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Portrayals of Childhood Innocence in Contemporary Israeli Fiction

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In many stories and novellas in twentieth-century Israeli literature, a young boy or girl on the brink of losing childhood innocence is employed as a key figure or narrator. Five representative examples include A. B. Yehoshua's novel *A Late Divorce* (1984), Yehudit Katzir's short story 'Disneyel' (1987), and Amos Oz's novellas *Panther in the Basement* (1995), *The Hill of Evil Counsel* (1974), and *Mr.[sic] Levi* (1975). By allowing the reader to enter the narrative through the eyes of a child, the authors present the adult world around their child narrators in a unique way. The reader sees the complexities of the world inside and outside the home either through a lens coloured by a child's perspective in the literary present, or in scenes filtered through the prism of time. The moment of climax in these stories arises when the psychological reality of the child's world is disrupted by outside influences. As a result, their innocence — and their illusion of reality — is compromised. While the loss of childhood innocence comes when the children realize that their make-believe games and interactions with adults are limited because they are children, it is also brought about by the stunning realization that adult reality is flawed. Ironically, this helps them move beyond childhood. These particular stories, however, do not follow the children's development into the adolescent or adult worlds. Instead, the children lose their status as innocents and end their journey through childhood waiting in shadows and a darkness that reflects the fact that what lies

ahead in their adult lives is as murky as what lies ahead for the Israeli nation.

In many ways, the initial characterizations of the narrators in all three authors' works are specifically indebted to the Romantic conception of the child-innocent, as the idea of the child as an idealized innocent is not an age-old construct. Jackie Wullschlager explains that the symbolic associations among children, innocence, and regeneration can, however, be traced as far back as Biblical times, 'lying at the heart of the New Testament and of Christian thought; Christians worship their god as a newborn baby, children are emblems of faith and purity in Shakespeare and Dante [...]' (1995, p.17). The image of the child as Wullschlager historicizes it becomes embedded in the Romantic conception of the child, which uses these age-old symbolic associations to redefine the ideals (and weight of) childhood innocence in ways that give them new social and secular significance. The connection between innocence and affection toward children comes to the forefront in writing during the Romantic period, and it is this which rewrites what childhood innocence means in literature. Victor Watson notes that prior to the eighteenth century 'writers assumed that there were unbridgeable differences between children and adults [... and] children were regarded affectionately but warily, with a repeated emphasis on their smallness' (1994, p.165). However, the end of the end of the eighteenth century brought with it a cultural shift in the view of children and childhood which challenged this notion and which gave childhood innocence new meaning in literature, and in society as a whole.

The societal significance of the Romantic idea of childhood innocence comes in the changed family dynamic, where the child assumes a new role in the centre of the family — a role which the children in the Israeli novels hold. Rather than being regarded warily

or ignored nearly completely as in the pre-Romantic era, children were placed at the centre of family life as a result of 'a slow and incalculable cultural shift in which adults sought a new significance in children' during the Romantic era (Watson 1994, p.165). This meant that, as art strove to mimic reality, that children were likewise allowed more significant roles in novels, either as narrators or as adults speaking 'with the remembered voices of childhood, an apparent acknowledgement of the William-Wordsworthian notion of the child within the adult' (Watson 1994, p.171). Not only did this transform the image of childhood 'by relating it specifically to contemporary society and morality,' but the increasingly smaller sizes of families in Victorian times also caused 'parent-child relationships [to become] closer and adults [to focus] more intensely on children' (Wullschlager 1995, p.15). In particular, when children are acknowledged as central to the family yet distinct from its adult members, a negotiation of differing perspectives comes to characterize children's tenacious engagement with parental figures and the adult world around them. The Romantic conception of childhood innocence is at once an illusory construct forced on child narrators by adults in the text as well as by the author and perhaps the reader; at the same time, as the writers strive for a certain degree of mimesis, the innocent illusion is written as the child's reality.

