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# The EUROPEAN REVIEW of BOOKS

## The size of longing

On « Israel's first political murder », and a novel of  
post-Zionist disillusionment

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09 April 2024

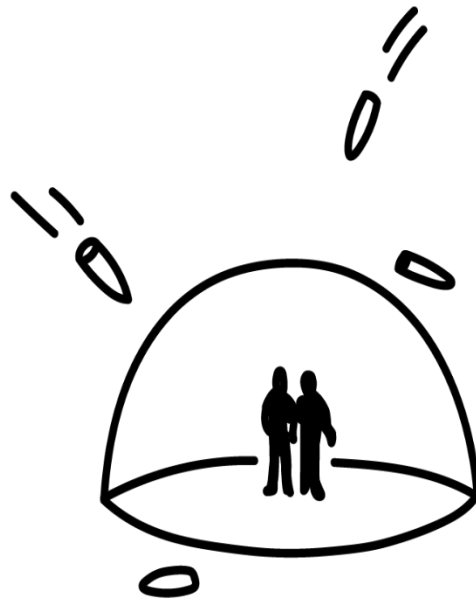
published in Issue Five



Palestine, before it named something else, named a region. The region emerged during Ottoman rule, between 1518 and 1920. It was called Filastin in Arabic, the language of the Muslims, Christians, Jews and others who lived in this region. The word « Palestinians » could apply to all of them. It could refer to « Palestinians » beyond Palestine, too, as when Immanuel Kant, for example, referred to European Jews in 1798 as « Palestinians living among us » in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. This is one of many things we've forgotten to remember.

Jews in the late-nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, meanwhile, identified as Ottoman citizens, and, in the Empire's Arab-speaking regions, as Arab. « Arab » could encompass Muslims, Christians, Druzes, Alevis and Jews. Another thing we've

forgotten to remember is an intimate relationality — Muslims, Jews, Christians and others — forged within the Ottoman project by those in Palestine and beyond, long before our time. As the Ottoman Empire fractured in the early twentieth century and collapsed after World War I, the term « Arab » would acquire an increasingly political or *nationalist* edge. When Arab nationalism was articulated against Ottoman rule, it could play into European geopolitical interests. Under the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916, Britain and France carved up Palestine, turning Palestinians (that is, the multiethnic inhabitants of Ottoman Filastin) into the colonized subjects of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Transjordan. The institution of the British Mandate over Palestine, following the San Remo conference of April 1920, would turn varieties of Arab political aspiration into nationalist movements articulated against the European control, division and transformation of the region.



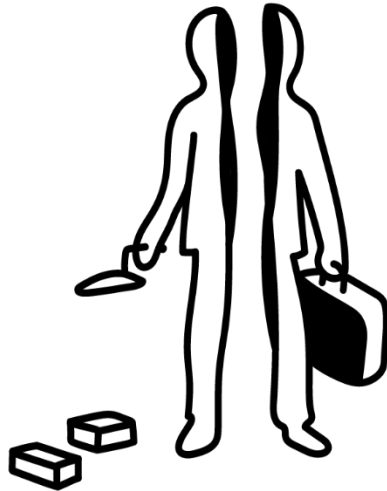
Even then, Arab nationalisms included the active involvement of Arab Jews. « Arab » included Jews, and « Arab Jew » was used by Jews in the region. « From the 1920s through the 1950s, » the literary scholar Lital Levy notes, « the collocation ‘*al yahud al-‘arab*’ (the Arab Jews) ... was employed by both Jews and non-Jews in the Arabic press. Jewish writers and intellectuals in Egypt and Iraq mobilized the term to express either a cultural or a political affinity with the Arab collective. » Jews were an integral part of the anticolonial and pan-Arab « collective » then being constructed. « Being ‘Arab’ did not come at the expense of being ‘Jewish’, » Levy argues, « but was

an additional form of affiliation connected to a common experience with non-Jews in the emerging public sphere. »That the term « Arab Jew » now lands as an oxymoron is a further index of our forgetting.

