I. Extent and Directions

The extent to which Italy appears in modern Hebrew literature is astounding. The number of authors who have written about Italy is so great that it seems there is not one author, and certainly not one poet, who has not written about it. Many poets have devoted considerable bodies of poetry to it. In prose too, many plots take place in Italy, and it is referred to in very many stories and novels. Its impression is also considerable in plays.

The present article should be seen as an initial survey, aimed at discovering the extent, dimensions, directions and character of this phenomenon. Later stages of study should include in-depth examination of ways in which Italy is described in the works of each individual writer, with the aim of discovering whether underlying laws characterizing these can be formulated.

In this initial stage, which is necessary partial and not comprehensive, I have arrived at a list of 60 writers, which includes 42 poets, 27 authors of narrative, 5 dramas, 6 travel diaries. Of these, I have examined more than half.

I have no doubt that far greater numbers are involved, on the principle that there is hardly a single writer, poet, narrator, dramatist or essayist without an “Italian Connection” in his work.

This picture will detail the place of Italy in our national consciousness and, correspondingly, the attitude of our literature to Italy, the most frequent topics in descriptions of Italy in poetry and prose, the modes and orientations of these descriptions, and their literary functions in their interactions with the other components of Hebrew literature.

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In this context it is worth noting that Venice has a special place in these descriptions, first of all in terms of quantity, but also in terms of the artistic functions – symbolic and realistic – that it fulfils. This is definitely a topic in itself – Venice in modern Hebrew literature – within our more general topic.

The history of Italy is linked with the history of the Jewish people throughout all its principal stages. Hence it is only natural that Italy is so prominent in the historical consciousness of writer and reader alike.

The Jewish people has “Historical accountings” with almost every nation and state, and with Italy in particular. Generally, these “accountings” are bitter ones. Fortunately, however, these are also intermixed with periods of light, in which Italy has played a positive role.

In the limited framework of the present survey, I will present one example only of each of the different directions taken by authors who have written about Italy. Of course, as usual in such differentiations, it must be remembered that the classification is not univocal, and that many works appear under more than one heading.

1. Rome – the Traditional Historical Enemy (Rome = Edom)

Rome is not only the capital of Italy, not only the name of the Empire, and even not only the conqueror and destroyer of the Kingdom of Israel and of the Temple. It has also become a synonym for the strong and the numerous who set out to trample down the few and the weak. This trampling down is total, down to the dust – they destroy, burn, enslave, exile, plunder and humiliate. The symbols of this role as fulfilled by Rome are: the Arch of Titus, the sacred implements from the Temple, the triumphal procession through the streets of Rome, the sale of Israelite youths and maidens into slavery and servitude, and more.

Rome is the enemy of the Jewish people, a model of all those who would appear afterwards, and a reminder of the situation of the Jewish people, like a sheep among wolves, weak among the strong.

It is enough to speak the word “Rome” and at once all these associations arise almost automatically. The connection is strong and immediate and almost requires no further reinforcements.

But Rome is also reminder and evidence of the fact that the victory of the strong is brief and transient, and is thus an instantiation of the eternity and survival of the Jewish people despite all that is done to it. For the Roman Empire expired and passed away from the world, while the Jewish people has survived and continued to exist.
Any historical place or name inevitably evokes the past and invites comparison with the present. Hence, any description of Rome, whether it relates to the past or the present, implicitly incorporates this long and complex historical “accounting” that the Jewish people has with this great power. This is a collective-national “accounting”, but also a private-personal one made by every Israeli and every Jew. It is part of the collective memory of the nation and the individual.

The first group of relatings to Italy – and this is the strongest and most dominant one – is that of relating to *Italy as Imperial Rome*, with all the historical “accountings” of the past seeping into the present in different ways. This is a historical relating that has become mythical in nature – a permanent present.

Example:

*Yaacov Cahan:* “The Duomo at Milan” (1927).

This is one of the first “tour” poems by a Jew visiting Italy, overwhelmed by the architectural splendors before him, with a chaos of feelings in his heart.

The poet does not let himself be seduced by the beauty around him, because “I remember well all their crimes and wickedness against me”. Although “their souls have passed away long ago”, “still every stone preserves their enmity to me”.