While there are countless examples of childhood innocence which borrow from the Romantic vision of the child-innocent in all these stories, more important are the ways in which these stories challenge and complicate the Romantic vision of childhood. One of the main ways in which this is challenged, is in the children's constant engagement with politics outside their realm of understanding. The integration of politics into the texts subverts what Alan Richardson calls the 'sentimentalisation of childhood' (1999, p.24). Richardson notes

that such sentimentalisation was a large part of the image of the child-innocent for the Romantics (1999, p.24-5). In other words, the imposed illusion in which the children live, derived from the Romantic cult of innocence, shows signs of fracture as the children come of age due not only to their natural maturation but to extreme political circumstances in Israel. A key way this sort of sentimentalisation is displayed in these stories comes in the reaction of the adults in the narratives to the children's actions. By showing the engagement of adults and children in their texts, the Israeli writers actively interrogate the Romantic conception of the child-innocent as a reality the (presumed) adult reader should accept.

Oz and Yehoshua place their child narrators at the centre of their families' lives, imbibing the Romantic idea of innocence with an implied wisdom, layered into childish turns of phrase. In *A Late Divorce*, Gaddi's mother tells him: 'Grandpa thinks the world of you. He says that you know so much, that you understand so much [...]' (Yehoshua 1984, p.29). Even as Gaddi's grandfather struggles through the rest of the novel, he returns to this sentiment again as he reflects on his initial negative perceptions of Gaddi, which were replaced by a sense of awe at Gaddi's seeming understanding of the adult world around him (1984, p.306 - 7). In this way, Gaddi's very presence in the novel embodies some sense of the Romantic construct: the (grand)parent-child relationship takes centre stage, against the backdrop of a sentimentalized image of Gaddi as a child. It also complicates the idea of the child's reality and that of the adult, which are in many ways in opposition. One only has to consider the grandfather's observations of a sick and sleepy Gaddi waking in the middle of the night to understand the sentimental gaze which is turned on Gaddi (1984, p.308). Does Gaddi understand what he says or know that he is considered wise? Are his wisdom and innocence a childhood reality or

an illusion imposed by his grandfather? The purity of a sick child awoken from sleep certainly contains echoes of the idealized child-innocent. Most significantly, it does so by eliciting affection from an adult character. Oz's Hillel, in *The Hill of Evil Counsel*, also elicits similar emotions from adult figures. Oz writes that 'Hillel often wrapped himself in introspection of sadness, and then he would delight [the adults] with a sweet phrase, such as: "Life is a circle. Everyone goes round and around."' (1974, p.16). There is an implied wisdom in this statement that is imposed by adults. The adults' response, Oz writes, stirs ripples of emotion; one might imagine this emotion as a sense of sentimentality that is procured by the child Hillel's charming innocence. Yet there are key features which complicate the image of the child-innocent, even before the children's innocence is shattered from their own perspectives.

While there are sentimental moments in the stories, they occur primarily among family members, and the child's understanding of politics does not allow the reader to reduce the stories to mere sentimentality. In 'Disneyel', the child narrator constantly references 'the Political Situation'. The narrator remembers: 'Sometimes, when there was a war or elections, you all talked about the Political Situation' (Katzir 1987, p.79). Politics punctuate the stream of consciousness narrative as the story moves forward. The term 'the Political Situation' is at once childlike in its simplicity, though its simplicity does not necessarily make it sentimental. A key element of the sentimental is the child's ability to procure a sense of affection from an adult in the story in the way that Gaddi's grandfather observes a sleepy Gaddi in the previously referenced scene and thinks: 'My heart went out to him' (Yehoshua 1984, p.308). In 'Disneyel', the narrator's monologue is addressed to her mother in the second person plural, and as a result of this point of view, the reader is put in the mother's place — or in the

place of an observer who has mistakenly tuned into a high volume frequency not intended for his or her ears. In any case, the severity of the political situation and of the mother's imminent death in 'Disneyel' are enough to rob the childish and simplistic view of politics from any sense of endearment or idealization on the part of an adult figure, into whose role the reader is placed.

