Yaakov Shabtai and Tel Aviv: "The Terrible Transformation"

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I know the city in a very particular phase, a phase that to me is critical, that is the phase of the terrible transformation of the city, that turned me, as someone who was born and grew up in Tel Aviv, to a man who feels himself to be refugee in Tel Aviv. Simply, a foreigner in his own place. Not just me. I feel myself and all those near me to be people who became refugees in the city. And that the city transformed. For me, in some respects, it has been destroyed. Never mind, I love it. But it has undergone a metamorphosis, that to me is very depressing." Yaakov Shabtai (Tzukerman 1991)

Introduction

Following the Six Day War in 1967, and the occupation that followed the Israeli victory. Hebrew fiction became possessed by narratives that expressed utopia and dystopia as tensions that define Israeli society and politics. The Yom Kippur War of 1973 and the political and moral crisis that followed, strengthened the threat felt both from within and from without, and literature began re-examining its role in the affirmation or subversion of the power structures in Israel. This was achieved through the re-writing of the past, re-narrating the chapters of Jewish and Israeli history that had been used to justify and support the actions of the State. Re-assembling the details of this history in a way that was no longer bound to the same meta-narrative, served to reveal a different story to that of national salvation, and that ran counter to the foundations of the Zionist project.

Yaakov Shabtai’s works examine the landscape of Tel Aviv following these events, and depict the process of loss through change, of disintegration as a direct result of reintegration. This study
will examine two novels, set in Tel Aviv during the 1970s and early 1980s. The author's preference for Tel Aviv as the locus for the unravelling of these conditions may be read as a reaction to the canonical status Jerusalem had occupied in Israeli literature, and the various limitations this has placed on the depiction of the subject matter. These novels embody the dialectic relationship between Israeli progress and decay, and depict Zionism under a different, more critical light, raising issues that may be seen as both specific to Zionist discourse, and universal in character.

**Shabtai as an Author**

Shabtai wrote elegies for a city that no longer existed as he knew it. Having written since the early 1970s, the author first gained public acclaim with *Past Continuous* (1977). Shabtai belongs to the Generation of the State (*Dor hamedina*), along with whom he is concerned by the changing face of Israeli society and ideology. The authors of this generation began lending literary expression to certain elements in Israeli society previously overshadowed by the Zionist meta-narrative. No longer "handmaidens" of the state-to use Leon Yudkin’s term-these authors initiated a depiction of figures that "consciously fled national commitment" (Yudkin 1982:156). These authors sought to reveal elements of the Zionist hegemony that failed the dreams of the pioneers and founders of the country, as well as their descendants. They also wished to give a voice to groups within society silenced because they did not fit into the Zionist model.

Shabtai was born in Tel Aviv, where he spent his childhood, but upon completion of his military service, moved to a kibbutz, where he remained for twelve years. He then returned to Tel Aviv, aged 30, encountering a city different from the one he had departed. A photo of the young author, wearing his youth-movement uniform (*Hanoar Haoved*) and standing by the Wailing Wall, an embodiment of the virility and roughness of the Sabra, was used by the conservative Revival Movement (*Tnuat Hathiya*). Although Shabtai tried to prevent his image from being used by the movement, it appeared in posters throughout Tel Aviv. Perhaps a sense of stolen identity, usurped by a power greater than he, heightened his feeling of powerlessness in
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the face of the changing political and ideological landscape of the city. Shabtai died in Tel Aviv in August 1981, aged 47.

Shabtai’s writing was fuelled by the harsh sobriety that accompanied the Israeli victory in 1967, the implications of that victory, and the political upheaval of the 1970s in Israel which saw the final defeat of the Labour movement. As Ruth Almog wrote in *Death in the Ruiz* the land of orchards now opposed the world of contractors.

While other authors explored the utopia of the past and the dystopia of the present through social, political or allegorical forms of literature. Shabtai dealt with these themes partly through exploring the changing spatial dimension of modern life in Tel Aviv as a microcosm of life. His meandering characters follow a set path through a city mapped out in very specific detail, and yet successfully embody a universal urban experience. His protagonists occupy the unique position of a Jewish generation anchored to its history and forever embroiled in Jewish polemics, and yet feel devoid of national identity. Herein lies Shabtai’s nascent criticism of the Zionist narrative and of Israel following the 1967 war.