But the Duomo at Milan is different. This he does not “pass”, as he does all the other edifices. Here he “stops”:

This pyramid of towers striving upwards
[...]
Here is a fair enemy, worthy of hatred!

The speaker comes here in order to hate, to know the enemy from close at hand.

And in another poem, “Before the Arch of Titus” (first published in *Davar*, 21. 5. 1942), the “motto” already indicates the spirit in which the poem is written: “In memory of Shlomo Molcho, when he first stood before the Arch of Titus in Rome”.

The speaker did not want to stand before the arch, but arrived there unintentionally: “And suddenly I was stood / Before the enemy”.

His feelings: True, “you burned my Temple”, “but you did not vanquish my soul”; the shame is yours forever, “and you could not withstand me”; “and the victory – the final victory / Is mine!”

Writers who have written on this subject: Y.L. Gordon, Zalman
Schneour, Shaul Tschernikovsky, Yaacov Cahan, Yaacov Fichman, Yeshurun Keshet, Avigdor Hameiri, Esther Raab, Dov Chomsky, Aharon Megged, Yehuda Amichai, Moshe Dor, Aryeh Sivan, Asher Reich.

2. Christianity vis–a–vis Judaism

Italy is the center of Roman Catholic Christianity. In Italy Christianity first took root, in Italy it grew strong, and from Italy it set out to conquer the world for Christianity, to persecute all who would not surrender to it, especially the Jews. In Italy the supreme institutions and supreme representatives of this Christianity are based, and they have a long and generally very bitter historical “accounting” with Judaism and the Jews. They are responsible for the religious persecutions, the blood-libels, the many theological disputes, and the permission to shed Jewish blood throughout the entire Christian world. For generations on end they continued educating their believers on the tenet that it was the Jews who killed Jesus.

A second group of relations, then, is that of relating to Italy as the center of Christianity, to the long and painful historical accounting which Jews and Judaism in particular have with Christianity and its representatives.

Example:
Aharon Megged: The Bat (1975).

This is one of the distinctively “Italian” works, which unites most of the dominant directions in descriptions of Italy in Hebrew literature. The hero, who is an embodiment of extremism and fanaticism, is obsessed with the idea of the reinstatement of the monarchy of Israel, and for this purpose he tries to create an alliance between Rome and Jerusalem. He finishes up converting to Christianity, and tries to achieve his goal by means of a “redemption through the sewers”, or of “fulfilling a commandment by means of a transgression”.

The book contains a warning against Israeli fascist ideas, the sanctification of the pistol in the service of the Kingdom of Israel, which began to spread after the 1967 war. And the “natural” ally for this perversion and decay of the vision is found in Fascist-Catholic Italy. The hero’s blind uncompromising love makes common cause with Fascism and Christianity and Jesuit hypocrisy. A Jew in the gown of a Jesuit monk; the contact between love and hate; sacredness and abomination; nationality and nationalism.

Among other things, comparison is made between Dante’s 4 levels of exegesis and the 4 levels of the “Pardess” by which the
Torah is studied. There also appears the figure of Alfonso Donatelli, an Italian teacher sent to Eretz-Israel by the Italian government, who to his pupils becomes a model of patriotic love of the homeland, from which it is only a short step to fanatical nationalism.

The hero sees himself as a reincarnation of David Reuveni, and in the course of his attempts to make contact with the Fascist Supreme Council he meets a priest in the monastery of Beit-Jimel, south of Har-Tuv. In their conversation, the Jewish-Christian accounting is conducted:

You Jews, you have made two mistakes: one, that you denied the Messiah, the second, that you rebelled against Rome. If you hadn't denied the Messiah, Judaism would have been the religion of the world. If you hadn't rebelled against Rome, the Temple would still be standing and you wouldn't have been exiled from your land.

Writers who have written on this subject: Yaacov Cahan, Yaacov Fichman, Yeshurun Keshet, A.A. Kabak, Leah Goldberg, Aharon Megged, Natan Yonatan, Aharon Appelfeld, Dudu Barak.

3. A Historical Way-Station

Italy has played a certain role in recent Jewish history, during the First World War too but especially during the Second World War and before the establishment of the State of Israel.