Maybe all terms fail — or rather all such terms both contain and obscure the histories that produced them. The Balfour Declaration by the British government in 1917 promised a « national home » in Palestine for the Jews while ostensibly protecting the rights of the « Arab » population. The Declaration marked the successful pressure by leaders of the European Jewish diaspora on the British government. It cast Jews as a separate population whose future would be sedimented in a territory, while identifying non-Jewish Palestinians as « Arabs ». The views of this majority Arab population were not taken into account when the Declaration was made. (In 2017 the British government acknowledged that the Declaration should have guaranteed the *political* rights of what today we call Palestinians.)

*Maybe all terms fail — or they both contain and obscure the histories that produced them.*

The Balfour Declaration split, that is to say, the composite term « Arab Jew », and had a disastrous effect on the people whom that term named, negating their history, their affiliations, their « common experience with non-Jews », as the historian Salim Tamari puts it. For Arab Jews, after all, « the return to Zion meant little, since they were already in Zion, in the sense of the broader Holy Land. » Invoking the work of sociologist Yehouda Shenhav, Tamari observes that « for those Jews who lived in Iraq and Syria, the move to Palestine (before 1948) was not seen as a move to Zion, but a move from one area of the Arab world to another, with no significant connotations in terms of sacred geography. » It is worth remembering that Palestinian intellectuals signed a petition in November 1918, voicing opposition to the Mandate's distinction. The petition declared their « wish to live in a satisfactory manner with our brothers, the Israelites, the indigenous inhabitants of the country, with complete equality between their rights and obligations and ours. »

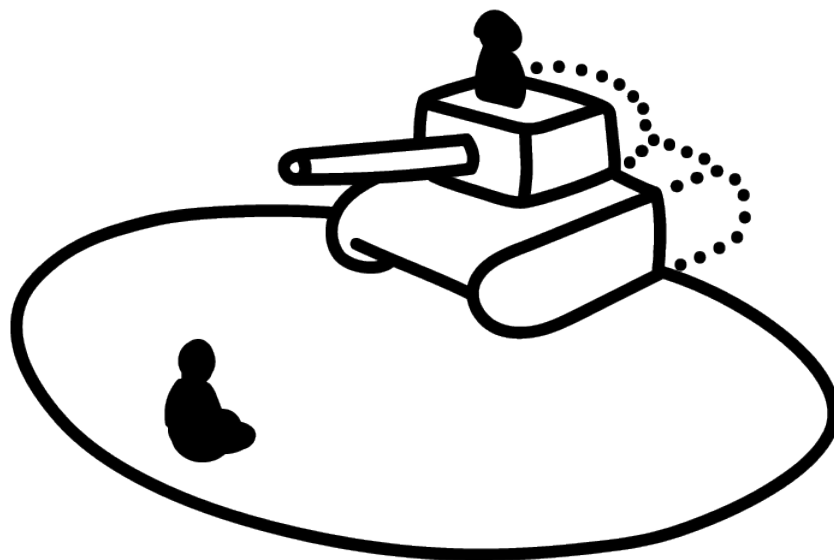


During the Mandate period, Tamari notes, the arrival of European Jews — touting a socialism or a nationalism that assumed a powerful air of ineluctable modernity — could overwrite the worldviews of the « native » (Arab) Jews who had already been living in a mixed cultural milieu. It placed « many native and Sephardic Jews ... in an untenable position. » The syncretic culture within which Arab Jews lived with others had developed at some remove from the political ideologies that animated the European Zionist goal of a future Israel. Ammiel Alcalay eloquently described these cultural realities in *After Arabs and Jews: Remaking Levantine Culture* (1993). Some historians have been committed to recovering this intimacy, this densely textured cultural hybridity through which the Arab Jew needs to be thought: « the histories of Arabs and Jews », Zachary Lockman argued, « were to a significant extent co-constituted and shaped together ». Lamentation over the destruction of this syncretic milieu has remained a refrain in critical Israeli writing. Amos Oz, in *Dear Zealots: Letters from a Divided Land* (2017), captured how a nationalist project erased a rich history of intimate cohabitation. The « new Hebrew » made coexistence of the Arab and the Jew unthinkable and made the « Arab Jew » an oxymoron. Simple historical facts — the Jew as Palestinian — now take on an insurgent character.

