly Hebrew essayistic novel, i.e. a novel that makes deliberate use of the contemplative essay and is specifically memoiristic, personal, repressing the limits of space and time and transcending to global humanistic significance. To investigate the logical component in essayistic linguistic discourse the term *dianoia* (διάνοια) is required. This was coined by Plato to isolate essayistic speech that doesn't strive for complete truth but is derived directly from the nature of experience. The same speech that is liberated from the tough inflexible chains of the rational, which validates itself by virtue of its "literature," is identified by Steinman with the Hasidic, mystical element that is found in his writing. Steinman's writing doesn't adhere to objective or intellectual facts and knowledge, preferring a skeptical, "essayistic" experiential approach, one that is explicitly spiritual, which he expanded on, for example, in his essay 'Time's Winnowing Fork,' in which he attacked Joseph Klausner for excluding the mystic Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (the Ramchal) from the history of new Hebrew literature, in favor of the maskil Naphtali Hirz Wessely. Over the years Steinman published thousands of essays about various subjects. Only some of them were published in his many books, including personal-memoirist

essays, topical essays, and essays on topics close to his heart, such as literature, education, messianism, and more. In these sensitive essays there is a gentle narrative layer, which is partially hidden from view, infiltrating the broad literary framework of the novel in a way that seems natural.

Historically, the novel and the essay are literary forms that were created in the modern era and began their journey in Western culture almost in parallel. In the novel, the story is never isolated, and is accompanied by picturesque, formal elements, or abstract, contemplative or essayistic elements, with changing frequencies. However, the lack of story does not mean the novel is essayistic. Already in the 19th century, naturalism sought to write deep prose that was completely devoid of plot. At the same time, as a counterreaction to naturalism, the novel began to be more contemplative and abstract; for example, the book *A rebours* ('Against Nature') by the French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans. In those years, as mentioned, the novel was eclipsed in popularity by the short story, but World War I and its catastrophic results brought about far-reaching changes in European thought and art, particularly in the German-speaking world. In the 1930s, the Austrian Robert Musil published his monumental *The Man Without Qualities*, which is viewed as a milestone and the perfect example of essayistic prose.⁴ The novel sketches a satirical picture of high society in Habsburg Vienna, literary salons full of characters from different classes, including counts and their wives, military figures, Jews and foreigners. The broad scope of the novel allows a continuation of the familiar Belles-lettres tradition but in practice the discursive, essayistic content, which deals with life in the presence of the epistemic crisis of modernity, strives, futilely, to reflect objective reality, essentially "suffocating" the plot.

During those years, Eliezer Steinman's essay 'Time's Winnowing Fork' was published. This used two important and original elements: The first is Steinman's abhorrence of Haskalah literature and what he perceived of as the "cold cult of rationalism," and his fondness for literature that seeks the invisible and the mystical. The second is Steinman's unique understanding of history as a "past with no end." Just as he interpreted the story as non-linear and contemplative, based on a dianoia chain of thoughts and reflections, so he thought that human history should not be based on a chronological, causal axis, but is instead cyclical and circular. In his key later essay, 'The Downfall of Story,' Steinman expanded on the feasibility of the modern story, determining that in a chaotic, diffuse reality, the attempt to achieve something as tangible and concrete as a story, based on events in the world of phenomena, is destined for failure. Therefore, the modern story needs to go up a level and strip itself of its narrative assets, to get closer to pure and holy art. This is what Steinman aspired to achieve in his novels.

From time immemorial, the novel (including the Hebrew novel) was full of differing degrees of contemplation. For example, one sees in the works of Uri Nissan Gnessin, who was admired by

⁴ Baruch Kurzweil, *The Roman Tractate and the European Story*, ed. Yehuda Friedlander, Jerusalem: Schocken, 1973, p. 190.