Italy was where the soldiers of the Eretz-Israeli Jewish Brigade stopped, passed through, and also fought. It was in Italy that the refugees from the Holocaust assembled before setting out for Eretz-Israel. Emissaries arranging immigration, and representatives of Eretz-Israeli institutions frequently came and went, and Italy became a center of extensive activities and struggle for the establishment of the Jewish state.

It was a place where many private individuals helped in migration arrangements, arms acquisition and smuggling, and due to them Italy gained a positive image and a respected place in the history of Israel. The Jewish people, with its long-range historical account-keeping, knows how to remember its enemies, but also its friends.

This group of relatings, relating to Italy as fulfilling a historical role in the recent past, is expressed mainly by writers who themselves experienced a stay there, whether as refugees (Appelfeld) or as Hebrew soldiers in the British Army (Zvi Barmeir, Hanoch Bartov).

Example:

In this section we have a rare opportunity of examining this direction from two contrasting and complementary angles: that of Aharon Appelfeld, who stayed as a refugee, a survivor of the
Holocaust, in one of the camps established in Italy, near Naples, until it was possible to sail for Eretz-Israel, in 1946; and that of Hanoeh Bartov, who arrived in Italy as a soldier in the Jewish Brigade shortly before the end of the war, and witnessed the release of survivors from the concentration camps and the assembling of many of them in camps in Italy until they could continue on to Eretz-Israel.

To this period Aharon Appelfeld devoted his book *Burnings of Light* (1980), and before that, the stories “By the Shore” (*Smoke*, 1969); “The Convoy”; “Enrico’s Voyages”; “In the Southern Sun” (*In the Fertile Vale*, 1964); “Hannukah 1946” (*Banks of the River*, 1971); “1946” (*Years and Hours*, 1975).

Hanoeh Bartov wrote his novel *Growing Pains*, (1965) about this period. Here, the soldiers of the Brigade confront their Jewish identity on Italian soil. Until then they thought that they were only Eretz-Israelis, and suddenly they discover their Jewish heritage and their links with the Jewish people, with all the intensity and horror these involve. It turns out that Jewish morality is imprinted far deeper within them than they thought, and they are incapable of simple, barbaric and spontaneous vengeance. They find that their family connection with the surviving remnant is part of their personality and identity, as is also their sense of mutual Jewish responsibility.

The soil of Italy, which served as a base for the Jewish Brigade in the reality of World War II, serves as an ideal background for this discovery, because here memories of the destruction of the people in the past blend with the destruction in the present. The Hebrew soldiers’ attempts to be no more than tourists in Venice do not succeed, for their past and their identity accompany them everywhere.

The description of a refugee transition camp is presented from the point of view of the Hebrew soldier, and it is not by chance that at this place Bartov mentions the story, “A Governor in Judea”, which recalls the figure of Pontius Pilate:

I don’t know what this place at the foot of the mountain had been used for before it was made a home for migrants. Perhaps a sawmill, or a small labor camp. There was one double-storied building there, and a number of long, black huts, like those of the Germans. Between the building and the huts a kind of square had been bounded which now bustled with many people. (p. 134)

These had already equipped themselves, in one of the camps they had come from, with American whiskey. Now they ran and brought a bottle and passed it from mouth to mouth, accompanying each sip with cries of “Le-chaim!” and with words of benediction and vision, handshakes and kisses in the Russian manner. (p. 137)
Bartov describes the transit camp near the Austrian border where he first met the child-survivors in 1946, but does not dare “after all these years” to tell “what those laughing boys revealed to me on that green and chilly June day in the Italian Alps. They laughed while they told it, and I became smaller and smaller and the words scratched my body like rusty nails”. (p. 142).

Appelfeld:

It seems that only now can one survey the area: it was a desolate stretch of land, where during the war the Italian army had erected a temporary camp. After the war the place had been abandoned. A few old jeeps, training bars, and lots of old helmets scattered on the ground – evidence of life here before the defeat. The sand and the salts from the sea completed the destruction during the months of neglect. There remained only the huts, they too perforated and cracked. (“1946”, ‘Years and Hours’, p. 111).