Nakba is the Arabic word for « catastrophe », or « disaster », coined by the Syrian intellectual Constantin Zurayk in *Ma'ana al Nakba* (The Meaning of Nakba), written in 1948. Born in Damascus in 1909, during the Ottoman period, Zurayk went on to teach at the American University in Beirut from 1930 to 1939 while playing an important part

in the development of a secular, modern Arab nationalism. The term named the experience suffered by Palestinians — expulsion, occupation, murder — as the state of Israel was born. Edward Said, reflecting in 2003 on Zurayk's coinage, noted the paradoxical temporality that the term had since acquired: « at the intersection of past and future stands the disaster » he wrote, « which on the one hand reveals the deviation from what has yet to happen (a unified, collective Arab identity) and on the other reveals the possibility of what may happen (Arab extinction as a cultural or national unit) ». To speak of an *ongoing* Nakba is, among other things, to speak of a conceptual catastrophe alongside the human one. The Nakba turned what was an *intimacy* into a cause of shame.

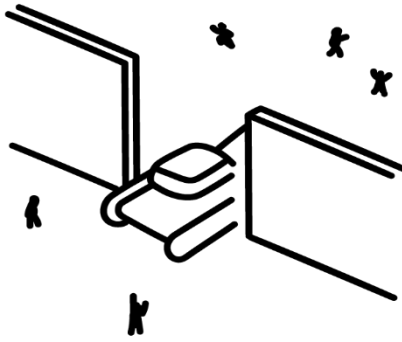
*The Nakba turned what was an intimacy into a cause of shame.*



I like a politics of contamination, a politics that refuses the search for pure origins, that unrepresses mixed histories, impure identities and defiant forms of conviviality. Edward Said, for instance, put it this way in an interview in 2000: « I do not appreciate going back to the origin, to the pure. I believe the major political and intellectual

disasters were caused by reductive movements that tried to simplify and purify. » When the reporter noted that Said sounded very Jewish, Said replied: « Of course. I'm the last Jewish intellectual... All your other Jewish intellectuals are now suburban squires. From Amos Oz to all these people here in America. So I'm the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I'm a Jewish-Palestinian. » Mahmoud Darwish, even as he'd been given the mantle of Palestinian national poet, understood himself to be « also the son of the Jewish civilization that existed in Palestine », and when he imagined a brighter future, these inheritances were complexly intertwined. « The Jew will not be ashamed to find an Arab element within himself, » he said in an interview in 1996, « and the Arab will not be ashamed to incorporate Jewish elements ».

The essay you are reading began as a talk at a teach-in on « The Ongoing Nakba », which took place on 12 October 2023 at the University of Amsterdam, mere days after the Hamas attacks and the start of the war against Gaza. Even a basic historical reminder of the now-impossible figure of the « Arab Jew », and of the « lost » world to which the Arab Jew was central, seemed important. Against the spectacle of obliterated buildings and bloodied corpses, of the rhetorical animalization of Palestinians that emanated from Israel, certain texts rang in the back of my mind, and faintly in my ears. The Lebanese writer Wadad Cortas Makdisi's memoir, for instance, was titled *A World I Loved: The Story of an Arab Woman* (2009), in a poignant past tense. The world she loved was a world of intimacy rather than enmity, in which Muslims, Christians like her, Arabs, Jews and many others lived together across the many cities and towns of Lebanon. All of it was negated by a nation-state's « right to defend itself », all of it therefore became itself insurgent. It felt important — urgent, even — not only to remind those who had gathered that the Nakba had destroyed this life of togetherness in the Levant, but also to pose that intimacy as a transcendent counterpoint to the ever-more-murderous line of distinction between Arab and Jew, between an injured Self (Israel) and its hated, to-be-destroyed Other (Palestinians). How does intimacy take shape, and what form could it be given in a present — an unbearably ongoing present — in which separation, enmity and intractable differences mark not just the political reality but also the imagination?