Often, however, the integration of politics subverts the sentimentality of a child's perspective of the outside world because of its shocking nature coupled with its violence. Uri, in Oz's *Mr. Levi*, talks incessantly about Russian interrogation cells (Oz 1975, p.104). He believes he has been learning tactical secrets that will help the Israeli Underground, and with an imagined violence that is quite vivid, he proclaims: 'Even if they pull my fingernails out one by one I won't talk' (1975, p.104). Several times he makes claims to this effect, and rather than charming or sentimental they are jarring and disturbing coming from a child. They do not elicit a strong sense of affection from the reader, who stands in for the adult since the adults in the text are often not privy to the boy's plots or inner thoughts. Rather, these observations create a sense of shock. Oz's boy narrators are well-versed in the politics of the day and in Zionism, and their games include clandestine operations in which they aid adult causes, though they do not realise at first they are only playing games. This ultimately complicates their perceptions of their own innocence as they come of age, which forces the reader to question the sentimentality the adults observe and praise. In other words, while the adults' characterization of Oz's boy narrators in his three novellas may be indebted to the Romantic conception of the child-innocent, Oz's development of these characters moves beyond the portrayal of an illusion of innocence or sentimentality. Further, this is true not only of Oz but also of Katzir and Yehoshua's child narrators.

The extended development of the children comes in the strong sense of psychological reality that the authors employ outside the purview of adults' in-text commentary: Katzir and Yehoshua through the stream of consciousness approach, and Oz through a close third person narrative point of view in his three novellas. Katzir's narrator in 'Disneyel' is bored by politics, as she reflects: 'There was an interview on the Political Situation with Ben-Gurion, who Dad always said was a great man, but I didn't read it because it looked boring [...]' (1987, p.90). She is aware of the political situation, though she does not engage with it as directly as the narrators in Oz's novellas. Her engagement with politics, then, is neither shocking nor violent, though it does lend a psychological depth to her character. Her reflections on politics shift from Ben-Gurion to newspaper articles, which lead her to fashion magazines, which in turn remind her of her glamorous mother, though the reader is not privy to her mother's opinion of her. As readers, we do not know if her mother would find her musings innocent, pure, or sentimental. In contrast to the Romantic cult of innocence imposed by Gaddi's grandfather in *A Late Divorce*, the girl's personal thoughts — unmitigated by adult commentary — are actually violent and shocking in nature. These elements of the girl's story ironically come through reflections on her mother: 'I picture your mutilated body' (Katzir 1987, p.91). The idea of the beautiful woman's body as mutilated provides the jarring interruption to 'Disneyel,' subverting the sentimental Romantic ideal of the child as well as the Victorian extension of this ideal (which, as Wullschlager notes, forces parent-child relationships to become closer).

Parent-child interactions provide a space in which the child's voice is provoked and exposed, ultimately revealing that the innocence that adults read into children's comments is more often than not an imposed illusion; childhood reality is less pure than it seems. For

example, Gaddi is left alone by his mother in *A Late Divorce*, charged with the care of his baby sister and with entertaining his grandfather, who he still does not know very well since the man just arrived in Israel from the U.S. His mother is not sympathetic when Gaddi complains that the baby cried nearly the entire time she was gone, despite the fact that she had promised Gaddi the baby would not. 'What do you mean, I promised?' she asks Gaddi insensitively, and then follows with: 'Don't be idiotic' (Yehoshua 1984, p.28). Gaddi's mother is not only unsympathetic, but she is also absent for the majority of the section of the novel that Gaddi narrates. Hillel, in *Hill of Evil Counsel*, is likewise left alone by his mother, though he is abandoned more permanently in what Nehama Aschkenasy calls a 'recreation of the biblical book of Ruth' (2004, p.148). Hillel knows enough to lament 'There's nothing' after turning to gaze at the sky when his father tries to convince him that 'Mommy will come back and it'll all be like before' (Ox 1974, p.58-9). Furthermore, at the end of 'Disneyel', the female narrator is abandoned by the mother when she succumbs to cancer. The narrator notes the time and imagines listening to the 'brittle thunder and the soft rain descending on the world as solace' (Katzir 1987, p.103). The portrayals of the mother-child relationship here would better be characterized as real and even harsh or gritty rather than sentimental or innocent. And it is not just plot that creates these real or harsh sensations in the text, rather, it is the narrative voice, or the child's understanding as he or she rises above a mere modern conception of the Romantic child-innocent.