The many children, because of their adult expressions, looked like dwarfs. [...] There were lots of children there, nimble children, faithful servants of all kinds of men and women. Their little hands snatched anything that came to hand: chocolate and lire. (‘Burnings of Light’, p. 16).

More on this subject of recent historical accountings with Italy, both positive and negative, has been written by: Y.L. Gordon, Avigdor Hameiri, Natan Alterman, Hanoch Bartov, Aharon Appelfeld and Dan Ben-Amotz.

Especially well known is a poem by Natan Alterman, “Speech of Response to an Italian Ship’s Captain After a Night of Disembarkment”, which appeared in the poet’s series “The Seventh Column” in Davar, (15. 1. 1946). The ship’s captain’s name was Ansaldo, and his ship was the illegal-immigrant vessel “Hannah Senesh”. The poem became a popular song which was often recited at festive occasions, and perhaps more than any other work it contributed to the positive image of Italy in Israeli eyes.

4. The Cradle of the Renaissance

Italy is also the birthplace of the Renaissance, of the positing of man at the center and the liberation from the chains of religion and faith and from the omnipotent dominion of God. In Italy, science, free thinking, and the universities developed. A literature in the vernacular flourished there, and new literary genres developed. In Italy, great writers created a great literature that has been a model for all humans. The greatest painters, sculptors and architects in the world worked there, and their works have aroused wonder and emulation and have inspired human beings everywhere ever since.
Raphael, Michelangelo, Leonardo, Dante, Petrarch – to mention only five of the most famous – are the great names.

The Jewish commandment of “Thou shalt not make unto thyself any statue or any picture” [the literal translation of what the King James translation renders as “any graven image or any likeness”] confronts the abundance of mighty sculptures that astound the viewer, together with the paintings, buildings and all the other colossal monuments.

Every Jew who gazes at all this, willingly or unwillingly makes a comparison between the two cultures, and of course stands astounded at what his eyes see. This experience finds extensive expression in the literature.

Here the attitude is almost always not only positive, but also enthusiastic, grateful for the powerful aesthetic and emotional experience, and for the admired source of influence.

This is accompanied by gratitude to the country of Italy, not only for the beauty it has given the world, but also for the freedom and the absence of discrimination which Jews have found there during long periods, and in modern times. When, for example, the gates of other universities in Europe were closed to them, Italian universities accepted them, especially in the field of medicine.

A third group of relations to Italy, then, will be relating to *Italy as center of art, literature and science*, generally with great admiration and gratitude.

Example:

Here Shelley wrote the Ode to the West Wind.
The Arno was certainly shallow as
today in the midst of summer,
creased from the tangles of Dante’s dreams, the convolutions
of Galilei’s calculations.
Benvenuto Cellini looks down from above Ponte Vecchio to the rods-of-twilight-
which-do-not-pull-up-anything-
Shelley went off to the hunt for a parchment of
Petrarch’s in which each letter is sprayed
with tips of blue, of scarlet, –
and the wind hit him.
On cornices of churches the doves have positioned themselves
devotedly, not to move.
They too are afraid of the night.
Perhaps of the wind.

And before Shelley came Yehuda Halevy who adressed the
Western Wind in metered vowels
for he had touched mountains of sanctity and there he rested
and here just recently Yaacov Fichman too
(who today is almost forgotten)
got drunk on the effluence
of coolness and softness in the Western Wind –
and now the man says to himself:
Arise, O Wind,
fling on to a first rain that is beyond here
and there too you won’t rest.

The wind is literally a wind, but is also the Western spirit, the
spirit of Europe and the human spirit in general.

Florence is the place of inspiration for generations of poets, who
have erected upon it an edifice of spirit in which each generation
builds a tier upon that built by the preceding generation.

Within this literary edifice of spirit, Hebrew writers have a part:
Yehuda Halevi, Yaakov Fichman, K.A. Bertini.
The human spirit is not soothing and soporific, but flings man
about and gives him no rest.

Florence is the source of inspiration for the tension between the
desire to rest and the necessity to keep on moving.

Writers who have written on this topic: Yaacov Fichman, Sh.
Shalom, Leah Goldberg, Yeshurun Keshet, Ezra Zussmann, K.A.
Bertini, Binyamin Tammuz, Natan Yonatan, Aryeh Sivan, Natan
Zach, Uri Shoham, Yotam Reuveni, Moshe Ben-Shaul, Dudu
Barak.