Of course, like so many « important » utterances then, it also felt depressingly ineffectual. Most western governments lined up behind Israel and its mantra of self-defense, even as many organizations in the international community condemned the collective punishment being meted out to innocent civilians, not only in Gaza. The slaughter and devastation dragged on. The term « genocide » acquired its own paradoxical temporality, becoming, variously, a *cri de cœur*, an accusation, a site of *how-dare-you-mention-it* umbrage (cynical or blind). It is also, of course, a descriptive term — or more precisely an invocation of a descriptive legal category, itself codified in 1948, that names a criminal process, however adequately or inadequately. The millions who took to the world's streets, newly awakened or newly disillusioned, could understand when a criminal threshold was being met. Meanwhile I've clung to certain texts I mentioned in that talk, which now resonate in a different way: not as urgent warnings against hardened identities but as slower provocations, ruminations on the price we have to pay, politically and psychoanalytically, for the things we've forgotten, flattened, reduced. For Darwish, for instance, one of the predicaments of Palestinian poetry was the need to resist reduction to the status of mere « victim of history ». Against that reduction, a poet held out the possibility of « triumph through language ». Darwish likened the work of poetry to being « a fishermen in your language » — which brings us to two fishermen from the past, and their lost language.

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Carved into the pink granite stone of Amsterdam's Homomonument, opened in 1987, are the words *Naar vriendschap zulk een mateloos verlangen*: « To friendship, oh such a limitless longing ». The words are taken from the poem « To a Young Fisherman », by the Dutch poet Jacob Israël de Haan, published posthumously in 1924. The Homomonument is a triangle that juts out into the Herengracht canal in the city center, a stone's throw from the Anne Frank House. It is a ready site for ceremonies: every 1 December there is a memorial for those felled by AIDS; every 4 May, for the homosexual victims of Nazism.

Jacob Israël de Haan, from Zaandam to Palestine



*It is a riveting blasphemy: figuring the Western Wall as a site both for prayer and for sexual sacrilege.*

Jacob Israël de Haan was a Dutch lawyer, born in the town of Smilde in the Netherlands in 1881. He was also a writer, a scholar of Jewish texts, and a human rights activist *avant la lettre*. From Amsterdam, he documented, among other horrors, the violation of prisoners' rights in Tsarist Russia. In 1919, antisemitism in Europe drove him to Palestine with the hope — illfated — of helping establish a humane form of Zionism. Soon after his arrival there, De Haan was repulsed by the

violent repression of the native Arab Muslim population, and he became an ardent anti-Zionist, even as he continued to teach and practice law in Jerusalem.

De Haan was also homosexual, and his poetry reached defiantly and exuberantly across the Arab/Jewish divide. One glimpses it in these lines from the poem

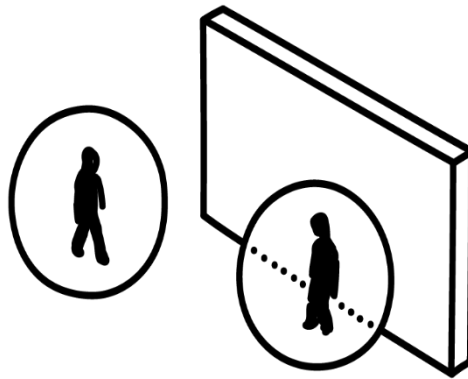
« Doubt », for instance:

*Wat wacht ik in dit avonduur,  
De Stad beslopen door de slaap,  
Gezeten bij den Tempelmuur:  
God of den Marokkaanschen Knaap?*

What is it I await as evening falls,  
The city snuck upon by sleep,  
Sitting near the Western Wall:  
God, or a Moroccan boy?

It is a riveting blasphemy: figuring the Western Wall as a site both for prayer and for sexual sacrilege.

That poem was published in 1924, the year De Haan was shot in Jerusalem. He was killed on the orders of the Zionist group Hagganah, forerunner of what is now the Israeli Defence Force, whose senior leader, Izhak ben-Zvi, would become the second President of Israel. De Haan's desire was, we might say, both political and sexual: it could obey neither the violent dynamic of state formation, nor the holy strictures of the religion he studied.