The Works

The two novels discussed here are *Past Continuous* and *Past Perfect* (published in 1984). *Past Continuous* (*Zikaron Devarim*), literally a transcript, or minutes, of the lives of three male friends in decline-Israel, Goldman and Caesar-and their families, friends and lovers. The novel covers nine months that open with the death of a father and end with the suicide of his son. Goldman. This gestation period produces not life, but a grim realisation that forces of destruction have come to overpower forces of life and creation. These men's lives are threads in a tangle of family, society, locality, memory, and nation. Leon Yudkin argued that "since death reigns supreme ... the only adequate response to death's dominance has to be submission to it" (Yudkin 1984:114). However, Goldman’s suicide is not intended as a submission to death, it is the one act that takes complete control of his life. Rather, Goldman's life in this novel is a progressive narrowing of possibilities, to the point that genuine
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freedom of action can only be expressed by a “transition to a new way of life, or to use his own expression: ‘a different mode of being’ possessing absolute freedom and complete certainty” (Shabtai 1977:7). Shabtai shows this suicide is the final act of despair. He describes how Goldman, “with increasing disquiet saw the approaching end [and] slowly turned to stone inside, as if an infinite calm had descended on him and nothing disturbed him anymore, and he withdrew into himself” (Shabtai 1977:264).

This leeching away of any enthusiasm for life which precipitates Goldman’s death is equally manifested in the lives of the other two main characters. Of Israel, we are told:

[W]hen it came to choosing between his humiliating and oppressive dependence on Caesar and his professional freedom and convenience he chose the former and adopted a monastic way of life without setting himself any clear aim, and deliberately ignored the claims of reality and time, and thus he was able to harden his heart and stubbornly refuse to acknowledge all kinds of things which were disturbing and wrong, and concentrate routinely on himself and on the main thing, and the main thing was the organ, which for almost a year now he had been playing in St Antonio’s church, toying with the idea that at some date in the not-too-distant future he would be able to earn his living by it, although in his heart of hearts he already knew that nothing would come of this idea (Shabtai 1977:64-65).

Caesar attempts to obliterate any sense of impending doom, trying to block out the pain caused by his son’s leukaemia, by accentuating his hedonistic lifestyle. He insists that his numerous girlfriends have abortions, as though fearful of life. He engages in a metaphorical “joyous suicide” (Shabtai E. 1988:66), crowding his life with the “paraphernalia of erotica” (Yudkin 1992:50) in an attempt to blot out the misery of his reality. However, Caesar, who enjoys the oppressive heat of the Tel Aviv summer, who admires the debauchery embodied in his father and the latter’s friends, also experiences a final collapse. While dining with Israel, ordering more and more food and wine. exclaiming that “Everything’s quite all right” (Shabtai 1977:266), we sense growing tensions, and Caesar finally
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breaks down in tears. While driving home, Caesar's breakdown peaks:

When they stopped at a traffic light Caesar, who was sitting withdrawn and sunk in thought, turned to Israel and said that he simply could not understand how a healthy body could suddenly become sick and how no power on earth could arrest the disease or cure it, and he hit the steering wheel furiously with his fist and said, "God damn it, that's what's killing me," and he started the car and cursed a driver who overtook him, and afterward, when they had passed the intersection, he hit the steering wheel again and said, "It's impossible. It can't happen. And if it does, then everything's a load of shit," and he fell silent (Shabtai 1977:267).

The novel's final scene sees Israel in the maternity ward of a Jerusalem hospital, staring at his former girlfriend, who has just delivered a baby, possibly his. The mother is completely unfeeling to the newborn, her face devoid of emotion. Thus the next generation is doomed, either to death, or to life in an emotional vacuum (Admon 1994).