5. Landscape and Tourism

Italy as a world tourist center, for Jews and Israelis too. The
emphasis will be on landscapes, sights, places. Attention will be
focussed on the wonders of nature: sea, mountains, islands, water,
volcanoes (Vesuvius, Pompeii). Of course, also on historical places
which have preserved their form and their art treasures from earlier
periods. The special atmosphere with its blend of old and new, or
preservation of the old alone – “where time stands frozen” – these
are what attract the attention of the Jewish tourist. Within this, a
focus on Jewish traces in this country – ghetto, synagogue, Jewish
community, Hebrew manuscripts, and the like. Also, the Medi terrane-
nean character of the lifestyle (residences, foods, entertainment) and
of the people, have attracted attention too, especially of late.

All this from the casual observations of the tourist, not from the
deep study and thorough knowledge of the scholar.
The tourist has a grater or lesser acquaintance with the history,
and takes it into account, but does not let it spoil or bermurk the atmosphere or his wonderment at what his eyes behold.

This tourism can be superficial, casual, enjoyment-seeking and momentary, but it can also be profound, admiring, delighting in this close personal acquaintance, a profound identification and acceptance of influence.

This group of relatings will emphasize, primarily, the external sights, in wonderment and enjoyment, with the historical accountings and lessons pushed to the margins or disappearing entirely.

Examples:
A. Landscape.
   Israel Efrat “Generations” (Poems II, 1966)
   The poem “Vesuvius” (1934)

Here the genesis lurks underground
Here you’ll yet see the before-world.

Vesuvius represents the world before it was created, the time when all was uniform, the “burning uniformity” before materials became differentiated from each other.

Vesuvius symbolizes the “fiery lion” which does not “bow before Fate”, the primeval demonic struggle which has not ended but has only gone underground where it awaits the right moment to burst forth.

Vesuvius symbolizes man’s possibility of peeping for a moment into the inferno that is opening up before him inside the earth.

At Vesuvius one can see the “fiery curl” of the primeval beast that sprawls below.

There is a connection to the “fiery lion” from Bialik’s “The Scroll of Fire” in Efrat’s formulation: the eternal war is within nature, and this is a sign that the war has not been won and perhaps never will be.

Writers who have written on this topic: Zalman Schneour, Yaacov Cahan, Yaacov Fichman, Israel Efrat, Dov Chomsky, Yehuda Amichai, Uri Shoham.

B. Tourism

There is an abundance of verse and prose descriptions of the Israeli tourist experience in Italy, and most of them are serious and exalted, full of wonder and admiration for the art treasures revealed before them. But it may be more instructive here to adduce a touristic description of a different kind: the humoresques of Ephraim
Kishon, who has devoted at least 4 feuilletons to his visits to Italy: “The Italian Liquidation”, which describes the techniques and injurious effects of the strike in Italy; “Arrivederci Roma”, which describes the inflated Italian bureaucracy, and how the discount he was given as a journalist cost him a lot of time wasted, additional expenses, and spoiled the pleasure of the trip. (Both are from Eights in the Air, 1966).

The humoresque, “Vacation in Rome” (A Smile in the Drought, 1978) describes disorder at the air terminal in Rome, a taxi strike at the airport, exorbitant prices, the non-honoring of a hotel reservation, difficulties in telephoning to Israel, ignorance of languages.

And the fourth, “The War of the Gondolas” (A Bone in the Throat, 1967), as its name indicates, describes the cheating of the Venetian gondoliers, who charge the tourists exorbitant fares, exploit their lack of orientation and their distress at the fact that there are no motor boats to be rented and at the great disparity between the official fare, which no-one regards, and the fare actually demanded from the tourist.

It is all very funny when the setting is Italy, but somehow a needling thought steals in that perhaps what is meant is not only Italy, but Israel too, and perhaps – only Israel?

