



Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past

By Amir Eshel



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When looking at how trauma is represented in literature and the arts, we tend to focus on the weight of the past. In this book, Amir Eshel suggests that this retrospective gaze has trapped us in a search for reason in the madness of the twentieth century's catastrophes at the expense of literature's prospective vision. Considering several key literary works, Eshel argues in *Futurity* that by grappling with watershed events of modernity, these works display a future-centric engagement with the past that opens up the present to new political, cultural, and ethical possibilities—what he calls futurity.

Bringing together postwar German, Israeli, and Anglo-American literature, Eshel traces a shared trajectory of futurity in world literature. He begins by examining German works of fiction and the debates they spurred over the future character of Germany's public sphere. Turning to literary works by Jewish-Israeli writers as they revisit Israel's political birth, he shows how these stories inspired a powerful reconsideration of Israel's identity. Eshel then discusses post-1989 literature—from Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* to J. M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*—revealing how these books turn to events like World War II and the Iraq War not simply to make sense of the past but to contemplate the political and intellectual horizon that emerged after 1989. Bringing to light how reflections on the past create tools for the future, *Futurity* reminds us of the numerous possibilities literature holds for grappling with the challenges of both today and tomorrow.

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Editorial Review

Review

“At a time when the pace of change seems to have the velocity of a bullet, it is refreshing to read an affirmation of literature’s sustained power to transform on a more profound, enduring level. *Futurity* lauds the sustainable beauty and power of real literature to outstrip the instantaneous and insubstantial veneer of wireless social networks. . . . A provocative and stimulating read.”

(Choice)

“[Eshel] coins the concept of ‘futurity’ to describe the way that literature helps us face past historical traumas while also prompting us to remain optimistic about shaping the future. . . . It’s a nice idea, that the most depressing fiction is also potentially the most catalytic. In this way, authors are trying to say: I get it, things are awful, but if my characters can do it, so can you.”

(Boston Globe)

“Compelling. . . . Throughout, Eshel urges us to consider how we read, to what end we analyze literature, and what drives our practice of literary criticism.”

(Hebrew Studies)

“The book is an impressive achievement. Eshel covers an enormous range of authors in three languages and offers subtle and nuanced readings of all of them. Moreover, his ability to discern narrative patterns across generations and literatures as well as particular repeated motifs that speak to ‘futurity’ . . . is remarkable.”

*(Carolyn J. Dean *History and Theory*)*

“A perceptive, wide-ranging, and thorough investigation. . . . By way of accessible prose, meticulous and consistent methodology, insightful readings, and sophisticated analyses, Eshel not only adds significantly to the scholarship on each period, author, and novel, but makes this volume a must-read for scholars and students of contemporary literature.”

(Studies in the Novel)

“Eshel advocates for a political reading of contemporary literature. This opens our eyes to connections and, with them, possibilities for action previously unseen.”

(Arcadia)

“Engages with world literature and reads magisterially across a wide range of Western literary traditions. . . . Eshel’s argument is crucially important for our understanding of recent US literary production.”

(American Literary History)

“Eshel’s study constitutes an important contribution to the interdisciplinary field of futurity studies. . . . His book delivers a powerful justification of the role literature can play in serving as mediator and arbiter of the retrospective and prospective viewpoints on modern human social life and of its challenges moving forward into the twenty-first century.”

(German Quarterly)

“*Futurity* is a generous and innovative work, with a remarkable breadth of cultural reference. More than

most books on post-1945 literature and culture, it is a true work of comparativist criticism, moving effortlessly between three languages and several national literary traditions, impressively identifying connections between texts that most readers would not notice.”

(Partial Answers)

“It is a tour de force, in which German, Hebrew, and Anglo-American contemporary literature—more precisely, literature of catastrophes—is compared and linked. But what do Gütner Grass, Martin Walser, and Bernhard Schlink have in common with Abraham B. Yehoshua, Amos Oz and David Grossman, and the latter with Ian McEwan, Philip Roth, and Paul Auster? . . . [Eshel] draws a bold arch from *The Tin Drum* to Oz’s *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, to Auster’s *Man in the Dark* and Roth’s *The Plot Against America*—from the Holocaust to the flight and expulsion of the Palestinians, to American catastrophes that remain fictions in the works of Auster and Roth. . . . Eshel believes that such works different cultures ‘expand the reservoir of words, images, and ideas’ which we use to create ourselves anew.”

(Die Zeit)

“[Eshel’s] vast, lavish, tightly argued and exceptionally interesting book—in which every sentence, every word, is important—may be for many years to come the resource *par excellence* for provoking philosophical reaction (and reflection, as Eshel himself would hope for) on a concept of the future as a potentially fruitful and genuine development of the traumatic past.”

(Consciousness, Literature and the Arts)

“Fascinating. . . . A rich and stimulating meditation on contemporary literature of all stripes. . . . Reminds us that futurity remains intimately connected to arts of memory, debates about history, and our undiminished need for new forms of commemoration.”

(German Studies Review)

“Amir Eshel writes from the perspective of a new ethics of literary and historical narration, whose focus is a new, post-utopian humanitarianism based in remembrance of the past.”

(Der Tagespiegel, on the German edition)

“Using an appealing combination of novels by German and Israeli writers, Amir Eshel produces a powerful and refreshing argument that these texts, which look back at past events, nonetheless point forward to future solutions to the problems they address. Convincing and engaging, *Futurity* will open the eyes of many readers to an important but often neglected function of literature.”

(Judith Ryan, Harvard University)

“Amir Eshel’s *Futurity* is a remarkable book about contemporary German, Hebrew, and Anglo-American literature and its obsession with the catastrophic world of the twentieth century. Animated by the passionate belief that literature has the power to change us, Eshel shifts the focus away from our own obsession with this catastrophe, uncovering the dimension of the future that these texts harbor at their core. A committed and lucid reader of the literary, Eshel recovers the complexities of literary texts by reviving the humanism of Arendt’s post-catastrophic philosophy. Deeply political, *Futurity* makes the strongest possible case for poetic language as a practice that asserts human agency.”

(Robert Alter, University of California, Berkeley)

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(*Julia Hell, University of Michigan*)

About the Author

Amil Eshel is Edward Clark Crossett Professor of Humanistic Studies and director of the Europe Center at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University.

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