The location of the narrative voice in time is one of the primary reasons that the image of the child as innocent is blemished and that the idea of illusions and reality is brought into question. Panther in the *Basement* and 'Disneyel' feature the voice of a narrator who is, indeed, a child, though the voice is only sometimes childlike. At times, the

narrator speaks as a child and at other times, the narrator's voice comes from an adult version of that child. Nili Gold observes that, in 'Disneyel', 'the events of the past glide into the gloomy present in an elegant dance' (2006). In one scene, for example, the narrator moves from speaking of a childhood dinner with the mother's lover Michael, rich with description of candles, dishes, and appetizers, straight into the present moment in the hospital, when the narrator is an adult, with no transition. She remembers: 'In the middle of the table were two candlesticks [...] Soon it will be so late, I'll ask them to set up a cot for me, because it would be crazy to go back to Haifa [...]' (Katzir 1987, p.91). In a similar vein, Aschkenasy notes that the narrative voice in *Panther in the Basement* alternates 'between that of a child, imparting a sense of immediacy to the events, and the adult looking back to relate a childhood memory' (2004, p.137). The adult reflective voice complicates the idea of the child-innocent because it combines two opposite things: childhood purity (and its related misconceptions) and an adult understanding.

Amos Oz employs the reflective voice in *Panther in the Basement* and in *Hill of Evil Counsel* to great effect. Amos Oz's boy narrator, Proffy, is caught between adulthood and childhood as he narrates *Panther in the Basement*. For example, the novel begins: 'I have been called a traitor many times in my life. The first time was when I was twelve and a quarter [...]' (Oz 1995, p.1). This line begins without a sense of immediacy, as the phrase 'many times in my life' suggests that the narrator is reflecting on a past that may be distant at the moment of narration. Given that the first time that the narrator was called a traitor was when he was twelve, the reader reasonably expects that there were many times after this point that the narrator was also called a traitor.. Within several paragraphs, however, the narrative voice becomes less reflective and more childlike, as Proffy describes a

scene in which he is immediately engaged: 'First of all I cleared the table and put everything away in its proper place, in the icebox, the cupboards, or the sink, because I loved being at home on my own all day without anything to do' (Oz 1995, p.3). The foundation of the lines of action in a present, child's moment contrasts sharply with the reflective voice that was used only a page prior. Alternatively, Hillel in *Hill of Evil Counsel* stays within the child's voice throughout the narrative until the very final chapter, in which the narrative voice moves to a broad overview of the characters' lives and Israeli history. As in *Panther in the Basement*, the reflective voice comes in sharp contrast to the child's voice, which in *Hill of Evil Counsel* moves in a meandering pace, describing events moment by moment. The contrasts create a confusing space in which childhood and adult reality are confounded.

The confusion that ensues is, perhaps, the ultimate mimesis — and one that adults overlook or simplify in order to impose an illusion of childhood innocence. Children's reality is coloured by the seriousness of adult reality since they have to function within an adult world in Israel. In Romantic texts, children served either as narrators or as adults speaking 'with the remembered voices of childhood', which Watson observes is 'an apparent acknowledgement of the William-Wordsworthian notion of the child within the adult' (1994, p.171). The key difference in the Israeli texts comes in the Wordsworthian ideal of the Romantics: that a child would exist within an adult, who has come back to tell a story. While this basic plot structure may be at play in 'Disneyel' and in *Panther in the Basement*, these Israeli writers' work does more than simply present a child within an adult. Instead, the narrative structures in their novels more closely parallel Watson's general observations about adult-child interactions, which are not tied to the Romantic era:

Adult literature is not obligated to be interested in childhood, and parents do not have to understand their children. But children have to understand adults because they live in a world controlled by them and they are living their lives forward, towards their own adulthood. Adulthood surrounds them and awaits them. (1994, p.174)

The Israeli children portrayed in the novels of Oz, Katzir, and Yehoshua are indeed 'living their lives forward towards their own adulthood.' They are not stagnant, unchanging characters, as the typical Romantic child, who Wullschlager asserts would have been trapped in a 'privileged and seminal state, connected with both spiritual redemption and the natural world' (1995, p.17). In contrast, Proffy and Katzir's young girl eventually do grow up, while Hillel, Uri, and Gaddi are moving toward adulthood, and each page of the text brings the end of their childhoods nearer and nearer. Their experiences push them toward maturity and toward the confrontation of an adult reality which, when they adopt a sense of adult perspective, seemingly renders their former (childhood) realities an illusion.