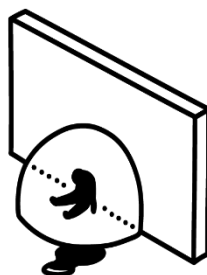


But the circumstances of his assassination demand a finer parsing, particularly the role that his homosexuality did and did not play in it. Through De Haan's time in Palestine, according to the British artist Nathan Witt, « De Haan's sexual activity was well-known to the Zionist Organization and to the British, but it did not add to existing problems they had with him about his political activities because he was an exceptional lawyer ». Nor, for others, did De Haan's homosexuality disqualify him from the respect he earned as a brilliant lawyer. « The Orthodox Jews, local Palestinian communities, and the Jordanians embraced De Haan when he was shunned by both the Zionist and the British administrations. They paid little attention to his sexual proclivities and, to the end, he was fiercely loyal to his rabbi, Chaim Sonnenfeld ». Along with Sonnenfeld, De Haan met with Arab committees in Palestine and beyond to explore alternatives to the violent and exclusionary Zionist transformation of the region. De Haan also met regularly with Palestinian nationalist parties, flouting the lines Zionists has drawn between Jews and Arabs. He openly refused to toe the Zionist line, forging close relations with Arab leaders, including the grand mufti of Jerusalem, Kamil Effendi al-Husayni. « Attacks on his sexuality became a last resort that the Zionists », Witt writes, « decided to use against De Haan » after his meetings with King Husayn of Jordan and his son emir Abdullah.

*a novel not of anti-Zionism per se, but of post-Zionist disillusionment*

It takes a leap of the imagination, today, to think through De Haan's multiple affiliations, confronted as we are by Jew/Arab, self/other distinctions. In ways I have found newly potent now, the psychic and the social, the erotic and the political coalesce in De Haan. He figured an intimate conjoining of political anti-Zionism by a Jew, a deep-seated love of the holy texts of Judaism, and a sexual longing — both acted on and aestheticized — for Arab youth. The Homomonument, certainly, does not register this conjunction of desires, for it does not lend itself to monumentalization.

But it does lend itself to novelization. The German Jewish writer Arnold Zweig, writing to Sigmund Freud in 1932, called De Haan's fate « Israel's first political murder ». De Haan was the inspiration for Zweig's novel *De Vriendt kehrt heim*, published that year. The novel's De Haan figure is Jitschak Jozef de Vriendt (*vriendt* in Dutch means « friend »), a Jewish scholar, lawyer and writer who moves to Palestine from Holland. It is set in 1929, and begins with a British intelligence officer, Lolard B. Irmin, being informed by a spy that De Vriendt's life might be in danger. The espionage plot is well-suited to the powder-keg that Jerusalem was in Mandatory Palestine, and to the complex social and political realities of the region. The novel details De Vriendt's friendship with a young Arab boy, Saud — a relationship both sexual and pedagogical (he teaches Saud the art of writing quatrains; the Arab boy calls the Dutch Jew « the Father of the Book »). And it registers De Haan's (and Zweig's own) distaste for the violent forms of Zionism then gaining hold.



*De Vriendt kehrt heim* is the era's great novel not of anti-Zionism *per se*, but more particularly of post-Zionist disillusionment. That is what a reader today might thrill to,

at a moment when « Zionism » no longer evokes an abstract aspiration but a murderous ideology — the murderousness of which was either essential or eventual. At one point in the novel, at a discussion between Jewish diasporic intellectuals and politicians in Jerusalem, for example, a philosophy teacher named Heinrich Klopfer bitterly observes the hypocrisies and inversions wrought by European Zionism: « we in Europe make pleas for humane treatment in everyday life and politics, while in this land we play the superior race and oppressors? » The novel depicts the grim irony of a political Zionism already absorbing rhetorics of anti-semitism into itself. When De Vriendt's political overtures to « Arab notables » make him seem a traitor to the Zionist cause, a Zionist newspaper dubs him « The Eternal Traitor ». A commonplace in German anti-Semitism — « The Eternal Jew » — thus reappears as a Zionist bludgeon against one of their own.