The author's wife, Edna Shabtai, and his colleague Dan Miron posthumously published Past Perfect (Sof Davar), or "The end of the matter." The ending chosen for the novel was based on the author's notes and the conversations he had with his wife and colleague prior to his death. A highly autobiographical novel, Past Perfect follows one man, Meir, an amalgam of the trio from the previous novel, as he marches in a similar direction. The first chapter in the novel focuses on Meir's relationship with his mother. Yaakov Freund wrote that "the ugliness of society, the momentary charm of fanatic ideologies and the void into which its believers might fall is exposed by the initial emotional contact a child has with [its] mother" (Freund 1984:52). After discovering his wife has had an affair, Meir becomes consumed with desire to have sex with other women, and much of the novel follows his attempts to carry out this fantasy. Despite pursuing several women, Meir fails in his mission. At the end of the novel, he has sex with his doctor, who becomes a surrogate mother and wife to him, and at this point, the narrative departs the realistic plane and becomes a surreal depiction of death and rebirth.
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Meir is a complete antithesis to the Sabra mythological hero. Having once belonged in spirit and in essence to the Zionist dream, in adulthood he has come to live out the mental illness of an entire community (Rozen 1984). A growing sense of cessation, of thinning and emptiness in substance, dominates his life. Although some have suggested that in Past Perfect Shabtai comes to terms with the city that has formed around him (Shabtai E. 1988), his regression to surrealism and fantasy towards the end of the novel suggests that he does not contend with the city on real ground, but escapes the confrontation altogether, retreating to the safety of memory. The dreamlike rebirth reads more like a reverie on the part of the ailing author, than a resolution of the complexities so thoroughly documented throughout his literary corpus. The dual lines of movement followed in the novel—towards deterioration and towards rebirth—may be seen as reaffirming the necessity for destruction in order to bring about construction. A defiled temple must be destroyed in order to erect another in its place, just as the diaspora had to be eradicated for the benefit of Israel, and just as socialist ideals had to be stamped out to give rise to capitalism.

Meir's journey to Amsterdam and London after his mother's death was intended as an escape, a way for Meir to recover all that he had missed thus far in his life, but becomes its absolute negation. Europe becomes the purgatory Meir must pass through (Furstenberg 1985:11). Here, his disconnection from the world reaches its peak. He walks aimlessly in the foreign streets, finding his isolation and sense of cessation growing, and his physical condition worsening. In Foyle's bookstore in London, Meir collapses. In broken English he pleads to the man at the desk. I am dying. It's finished. I know. The blood pipes in my head have been splitted. I am becoming cold. In few minutes I'll be dead* (Shabtai 1984:191). A growing cloud surrounds him and negates any attempt at reconnecting with the outside world. This pathetic and tragic experience saps Meir's last energies. He then returns to Tel Aviv, where he dies.

In both novels, the city that once cradled its inhabitants now consumes their childhood dreams, images, and ideals. Tel Aviv is now thriving economically, and expanding to take on a form that is alien to its inhabitants. The characters live out this condition in
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a mixture of an almost perverted hedonism and an intense fear of death, in a struggle between Eros and Thanatos that expresses the dependence of the two forces upon each other (Shaked 1997:34). The male protagonist in Shabtai's works is a flaneur, who observes the busy city life around him as he walks the streets, but at the same time is part of the activity around him. In other words, he wants to be seen as well as to see, but fails in both respects. The two narratives express the failure of power and prosperity in creating unity and security for Israeli society.

Format

From one day to the next, over the space of a few years, the city was rapidly and relentlessly changing its face, and right in front of his eyes it was engulfing the sand lots and the virgin fields, the vineyards and citrus groves and little woods and Arab villages, and afterwards the changes began invading the streets of the older parts of town (Shabtai 1984:268).

One of the ways in which Shabtai explores the Zionist meta-narrative is through a renewed format for his own work. In a style reminiscent of Marcel Proust's Remembrance of Things Past, Shabtai delivers the protocol of a collective, supra-personal consciousness (Shaked M. 1990:268). He brings together the social, familial, and existential planes of experience together with the geographical context of Tel Aviv and its successive historical transformations. These dimensions are intertwined and cannot be grasped in isolation from one another. The first novel is not divided into paragraphs, but is a string of run-on sentences that link all the thoughts, conversations, trajectories, and ambles through the city, to one another, in a wealth of detail and information. Thus Shabtai does this in an attempt to preserve, and solidity every detail that together would form a complete image of the city and its people.

As though combating the destructive force he identifies in Tel Aviv, Shabtai's reaction is the obsessive documentation of all that has gone before, setting the past in stone through its highly detailed and anti-connotative articulation, a depiction of the memory of the past in an objective way that is free of pathos, free of symbolism. In
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*Past Perfect* this longed-for ideal memory is finally given tree rein in the final chapter, a "Proustian bacchanalia" (Agassi 1984) wherein all that Meir had wished for, all that has gradually been eliminated from his life and memory, returns to him as he progresses towards death and rebirth.