“The War of the Gondolas”
Contrary to irresponsible lip-propaganda, not every tourist licks honey in Venice. To be truthful, it’s a bit hard to manage in this corner of beautiful Italy. You step out of the railway station, and if you’re not careful you already fall into the water. For this ancient city, as everyone knows, was built on the sea, and instead of streets only canals were paved in it (to prevent road accidents). When we came out of the station we had the shocking impression that we were in Jaffa during a flood. So we asked someone in the tourist office how we would now get to our hotel destination, considering the fact that our little wife was not a good swimmer?

– Take a taxi – the clerk suggested – In front of the station there are many motor-boats. But make sure – the man added – that you don’t take a gondola, because they’re very expensive...

We replied with a manly “Sure” and went out with the luggage. Along the entire pier we didn’t see a single motor-boat, only gondolas in their myriads, their oarsmen standing serene in their bows, dressed in the blue-striped shirts and with the traditional avarice in their eyes. We thought “Ah” and called to the first gondola. An old man with a stick helped us sit down in it in return for 100 lire, while a good-hearted young man put our suitcase by our feet for 200. A third said “Go” for 50...

The sequel is as expected: the journey takes an hour and a half instead of quarter of an hour and the price is 2000 lire instead of the official price of 800. On the last day before the journey home, when the tourists are hurrying so as not to miss their flight, the morot-boat that was ordered well in advance doesn’t arrive, and the price of a gondola reaches 3000 lire.

Writers who have written seriously and with emotion about the
experience of visiting Italy: Yaakov Fichman, Yeshurun Keshet, Sh. Shalom, Leah Goldberg, Hanoch Bartov, Yehuda Amichai, Natan Yonatan, Ephraim Kishon, Natan Zach.

6. Fascism

About Italy as the origin of the inspiration of fascism, dictatorship, and death, the following writers have written: Yaakov Fichman, Avigdor Hameiri, Dov Chomsky, Natan Alterman, Aharon Megged, Ida Tzurit, Moshe Dor, Yaakov Horowitz, Natan Zach.

The example, from Natan Alterman’s poem “Mussolini Opens the Last Cabinet Session”, from The Seventh Column (first published in Davar, 9. 4. 1943), is particularly, forthright, being written without distance, at the time of the events. As the title indicates, this is Mussolini’s speech at the Cabinet Session [in the original, the lines are all in iambic and anapestic tetrameter, alternate lines rhyming]:

I have spoken to say: War, it is splendor!
Burning is a dream, bombing is poetry!
Now poesy itself returns to us,
To prove that this is not a mistake.

“Now”: at this time, Italy is lamenting its fallen, Milan is burning, and the nation will decide to hang its leaders from the same balcony from which they had previously listened to their speeches.

David Grossman sees Italy as the place where the hero of his Smile of the Kid attains a love of humanity, when he goes out to Santa Anarella to help in villages that have been badly damaged in an earthquake.

II. The Jewish Aspect – Conclusion

As a general conclusion of the picture revealed by this initial survey, one can say that there are places, characters, sites and events, with regard to which Hebrew writers have followed writers of other nations, and there are places, characters, sites and events which have special meaning in Jewish history, ancient and recent.

But even those Italian places which have become the property of all European culture often receive an additional, Jewish, dimension when described by Hebrew authors, very few of whom are free of a Jewish perspective and its historical accountings.

Cities which have been described most frequently in Hebrew literature: Rome, Venice, and Florence.

Naples too, and Bologna, and of course the Vatican have been mentioned not a little.
Trieste, which for many years served as a port of departure from Europe to Eretz-Israel, also has a special place in Hebrew literature (Yeshurun Keshet, Yehuda Amichai, Ezra Zussman).

Writers: Virgil, Dante and Petrarch; but also Machiavelli (Yeshurun Keshet), and Axel Munthe (Aryeh Sivan).
Caesars: Julius Caesar, Titus, and Nero.
But also Marcus Aurelius (Moshe Dor).

Jewish characters: Josephus, Herod, David Alroi and Shlomo Molcho, whose lives and fates were connected with Italy and her rulers.

Places: the Arch of Titus, the Colosseum, the Duomos of Florence and Milan, the Piazza San Marco and the pigeons in Venice, the Tiber and the Arno rivers.

Descriptions of the Roman mob, and of the matrons delighting in the combat in the arena, also have a special place.

The Mediterranean landscape also links Italy to the Eretz-Israeli landscape, and is not infrequently mentioned in poems.