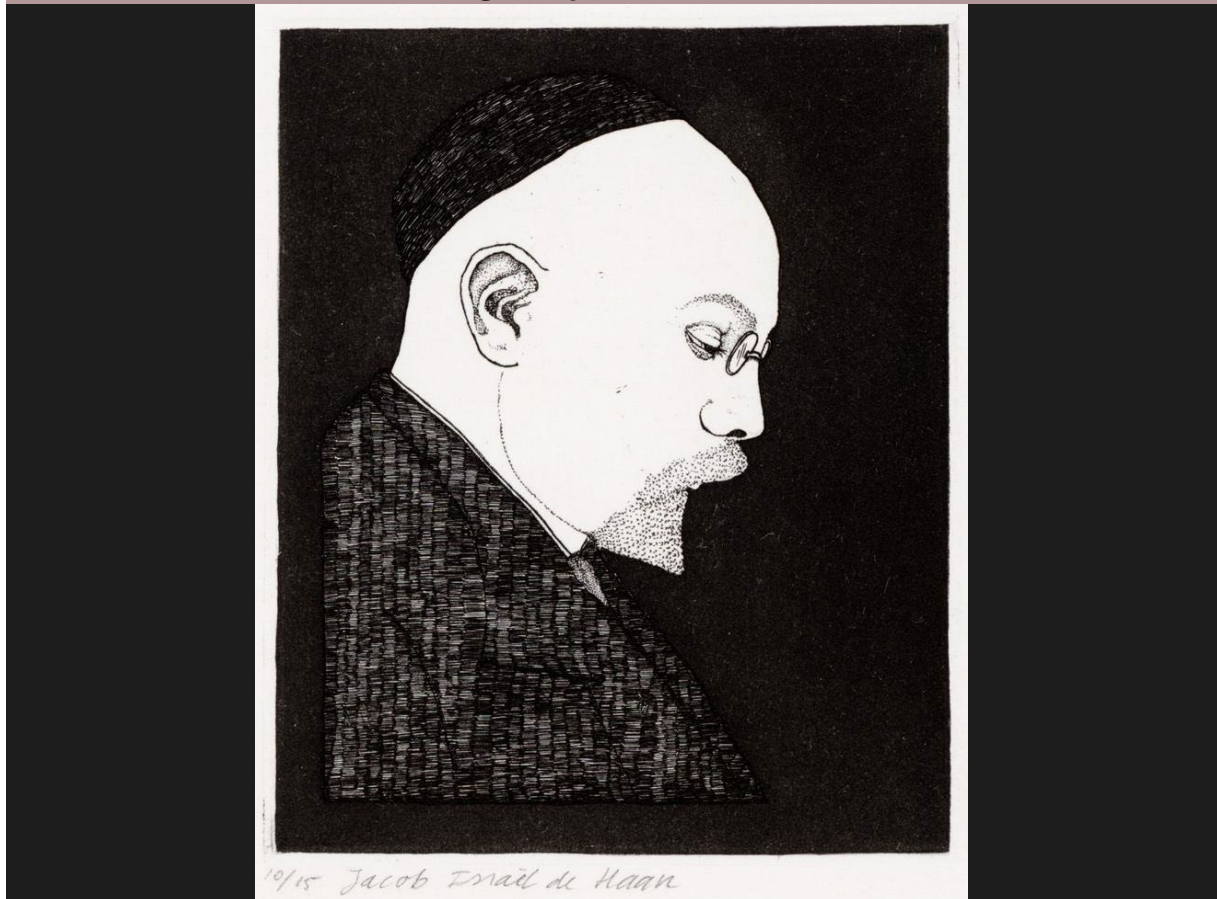
Zweig's own migratory and political trajectory paralleled De Haan's. Zweig, six years younger than De Haan, was born in 1887, to a moderately religious Jewish family in Silesia, Germany. Zweig made his first visit to Palestine in 1932, and returned to Palestine in 1933 with his wife, when the Nazis came to power in Germany. Before his first visit to Palestine, Zweig's relationship to political Zionism was already mixed. While acknowledging the need for a homeland for Jews, he was not an uncritical supporter of Zionism. He sought, as Laurel Plapp has put it, « a peaceful coalition between Arabs and Jews ». Zweig's book *Das neue Kanaan* (1924) was a « call for a socialist and ethical Zionism that would protect the Arabs and transform the economic system to benefit the *fellahin* [Arab farmers] ». Deborah Vietor-Engländer explains further that « although he came to Palestine as a Zionist he was deeply disappointed » and his « belief in a future bi-national state with Arabs did not make him popular ». Instead, his increasing isolation caused him to « turn to anti-Zionist communists as friends ». The revelation in 1932 that De Haan was murdered by a Zionist came as a bombshell to Zweig, who was in Palestine then, forcing him to rethink profoundly the novel he was already working on.