Ultimately, the stories end with the loss and the repudiation of the very idea of innocence itself, as the children reach a moment of darkness or waiting at the end of the novels which symbolizes the beginning of the last phases of their childhoods. They begin to realize that the adult world is imperfect and that adult reality is flawed. At the end of Gaddi's chapter in *A Late Divorce*, for example, Gaddi is frustrated with his mother. He realizes her promises are meaningless: she could not possibly ensure his baby sister Rakefet would not cry while she was gone (Yehoshua 1984, p.28). Yet the whole time that his mother was gone, Gaddi was concerned with his sister, trying to comfort her and stop her tears. The final lines of the chapter, however, reveal Gaddi's disillusionment to the fullest: he adopts his mother's carelessness, no longer rushing to his sister's side and trying to stop her

crying but rather simply ignoring it. He observes: 'She must want to wake up and cry again. If I'm quick enough, I'll fall asleep before it starts' (1984, p.30). These are the last lines presented from Gaddi's perspective in the novel, and they follow the realization that Gaddi's grandmother is in a prison, not a hospital (1984, p.29). However, this revelation comes after Gaddi's confrontation with his mother about her broken promises, and while the realization should be stunning or shocking, Gaddi does not present it this way. Instead, he matter-of-factly states: 'She wasn't in a hospital she was in a prison I knew it I knew it all along' (1984, p.29). Gaddi's realizations begin to propel him out of an innocent state of childhood and toward a more bleak and dark place where he must wait for his adulthood to begin.

A sense of world-weariness characterizes the ending of Gaddi's section in *A Late Divorce* and the ending of 'Disneyel'. Gaddi's reaction both to the news about his grandmother and to his sister's final cries reveal a sense of defeat and tiredness that is not indicative of an innocent child. Though Gaddi is precocious from the beginning of his narration, something has changed here: he has lost the anger that he had moments ago at his mother and cannot summon a similar reaction. Instead, Yehoshua leaves Gaddi waiting for Rakefet's piercing cry, and waiting for sleep: a dark cloud that will steal away his waking consciousness. In a similar vein, the female narrator in 'Disneyel' stops lingering for full pages on single memories by the end of the story; instead, she begins to list events tiredly, each event taking up the space of only a few sentences in the final pages of the story. At the very end, she remembers her mother falling unconscious in the past, as she realizes her mother's life is now ending. She laments: 'I'll search for your face always smiling in my memory' and then imagines a mundane moment — her mother asking for the time (Katzir 1987, p.103). The final image of rain and 'brittle thunder' seems to echo both the

melancholy mood of the narrator as well as her world-weariness. She has reached an adult reality here, as she lives the last lines of the story as an adult, while Gaddi has just begun to lose innocence. His outlook is bleak as he looks ahead to the adult reality Katzir's female narrator has already reached, which come in the form of lies he must untangle within his own family.

Uri and Hillel lose innocence and must come to terms with a flawed adult reality in a similar way. The mixture of adult-world politics with which they engage is far from charming or innocent; their games end in a harsh reality that effectively end their childhoods. When his parents refuse to confirm that Mr Levi was at the house the night before (Oz 1975, p.128), Uri comes to the realization that his efforts to help the Underground were not real. He says, with despondence: 'I was nobody's lieutenant [...] There would never be a Hebrew State' (Oz 1975, p.129). This first epiphany signals the end of his politically-laced games, and the final lines of the novella reveal a far more mature attitude on behalf of Uri, the narrator, than his despondent realizations allow. At the end of Hill of Evil Counsel, Hillel is faced with a similar sense of disillusionment in his country. He is fondled by the women who are supposed to be watching him, and as he moans, he comes to a startling realization: that his parents will not return, and descending into stream of consciousness, comes to the epiphany that 'he was alone in the house alone in the neighbourhood there was no one in Tel Arza no one in Jerusalem no one in the whole country he was left all alone [...]' (Oz 1974, p.49). Hillel's and Uri's realizations comprise the moments in which their sense of idyllic, innocent childhood is first compromised in a way that propels them toward adulthood.