The figure of Marco Polo, who has become a symbol of the great traveler, the great seeker, the man who does not rest in his place and aspires to discover the world, also has a special place. Moshe Ben-Shaul, in his poetry, has turned him into his own “alter ego”, in the figure of Adam Polo, and the figure also occurs in the poetry of Ezra Zussman and Moshe Dor.

Apart from these places, which are no-one’s unique possession, every poet has places, cities, painters, sculptors, pictures, authors and works that he particularly likes, which he contemplates again and again, and from which he learns about the world and about himself. This is a long and distinguished list, especially in those artists who have spent long periods in Italy, who have studied there and have gained a close acquaintance with its culture.

For example: Yeshurun Keshet, who wrote many essays about the great artists of Italy, and devoted several chapters to Italy in his book of memoirs, Eastward and Seaward (1980), where he described Italy in 1920–1921, the time when he studied art history there; or Yaacov Fichman, who described Rome and Florence in poetic prose, writing also of the poets and artists close to his heart.

Natan Zach devoted an entire book of poems to Italy (In Place of a Dream. First Italian Notebook), and Ezra Zussman, Dov Chomsky, Sh. Shalom, K.A. Bertini, Dudu Barak, Dan Tzalka and many others have devoted poem-cycles or series of poems to Italy.

In the poetry, Shin Shalom mentions Giorgione; Natan Yonatan relates to the Pietà; Leah Goldberg, to the composer Giovanni
Paisiello; Moshe Dor, to Paolo Uccello; Uri Shoham, to Berlioz; Yotam Reuveni, to the poet and director Pier Paolo Pasolini; Dudu Barak, to the Bellini family of painters; Ezra Zussman, to the artists Donatello and Tintoretto.

Many poems were inspired by contemplation of a painting, some more famous, some less. Among these, paintings of the Hebrew Prophets have a prominent place, and the “Jewish perspective” is not absent.

A special place belongs to Edmondo De Amicis’ book *The Heart*. Since it was first translated into Hebrew in 1923, and three times more after that, it has been part of the childhood of almost everyone who grew up in Eretz-Israel, and has become part of their memories and a source for emulation and identification. This is one of the books that has had the greatest influence on generations of children in this country, as a model of love of the motherland and of the willingness to sacrifice oneself for her. Only in recent years have critical voices been raised against its romantic emotionalism, and the danger of a slide from nationhood to nationalism.

This book is mentioned in many works, e.g.: Aharon Megged’s *The Bat*, whose patriot hero becomes an extreme nationalist, and David Grossman’s *Smile of the Kid*, which centers on the argument about love of the nation and love of humanity.

Hebrew writers have followed writers of other countries who visited Italy, were filled with admiration, wrote extensively about it, compared what they saw to the places they came from (especially the comparison between north and south), set the plots of their works in Italian cities, wrote their impressions in travel-books, memoirs, and poems dedicated to Italy.

Here I will mention only the most famous:

Shakespeare, who chose Italy as the setting for some of his plays, like the eternal *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*; Goethe, who spent several years in Italy and wrote his impressions of it, making comparisons between the north and the south; Heine, who wrote many poems about Italian cities, as in his *Florentine Nights* (Uri Shoham); Shelley, who wrote the “Ode to the West Wind” in Florence (Bertini); and Thomas Mann, whose *Death in Venice* has been very influential.

All these and many others have inspired and served as models for emulation for writers all over the world, and for Hebrew writers too. Sometimes these sources of influence are referred to explicitly, sometimes they are only hinted at, and sometimes they exist consciously or unconsciously, as part of the world of culture within which all artists function.
Another sphere of influence and emulation which originates in Italy is the purely literary one. Italy has given the world the sonnet, the terza rima form, and the stanza. These forms have served as a challenge for writers in all languages, and for Hebrew writers too. Hence, whoever writes a sonnet in Hebrew, on any subject whatever, takes upon himself, by his very use of this strict and demanding literary genre, the yoke of a form which originates in Italy, and in this too he is inevitably influenced though his desire be innovative.

III. The General Image of the Place

The general image of Italy is marked with the seal of antitheses.