In an afterword to the Dutch translation of the novel in 1933, Zweig hedged the directness of the link between the real De Haan and the fictional De Vriendt: « When I paint De Vriendt, I do not mean Jacob Israël de Haan .... I have only drawn from his shadow which I have fed with my own blood and spirit ». The real De Haan he characterized as « *too* courageous ». The novel, he hoped, would « contribute to a more just evaluation of such divided spirits, including among their political opponents ». The dividedness of spirit he found in De Haan had clear personal resonances for him — as did a dividedness of psyche. Zweig had familiarized himself already in the 1920s with psychoanalytical theories, began corresponding with Freud and underwent psychoanalysis in Haifa when he moved to Palestine. After returning from his first trip to Palestine in 1932, Zweig wrote to Freud from Germany: « The figure of this Orthodox Jew who ‘reviled God in Jerusalem’ in clandestine poems and who had a love affair with Arab boys — this important and complex character gripped my imagination while the blood was still not dry in the whole affair. It compelled me. » That the homosexual, heretical, Jewish anti-Zionist Dutchman « compelled » Zweig is not surprising; it had direct consequences for Zweig’s own self-perception, where disappointment with Zionism as a European Jew was intrinsically coupled with disturbing feelings about his own sexuality. In another letter to Freud, in 1932, Zweig confessed that « the homosexual component in this book, which I am dictating with special distaste and with especially great concentration, challenged me right away to self-analysis. » Writing the novel mixed the political and the sexual in ways that surprised the author himself. Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents*, it is worth noting, appeared in 1929, the

same year Zweig set the events of *De Vriendt kehrt heim*, and the novel channels a psychoanalytic epiphany. Zweig tells Freud that in writing the novel and channeling De Haan (« distaste » notwithstanding), « I was both, the Arab (semitic) boy and the impious-Orthodox lover and writer. I am afraid that the removal of these repressions is the main cause of my depression. » It is a remarkable formulation. According to Zweig's self-diagnosis, the lifting of repression *produced* depression rather than rid him *of* it, as one would expect. The sexual deviance — the Arab and the Jew — was something Zweig both pushes away and yet is forced to avow. Zweig himself, in his own moment, found it impossible to escape this convoluted psychic state, in which depression and distaste were the only options. But a novel escapes its author, and to read it now, fortunately, is to realize that these aren't the only options available for us.

Jacob Israël de Haan from two angles, by Peter Yvon de Vries



The novel sets two poetic denouements around De Vriendt's grave on the Mount of Olives. The young Saud, avoiding the cemetery's main entrance, climbs over the cemetery wall on the other side. He utters the traditional Islamic prayers in Arabic —