Despite wishing to write "past and present into a single, unbroken whole" (Meroz 1985:13), this memory becomes no more than a metaphysical idea (Miron 1980:27). In mimicking the unstoppable pace of life in the city, Shabtai also expresses the loss that occurs in this process, as a certain detail is inevitably forgotten to make room for the next. Shabtai insists on maintaining flatness, maintaining a non-connotative use of material: "In my work I really love the surface to be more or less flat, and for the meaning to exist beneath it" (Tzukerman 1991). Yet, at the same time he wishes to preserve everything, every slight detail. In an interview given shortly before his death. Shabtai voiced his need

....to tell everything. And I don't just mean the big stories. Really, the smallest things. Some yawn that someone uttered. A certain sentence that got stuck in my head years ago. Someone's face, a relative or not, someone from the village. A garment, a shape, a gesticulation, an event. Sometimes something very fleeting, something minute, I wanted to trap all these things in the book somehow (Tzukerman 1991).

These two wishes are incompatible. An author cannot preserve everything and communicate the meaning hidden beneath it at the same time. The object of yearning, be it the physical neighbourhood or the notion of an ideally preserved memory, cannot coexist with the underlying theme of disintegration and loss. One will inevitably consume the other. This manifests itself in the characters—either they die or they escape into a world of fantasy. The sheer quantity of all these impressions makes it difficult to recall many of the factual details of the characters' lives. For instance, after reading the two novels one may not be able to recall Goldman's first name. Meir's mother's first name, whether Meir had children, and so on. These details often get lost in the surplus of description. Shabtai failed, in this way, to "fix everything."

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The long sentences, as Gershon Shaked pointed out, have an equalising effect (Shaked 1997:38) on the various emotions, spaces, tenses and events delivered, so that the painful decline undergone by the characters is rendered as a dull component of modern life, one story amongst many. Deborah Steinhart noted that "a brooding theme of decline and impermanence lurks in the hectic condensation of events... gloomiest of all is the structural interminability of the circumstantial chain, an effect of the run-on syntax" (Steinhardt 1994:240). Edna Shabtai added:

The city depicted in *Past Continuous* is a hectic and alien city, whose characteristics are the eternal overcrowding and stress and the empty movement, when all the protagonists are always held up by a situation of alert expectation for something they are entirely unclear of (Shabtai E. 1988:65).

This description mirrors Shabtai's story-telling technique. The reader's wish for closure is not satisfied, but rather we engage in constant pursuit of conclusion, summation, closure, that never ends, imitating life in the modern metropolis, for as Caesar experienced, "time did not stop" (Shabtai 1977:234). Perhaps what Shabtai's technique succeeds most in purveying is the element of change inherent within the unstoppable phenomenon of time. This has led to the emergence of "Shabtaisms"-expressions in literature that signify change, flow, and transformation (Hagorni-Green 1989:122). Shabtai's yearning was to manufacture a collective ideal memory, to recover lost time and to extricate this live entity from the ruins that time had plunged it into, but his failure to do so demonstrates the impossibility of such an ideal.

The Construction

There exists a foetal stage, a Garden of Eden, harmony I am talking about the world and about the extended family, these serve me as the model of perception or feeling-where everything is near, united, whole-and combined (Yaakov Shabtai cited in Tziper 1994).

Tel Aviv was first envisioned in the late nineteenth century by the Ahuzat Bayit pioneers. Wishing to become a separate entity from
Jaffa. these people envisioned a haven for Hebrew. Zionist living. In contrast with the decrepit Jaffa. In 1910, after uniting with some other Jewish neighbourhoods outside Jaffa. Ahuzat Bayit received its final name, Tel Aviv. The name itself reflects the uneasy element of change Shabtai explores. Tel is the Hebrew for "old ruins," and Aviv- 'spring," invokes renewal. Throughout its evolution, the city has been the product of a struggle between two approaches to urban development. The liberal Zionists strove for free enterprise, independence from the wider Zionist context. Meir Diesengoff's trip to Wall Street in 1923 to attempt the sale of municipal bonds to fund the city's development. advocated an institutionalisation of this approach. The socialist Zionists on the other hand pushed for an urban interpretation of the communal model of colonization employed throughout Palestine. This was to be based on urban socialist ideas propounded by Ebenezer Howard, and deployed in Vienna. At this crucial stage in Tel Aviv's formation, the clash between capitalist and socialist conceptions, each vision projecting alternative and competing models, was to remain a point of contention for the leadership of the city for many years. Furthermore, this struggle is reflective of issues that simultaneously aggravated the organisation of Jewish settlement in Palestine as a whole.