Steinman, a fiction sparse in narrative that is characterized by stream of consciousness, with essayistic characteristics. According to Dina Berdichevsky, *From Here and There* by Yosef Haim Brenner is the first modern Hebrew essayistic novel. I disagree with this, since while *From Here and There* might be a “post-modern” novel, in the sense that it is fragmentary and composed of different texts (“diary excerpts, parchments, correspondence, critical articles”), it preserves a balance between story and contemplation, as opposed to Steinman’s novels, which are mostly composed of an essayistic layer. In this sense, I think that the moment in modern Hebrew literature when one can begin talking about a Hebrew essayistic novel is from the 1930s onwards, the period when Eliezer Steinman’s essayistic novels were published.

In the third chapter, I will apply the basic assumptions from the earlier chapters to the novelistic work of Eliezer Steinman. I aim to demonstrate how Steinman found his literary stance, how his essayistic voice became clearer, seeping into his novelistic work, and finally taking up residence there. This process took place in parallel to the development of his overall worldview, which despised rational thought and welcomed the hidden and the mystical. I argue that, during his creative peak, when he published his revolutionary modernist novels, at the height of his public literary activities during the days of *Ketuvim*, Steinman merged Hasidic spiritual thought with an artistic worldview and put it into practice.

Eliezer Steinman’s debut novel, *Round and Round*, which he planned for years and was published in five parts between 1918 and 1920, was the most unusual of his work. Steinman, who for years stated that the Hebrew novel’s time was coming, produced a social satire which ridiculed the literary circles of Warsaw, especially its leaders, and the circle surrounding them and grovelling before them. The “round and round” in the novel is expressed through the wanderings of the main character Shalit through the streets of Warsaw, which are sketched with realist precision - its markets, parks, and Jewish streets - but also through thick-headed and often meaningless dialogue between the characters, another example of Steinman’s contempt for the emptiness of their lives.

This novel, which as mentioned, is unusual for Steinman’s work, is not essayistic but contains essayistic enclaves. In *Round and Round*, though, the dreams of the hero of the novel, Pesach Shalit, appeared in the Hebrew press as a separate collection. For example, in the Moscow newspaper *Ha’Am* (“The People”), Steinman published personal essays based on his dreams, which appeared in *Round and Round* as the dreams of Pesach Shalit and were integrated into the fabric of the novel and its characters. These enclaves grew bigger and bigger over time and became the main focus of his novels. *Round and Round* received a chilly reception and it seems Steinman himself was not pleased with the final product, since its publication was terminated and it was never concluded. The manuscript may have been lost in the turmoil and the transitions of Steinman and his wife during the Russian Civil War, but he did not attempt to assemble it anew and to publish it as a separate novel.

At the start of the 1920s Steinman found himself in Warsaw, after escaping from Odessa. During those years he had literary momentum: activities in the Polish Writers' Association; the founding of a new literary forum (*Kolot*); writing for the Hebrew press in Poland; the publication of a Yiddish story collection; an essay collection (*The Book of Articles*); and the publication of his second novel, completely different from its predecessor, *Esther Hayyut*. The focus of the novel is the character of Esther, a married woman disappointed by her life looking after two children in a remote town. She decides to abandon them and join her sister Hannah in Odessa, where she meets different types of men and has romantic relations with them until the bitter end. In *Esther Hayyut*, Eliezer Steinman began his preoccupation of many years with he-she relations in the framework of family life. The novel takes a pessimistic tone in the vein of "The War of the Sexes" principles set forth by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, the ideas of Otto Weininger, and Freudian symbolism. With this novel, Steinman made his entry into the world of misanthropy, in which men and women struggle against one another; despise their offspring; disassemble the human body into components; wander the big city, which is compared to an erotic hunting ground; experience existential loneliness and wallow in the sorrow of existence. Despite the significant differences between *Esther Hayyut* and *Round and Round* in terms of content and form, when it came to the essay, Steinman was still groping about for his voice as a writer, and the essay was still secondary to the plot, emerging in the form of enclaves, in the form of dreams, contemplative dialogues and more.