While Uri and Hillel are similar in the sense that they face disillusionment with the Jewish state, Uri and Proffy share something different: the loss of their own myth or legacy of becoming a Jewish

hero. Oz himself notes that he wished to have been a hero when he was younger, telling an interviewer: ‘The discovery that I was not a hero [as a child] was a hard one and remains so to this day’ (Balaban 1993, p.12). His own epiphany in life echoes that of both Proffy and Uri. Uri realizes he will never have to face the Russian interrogators, while Proffy’s epiphany comes with a profound statement at the end of chapter twenty-three, when he recants a previous statement about shadows, which was somewhat sentimental or charming. This time, the statement reveals a darkness of spirit that transcends childhood: ‘Everything has a shadow of some kind. Maybe even a shadow has a shadow’ (Oz 1995, p.142). After the discussion of the Israeli state, this statement casts doubt on the certainty that things will be peaceful if the British leave. It is also the last time in the novella that Proffy narrates from a close third person perspective, as the final two chapters come from a reflective adult voice. The darkness of this realization is not heroic; in many ways, it is Proffy’s way of saying what Hillel despondently thinks when he says there will never be a Hebrew state.

These realizations are not childlike or innocent because they come to a deeper understanding of the world around them through politics. The adult reflective voice at the end of *Panther in the Basement*, for example, also speaks of darkness, saying: ‘Such is our story: it comes from darkness, wanders around, and returns to darkness’ (1995, p.146). That darkness, in many ways, is the shadow of the shadow that Proffy thought about as a child; his final epiphany as a child moved him out of the role of child-innocent because he was capable of thought that still held true from an adult perspective. This is unlike his rendition of Yardena’s affair, for example, which he misinterprets (1995, p.140). The shifting of his judgment from child to adult is, in essence, a shift from innocence to understanding — something Uri and Hillel also

experience, though they are left waiting at the end of their novellas, while Proffy is comforted by his father.

When Oz's narrators lose their childlike innocence in moments of darkness or waiting at the end of the novellas, it is because politics have moved from being merely a game to being a reality. Their world has suddenly become bigger than their hero games. The darkness and/or waiting are supplemented by a quick summation of the political state, through a reflective, post-childhood voice in *The Hill of Evil Counsel* and *Panther in the Basement*. But in *Mr. Levi* Uri is simply left waiting. This waiting comes through a second epiphany for young Uri: 'I remember: we've got to go on waiting. What has been has been, and a new day is beginning' (Oz 1975, p.130). This waiting seems to be as much for the Israeli nation as it is for an adulthood that is just out of reach, though childhood is ending for Uri. On the other hand, darkness falls on the *Hill of Evil Counsel* in the last few pages of the novella (Oz 1974, p.55), and in a short paragraph, Oz sums up the history of the nation and of Hillel, who will find himself at school in the kibbutz in the novella's closing lines. But the close third person narration from Hillel's perspective ends with the realization that he is alone, and the reader hears no more charming, innocent statements from him. He is no longer a child and therefore no longer the centre of his father's and the other adults' sentimental projections. He, like Uri and Proffy, fades into the greater history of Israel.

Thus, all the children are left to wait, or to sit in darkness. They are literally left in the twilights of their childhoods. Gaddi is in a darkened room, awaiting sleep (Yehoshua 1984, p.30); Proffy contemplates the shadow of a shadow (Oz 1995, p.142); Hillel describes an enemy army waiting to attack Jerusalem (Oz 1974, p.60); Uri forces himself to remember 'to go on waiting' (Oz 1975, p.130); and Katzir's girl narrator imagines 'brittle thunder' and 'rain descending on the world'

(1987, p.103). As the children wait, or sit in shadow or darkness, the authors do not give a further portrait of their adolescence or the ways in which they further move into adulthood. They end with this epiphany in narrative form. In Oz's novellas, this coincides with the end, or near end, of the British mandate in Israel. While Katzir and Yehoshua's novels are set further into the future, they are set against political times which seem just as turbulent to the narrators.