The little Tel Aviv that grew out of this struggle, an area clearly demarcated in Shabtai's novels, once contained Nordia neighbourhood where the author lived in the early 1930s, the workers' lodges (Meonot Ovodim), the small streets leading to the sea, the surrounding agricultural scenery. This is a manifestation of Shabtai's own Garden of Eden that had become eroded (Shabtai E. 1988:67-68). What formed was not only a socialist interpretation of rural communal living in an urban setting, but a place inhabited and sustained by a class of driven pioneers, certain of their ideals, and the means through which they were to realise them. Dan Miron writes of the social component of "Little Tel Aviv":

This class reached its prime at the height of the Yishuv period, but since independence its structures have eroded, its moral and aesthetic norms collapsed, and left it in disreputable decline. This is the class of the Labour union-its urban part-whose pioneering roots reach back to the Third Aliya. and which floundered with the rise and

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institutionalisation of the Labour parties as leaders of the Yisra’el and its social designers (Miron 1980:22).

Batya Donner wrote that in the city the Tel and the Aviv alternate. The city’s pace of life dictates a state of rapid degeneration and destruction, replaced by regeneration and reconstruction. She articulated: “It is a city living in the present, ever erasing its past, and ever prone to change” (Doner 1989:93).

The Destruction

He felt it like the dry movement of sand sitting through his flesh, and then shifting about in the dark space inside his body like greyish vapours, groping for the inner organs—heart, liver, lungs, stomach, intestines—hanging there as if on invisible hooks, and with frozen sorrow he stared at one of the houses next to the police station as he walked past it, and he saw the hut with the grey tiled roof and the sandy field full of little stones and bits of broken china and dry leaves and pieces of coal and the dilapidated fence that had once been there and that he would never see in their material form again (Shabtai 1984:33)

Shabtai is concerned with the final defeat of the communal, intimate, and familiar city of the 1950s and early 1960s. which by the end of this time, had changed. The “White City,” as Natan Alterman called it, had become grey. Tel Aviv had become a jumble of styles, and in addition, workers’ lodges were no longer being built. The idyllic Nordia neighbourhood was replaced by the monumental Dizengoff Centre, a shopping mall described by Yehudit Katzir as a sprawling concrete monster in Closing the Sea; the historic building of the Hertzlia Gymnasium was symbolically replaced with the Shalom Tower, the first sky scraper to extend beyond the skyline of the rapidly expanding metropolis. These changes in the city were inevitable with the waves of migrants arriving in the country, demanding quick and inexpensive expansion of residential areas and amenities. Historical circumstances such as economic, demographic and political emergency dominating life in Tel Aviv in the period between the Second World War and the time of the two novels, led to a slackening of ideological influences, and the eventual
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succumbing of the Zionist and socialist dream to capitalist reality. It was not necessity however, that led to the smothering of "Little Tel Aviv": rather, it was the product of a newly acquired power and economic prosperity, that changed the face of Zionism.

As other authors have explored the obliteration of the "old Jew" so as to give rise to the "new Jew," Shabtai explores this theme as it is manifested in the spatial dimension. The gradual erosion of those buildings, neighbourhoods, and icons of socialist Zionism of Shabtai's generation's youth, produced a sense of destruction of their own past. Lament clouds Shabtai's delivery of both the past and the present, and the additional sense that emerges from his novels is that nostalgia and yearning do not necessarily imply that what has gone before was good. Rather, loss and change in themselves are the objects of lamentation. Shabtai is indeed critical of socialist rigidity, despite his socialist background, and identifies in it similarly destructive forces as those he sees in liberal Zionism.

Beneath the surface of the eroding streets and crumbling houses of the old years, lie reservoirs of memory of the lost childhood and innocence. which have died together with the physical land. Edna Shabtai wrote:

The city beneath the asphalt... [contains] the wells of memory revealed to be broken pits no longer containing the water of life. And in the heart of this city lie the burnt and disintegrating, cut roots of the essence of life and the real entity from which the city sprouted initially: the old streets built according to human and family measurements, blending in with the world of nature - the sycamores, the sandy lots of land, the fallow fields, the hills of red loam and limestone (Shabtai E. 1988:76).

Memory and everything that exists in memory is, to Shabtai, more real than the tangible things in his characters' present life. They yearn for the reality that continues to exist in their memory.