The following novel, *Zugot* ("Couples"), Steinman's third, despite many similarities to *Esther Hayyut*, marked a significant new chapter in Steinman's work. First, it was his first novel to be published in the Land of Israel, at the height of the tumultuous struggle by Steinman and his friends against the "Revival Generation." In this sense, *Zugot* was a major artistic statement by the entire *Ketuvim* group, which celebrated its collective literary achievement. Like *Esther Hayyut*, at the center of *Zugot* is the figure of Rachel, married to Berger, who becomes a mother. The married couple meet another couple – Mitzi, a short-haired, swarthy woman, a feminist who belongs to an extremist women's organization, who had a romantic relationship with Berger and now arouses sexual feelings in Rachel; and Kahane, a mysterious tenant who lives in the same neighborhood as Berger and Mitzi, who draws Rachel's curiosity.

Zugot is deeply rooted in the world of the battle of the sexes and feminism of *Esther Hayyut*, and on the other hand it marks the beginning of Steinman's essayistic-narrative fiction. It also forms the first part of a trilogy of essayistic novels that were published in the 1930s (*Zugot*, *Duda'im* ("Mandrakes"), and *Sodot* ("Secrets")). As such, it marks a transition in Steinman's work, because in the following novel, *Duda'im*, Steinman placed a magnifying glass on a specific part of *Zugot* and developed it into a complete novel. *Duda'im* is the first Steinman novel written in the first person and is a distinctly essayistic novel, although extremely far-reaching. In *Zugot* Steinman began

making the described spaces abstract; the city in which the love affair takes place remains nameless. This trend continues in *Duda'im*, in which even the characters are unnamed and scarce – only the hero, the pale (“the dove”) and the dark (“the crow”). In *Duda'im* Steinman went even further, and the remaining story elements from *Zugot* were made even more abstract; the result was a narrative fully reduced to the singular perspective; this in turn required complete devotion to the essayistic format.

The final novel in the 1930s trilogy is *Sodot*. Similar to *Duda'im*, it is also written in the first person and continues the abstraction of the earlier novels. The large city has no name, nor do the characters (who provide names for one another). Amos, for example, the hero of the story, receives his name from Tzafirra, who in turn received her name from “Amos.” “Amos” is a reclusive diary writer (who writes about, among other things, writing diaries) who locks himself away from the outside world in his room while fearing for his sanity. A girl (or adolescent) manages to find her way to his private space; he calls her Tzafirra (and sometimes other names). The two become close and have a romance. *Sodot* was published after the break-up of the *Ketuvim* team, and therefore the novel deals, alongside the usual themes (he-she relations; procreation; existential discussions; the art of the story), with the virtues of solitude.

The essayistic trilogy of Eliezer Steinman has several characteristics identified with modernist fiction; I've already noted the issue of breaking down the barriers of space and time. There is also an increasing interest in human sexuality and in hermaphrodite and androgynous characters. Beyond this, Steinman makes innovative and groundbreaking use of the Hebrew language, whose boundaries he seeks to widen and split. This is especially clear in *Duda'im*, which serves as a linguistic laboratory, in which Steinman reduces and pulverizes words, while on the other hand binding together linguistic phrases and neologisms. In *Sodot* Steinman distinguishes between the speech of Amos and Tzafirra, who talks like a baby, garbling words and using a kind of slang. It's important to note that this trend was common among *Ketuvim* writers, as well as authors like Abraham Shlonsky and Yitzhak Norman. In *Duda'im*, for example, Steinman even imports mystical whispers and Kabbalistic expressions.