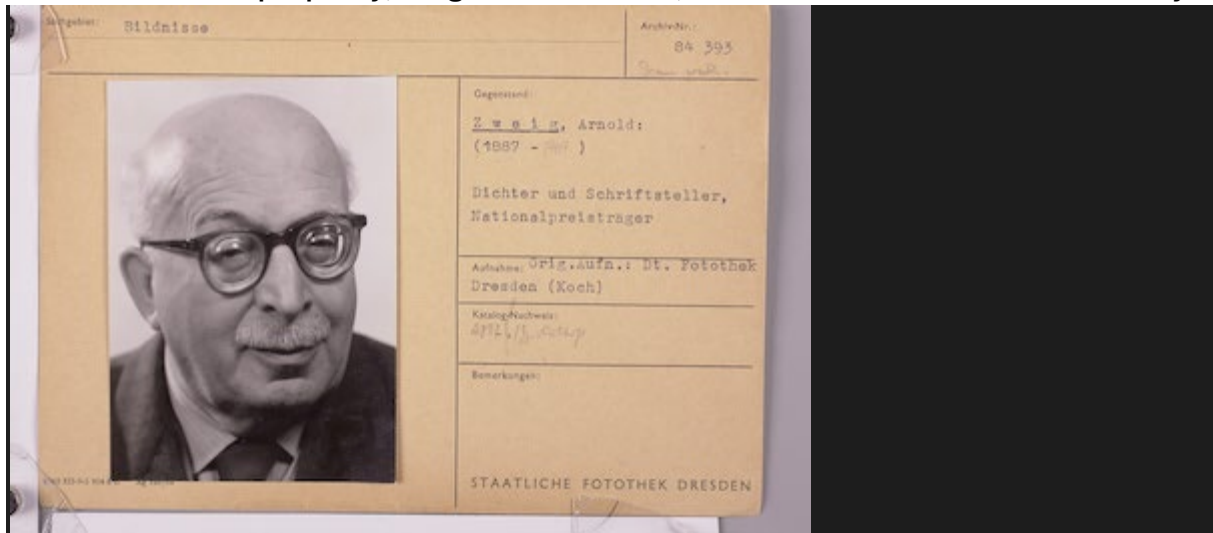


« *suras* from the Koran wherein the Merciful is praised » — before writing on the still-fresh gravestone the Arabic words « *Abu al-kitab* » (Father of the Book). Saud then, in the Jewish custom, places stones on the grave. The scene is rendered without contradictions, without surprise or « distaste ». The mixed languages, scripts and rituals follow one another smoothly: an intimacy without shame.

The other denouement is a gesture — itself powerfully mixed — from the grave itself. Toward the end of the novel, after De Vriendt has been buried, Zweig narrates a storm: « And suddenly the rain gushes down, the first rain of the year, and it hurtles down like an element that explodes and cannot be stopped. » As the rain falls over « the minarets, church towers and slopes of Jerusalem, that the Arabs call Al-Quds, » children « run out half naked. ‘Rain!’ they cheer out in different languages of the land. ‘*Gesjem*’ it sounds out in Hebrew, ‘*mata*’ out of Arab mouths. The ground greedily sucks down the rain. » The reader, too, revels in the multilingual idyll. The rain penetrates down to the body of De Vriendt: « It forces through to the corpse in his grave, washes his bones. The skull laughs. » The laughter is ambiguous. Is it a laughter of vindication? A vindication, that is, of the intimate relationality between Arab and Jew that De Haan lived, now preserved in the novel? Or is it the bitter laughter of dashed hopes? How bitter, in any case, to pair Zweig’s first rain of a new year — an explosive rain — with the raining bombs that have filled the air in Gaza and that fill our screens here. The distance is enormous.



As Irmin heard the young Arab boy weep after the murder of De Vriendt, he thinks « Love is love, the rest is nonsense and prudishness. » Irmin’s intimacy with De Vriendt, his friend, is the vessel through which Zweig articulates his own relationship to De Haan. In that glimpse of Irmin’s interior, Zweig’s « depression » is converted into an unashamed affirmation that « love is love »: a defiant tautology, escaping all bounds of sexual propriety, religious difference, national exclusion or ethnic enmity.



We might call it *mateloos*. The word « mateloos », from De Haan’s ode to a young fisherman, is usually translated as « limitless ». But *maat* means « size »: *sizeless* is truer to the term, or measureless. How do you measure the size of longing — for the wrong sex, for the wrong culture, for the wrong form of being together — when it is disallowed, not allowed to exist? De Haan offers a longing that is, in this sense, without measure. It is a mad desire, moving in all directions.

Zweig would return to Palestine as antisemitism took hold in his native Germany. He lived there from 1933 to 1948, as an exile. His disillusionment only grew. He returned to Europe in 1948, settling in East Germany, where he died in 1968, in divided Berlin — a Palestinian living among us.

By  
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EXPLORE THE ERB