While the endings of works appear very bleak, one exception comes in Oz's Panther in the *Basement*. In Oz's novellas, the reader does not see the transition of Israel from British occupation to self-governance. Any information of this sort is imparted through exposition at the end of the novel in sentences which provide a political history but do not include scenes where the boy narrators are actors. Yet in Panther in the Basement, Proffy is joined by his father at the end of the novel, spurning the Romantic presentation of the family in a way that Hill of Evil Counsel, A Late Divorce, 'Disneyel,' and Mr. Levi do not. The epiphany in Panther in the Basement comes two chapters from the end, rather than two paragraphs or pages from the end. It also provides what some critics would call an updated view of the family. Avraham Balaban notes that in Oz's work prior to 1991 'children were described either as a by-product of some inner, natural forces that had nothing to do with a child's family [...] or as a static totality of his parents' character' (1993, p.64). This could describe the tone of Hill of Evil Counsel and Mr. Levi in some ways; they both present boy narrators who do not directly interact with their parents very much on the page, and certainly not in the endings and epiphanies. In contrast, Panther in the Basement follows a model that Balaban notes is quite different: a model in which 'the family is conceived of as a dynamic unit, whose members, parents, and children alike, shape each other by way of interaction and symbiosis' (1993,

p.65). This relationship does not have to be bleak; while Proffy might come to the realization that the adult world is imperfect and flawed, he is simultaneously allowed for the first time to engage with it.

Part of the reason that Proffy's ending might have some semblance of hope comes from the meta-fictional ending. By the final chapter, the reader is aware that the Proffy speaking is an older Proffy, who claims to have told the entire story of his childhood as an adult. He acknowledges that the story 'comes from darkness, wanders around, and returns to darkness' (Oz 1995, p.146). Yet he seems to see some redeeming value in story-telling as an art. At the end, he questions: 'Have I betrayed them all again by telling the story? Or is it the other way around: would I have betrayed them if I had not told it?' (1995, p.147). These are the final lines of the novella, as Proffy the adult engages with deep philosophical questions. The narrative ending of the novel, however, comes two chapters earlier, with the epiphany, and Proffy's reflections on the shadows of shadows. Yet there is a chapter between this epiphany and the philosophical ending, which connects the illusion of childhood reality with the narrator's version of a true, adult reality here. Proffy's final scene with his father, in which he feels but does not see his father's tears (1995, p.145), gives the summation of the political state of Israel, as Hill of Evil Counsel and Mr. Levi do at the end. However, this information is imparted in a tender, deeply moving moment between father and son, the likes of which is markedly absent from the other two novellas. Proffy's father is not concerned with childlike innocence here anymore; he tells of a disturbing event in his own life, in which he and his father were humiliated in front of classmates (Oz 1995, p.145). The affirmative 'But from now on there will be Hebrew State' (1995, p.145) speaks not only to the affirmation of a political change here, but to the affirmation of a change in Proffy's life, only part of which is political. This is also a

moment that reaffirms that he is no longer being treated as a child by his parents. In this way, Proffy is left waiting in darkness at the narrative ending of the novel, but that is not the reader's final impression of him, as further chapters follow, suggesting that all is not lost and life is more than the sum of its bleak parts.

In conclusion, the bleak endings which subvert the idea of sentimentality at the heart of the Romantic conception of the child-innocent indicate an end of childhood in *Oz*, *Yehoshua*, and *Katzir's* stories discussed here. The spectacle of childhood is elevated to a complex psychological condition in these stories, though initial portrayals which borrow ideals of innocence and sentimentality are indebted to the Romantic conception of childhood. In many ways, the Romantic redefinition of childhood serves as the scaffolding upon which these Israeli writers can rest their depictions of childhood, as they continue to build and develop their children in more complex ways. The ways in which the children internalize political and historical contexts help the authors to do this. In the end, however, the children are leaving the illusion of innocence and are left staring into a dark, uncertain reality in much the same way that the Israeli nation is.

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