The three essayistic novels also dealt directly with the art of the novel. In *Zugot*, there are initial reflexive ars-poetical references by the narrator to the art of the story, when he expresses perplexity about the need to describe something that happened in the world. Also in *Sodot*, Amos writes in his diary about readers' desperate need to read about “facts.” But while in *Zugot* and *Sodot* these are footnotes, in *Duda'im* it is the main theme. The novel opens as a manifesto dealing with the hero's yearning for “non-existence” and his declaration that one should only talk about “the happenings that never happened.” This marks the nucleus of Steinman's worldview regarding essayistic prose, which later received expression in his essay ‘The Downfall of Story’, because the discussion about the art of the story takes place in parallel to the hero's endless preoccupation with

the essence of being and divinity. Rachel Berger, the hero of *Duda'im*, and Amos are searching for the pure and whole, far from the dispersed and chaotic world. This is a summary of Steinman's essayistic-narrative thought, which is full of contemplation, diffuse fables, and negation, as opposed to the story of the act, the existing, the realized, the "is." Also, the Hasidic thought of "existent" and "non-existent" merged for Steinman in a way that reflected his view that there is no plot in the story. For this purpose, the novel *Duda'im* is the total and ars-poetical fulfilment of this thought. On the one hand the view of a world in which the "non-existence" is formed from the "existence," increasing the spiritual level, and on the other hand - and in parallel to a story without a plot - that is without happenings and events, from which the literary "presence" in the novel is born. The art of the story as a representation of reality is abhorrent in the opinion of Steinman's heroes, because the material reality in the story is the plot, and nullifying the plot for the sake of spiritual advancement is like abolishing the realistic existence the sake of the "non-existence." Nullifying the story in the formal and content-related sense means dealing with its nullification, while discussing the yearning for the divine "nothingness," the primeval, the abstract, the hidden. This sublime, noble art, the longing for the hidden past, the elevated floor transcending the national story – Steinman called this the "art of consecration."

The **fourth chapter** is dedicated to a special test case that for me is an exemplary example of Eliezer Steinman's essayistic prose. *Brother's Ghost in Metropolis* meets all the criteria of the novels in the essayistic trilogy. It makes use of linguistic innovation (for example the name of the hero is "*Misty Artisty*"); it discusses the art of the story; it deals with sexuality and homosexuality; it has few characters; it takes place in an urban environment; the hero fears insanity and longs for God. However, there are several differences that benefit the novel. For example, the use that Steinman makes of the city of Berlin, its wide-open avenues and gardens that root the hero's area of action in an actual time and place, the cultural capital of Europe in the Weimar Republic between the wars. Beyond this, and perhaps most importantly, Steinman makes use of autobiographical material from his life that provides the novel with an emotional and slightly sentimental quality, absent from the mystical trilogy, which was full of deep rationalist thought.

Brother's Ghost in Metropolis was published in two parts in the journal *Mozanim* in the 1930s, but was fully assembled, with the third part, after Eliezer Steinman's death, as part of the anthology *Pnei Atzmi ('My Portrait')*. Steinman's younger brother, Yosile, committed suicide in Berlin, and Steinman wrote the novel based on that painful act. In it, the hero, Misty Artisty, wanders the streets of the city accompanied by his brother's spirit, mirroring the wanderings in the depths of his mind and soul, attempting to fathom the meaning of death and his essence as an author. This novel is an example of what I refer to as "Ghost Literature" – an essayistic literary creation with elements of stream of consciousness, which is reflected through content and form as a representation of something that was but is no longer. Misty Artisty, like Steinman's other heroes,

constantly pecks at the term “being,” which came into fashion in Germany during those years thanks to the German philosopher (and later Nazi) Martin Heidegger. The spirit of the brother, “the ghost,” raises the question of the fear of death and the ability to live an authentic life alongside death, thanks to death. The poet Reiner Maria Rilke gave expression to these questions in several of his poems, and the hero of the story, who walks the streets of the German capital, constantly wonders about the inner thoughts of the great German intellectuals, including Goethe. This novel contains other layers, beyond those which make up the trilogy of essayistic novels, marking a first-class literary achievement for Eliezer Steinman and Hebrew literature.



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“The Downfall of Story”

The Essayistic Novels of Eliezer Steinman

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