Shabtai is concerned with the instability and loss of authority of the father figures of the labour movement, and by depicting the failure of the fathers' generation in the novels, their dogmatic and
materialistic perversion of Zionist and socialist idealism. led to the 
disappointment and desperation of the sons and daughters; the 
parents have sinned and the children are punished. Consequently, the 
dark underside of the socialist pioneers, the destructive wave of liberal 
progress mongering, have led to the leeching away of any 
enthusiasm for life for Shabtai and his characters, and this 
disappointment by left, nght, and central ideologies brings about their 
nihilistic conclusions. It serves to perpetuate the desperation, 
passivity and victim status Shabtai feels in regard to the changes that 
have taken place around him, and prevents him from seeing a path to 
redemption and improvement of life in Tel Aviv, as in Israel as a whole.

**Binarism**

Shabtai's novels contain several binary oppositions. These are 
sociological, literary, and cultural dialectical conditions, which 
complement each other and form not so much contradictions, but 
foundations for the various constructs encountered in the novels. One 
may say for instance, that the name Tel (+) Aviv itself contains a 
binary opposition, invoking both past and future. From a 
sociological perspective, these novels embody the aforementioned 
tension between construction and destruction as experienced by both 
migrant and Israeli born Jews. The creation of a new Israeli ethos 
has led to the destruction of central elements in Jewish identity. For a literary critic, Shabtai presents a unique format that negates 
itself, synchronistically fortifying, and obliterating memory.

Shabtai emerges as an author who calls to doubt the hegemony of 
the founding generation, deconstructing the image of the Sabra. His 
work is therefore marginal, for it serves to subvert the dominant 
paradigm concerning the Zionist meta-narrative. At the same time 
however, Shabtai has won "a fetishistic status" on the Israeli literary 
scene (Soker-Schwager 2001:34). In reading the novels, one must 
question the detail chosen for inclusion: that which has been 
remembered, and that which has been forgotten, may serve to either 
subvert or reaffirm the hegemony of the Zionist project.
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Shabtai yearns for the unity he identifies in the socialist class, but the depiction found in his novels is of an ethnically and sexually exclusive labour movement. Shabtai does not inquire who was not permitted to erect worker’s lodges in “Little Tel Aviv,” nor does he consider the Arab inhabitants of the area, those who were present before the coming of the new natives of Tel Aviv. Those “wells of memory” as termed by Edna Shabtai, contain a wealth of prejudice and guiding mythologies (Soker-Schwager 2001:46).

As a flaneur, Shabtai’s male figure could either be a voyeur, who considers and decodes the meaning of life around him in Tel Aviv or elsewhere, or a shadowy, almost pathetic figure, whose only fulfilment is through participating in the transitory nature of other people’s lives. The role of the author is central in this question, and Shabtai as the narrator of these stories attempts to embody both subject positions. Furthermore, there is a tension between this figuration of the of the subject as a voyeur, who could be replaced by another, in a different location, and express the same modern urban existential condition. Shabtai’s characters oscillate between the universal observer and the Jewish subject committed to the national story (Soker-Schwager 2001:35).

Conclusion

Shabtai expresses the distress of the lost pioneering generation, the distress of the labour class, and of the urban middle class. who have lost the feeling of physical continuation, as well as organic unity which binds them to the place in which they live, love and work. The characters in the novels are part of the greater organism that is Tel Aviv: the city emerges as another main character in Shabtai’s works. The sickness that afflicts so many of his characters—depression, impotence, suicide, violence, loss of innocence in all its forms—is testimony that the organism on which they feed is sick too. However, in the conclusion to his final novel, Shabtai resolved to exist only within the realm of dream and memory, which fed his artistic imagination. A possible reading of this conclusion is that continuity may ironically occur through change, as the protagonist is reborn as a beautiful child, to resume the cycle of growth, change, loss, separation, death, and life.
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Although Shabtai deals with a condition specifically relevant to Israeli society and Tel Aviv, the state purveyed in the two novels possesses a universal resonance. Shabtai depicted the estrangement resulting from capitalist development, which although attesting to progress and improvement, has often led to alienation and isolation. Shabtai also echoes the nihilism that followed the great victories of the Second World War, and the disappointment and disillusionment from the ideologies that once led the faithful masses to war but now restrain them, as though through "invisible hooks."

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