1. Rome

Rome is the place of the Empire which destroyed the Jewish homeland and Temple, but is also the place from which the Messiah will come: he sits in the gates of the city of Rome, among the poor and the diseased (The Book of Aggadah; Yaacov Fichman: “Molcho on the Tiber”).

The Rome that destroyed the Jewish homeland has passed from the world, and of its grandeur only traces remain, while the Jewish people continues to exist.

This is a victory of the spirit over matter (Moshe Dor), of the weak over the strong, the few over the many.

Rome is voluntary exile with all the pleasures of life that it offers, in contrast to the poor and austere Eretz-Israel. A Jew who lives in Rome of his own free will and basks in its pleasures yearns for his poor homeland. The antitheses: abundance vs. desolation; amusements vs. paucity; splendor vs. aridity; but love of the homeland in all circumstances and despite everything (Yaacov Fichman, “Berenice Returns from Rome to Eretz-Israel”).

Italy is the land of the warm south, for which the man of the north yearns.

The south – the childhood of man, the childhood of the world.

Italy embodies the constant tension between the moment and eternity, between the transient and the permanent, between glory that passes and memory that remains (Aryeh Sivan, Yaacov Fichman).

Art eternizes the moment in marble, in color, in rhyme.

The whore in the present vs. the Madonna in the paintings.

Italy is a land of contrasts: Rome – the great city, as against the
Italian village that has preserved the traditional life forms; enthusiastic rhetoric and sober practicality; a life of pleasures in the city and yearnings for the country.

Rome – the eternal city; Rome – the city of revels and pleasures:

- Rome expresses the revenge of history: the glory and splendor that have become dust (Yaacov Fichman), the conqueror that has passed from the world, the poverty that has taken the place of the luxuriance. It is a living proof and reminder that “everything passes” (Moshe Dor).

- The splendor of the ancient palaces, with the roar of motorcycles in the present (Bertini).

- The Arch of Titus, where the fates of Rome and Jerusalem were brought together for generations to come (Fichman, Dov Chomsky).

- The Colosseum – complete antithesis to the spirit of Israel; the entire culture of sculpture, painting and architecture are in complete antithesis to the spirit of Judaism.

- Italy – the eternal and the transient, the concrete and the abstract, the heavy and the light, the constant and the flowing (Sh. Shalom).

- Rome – everything is there, except modesty.

- Italy – understanding the present from the past (Yeshurun Keshet, Dan Ben-Amotz, Hanoch Bartov).

- Italy – land of extremes: patriotism that became nationalism and fascism, masses longing for a dictator to rule over them; cruel and fanatical Jesuit Christianity; a romanticism that turned into nationalism and hatred of foreigners.

- Italy as the source of inspiration for extremist Christian and fascist movements throughout the world, a center of terrorism and violence (Asher Reich, Esther Raab).

- Nero, who turned terrorism into “poesy” (Chomsky), and delighted in the sight of the burning and destruction it brought (Chomsky). Aesthetics without morality.

- Art and destruction; war and painting; amusements and bread; pleasure at the price of pain to others (Chomsky).

- Italy – savagery that tramples down culture (Tschernikhovsky).

- Italy – was wanton and abandoned in the past and remains so to this day: the place of inspiration and pilgrimage for all who throw off accepted social yokes and frameworks (Zach).

- Mussolini’s fascist Italy is a clean, orderly country; there are no beggars, no price-raising, everyone is polite, everything works efficiently (Avigdor Hameiri).

- Italy, with its glorious past and its impoverished present, is a place for the discovery of the meaning of life, for man to seek for
himself (Uri Shoham).

Italy as a source of eroticism, beautiful women, uninhibited carnal love (Sh. Shalom, Natan Zach, Uri Shoham, Schneour).

Italy as the birthplace of beauty (Yeshurun Keshet).

Italy as origin of music and the arts (Binyamin Tammuz).

Christian music in the ornate churches, contrasted with the Jewish stillness in the austere synagogues (Yeshurun Keshet, Dudu Barak).

Italy – the war between the barracks and the synagogue (Kabak).

Death is both a historical and a contemporary presence in Italy – in Christian and Renaissance art and in the streets (Natan Zach, Natan Yonatan).

Italy – place of inspiration for writers, painters, sculptors, and artists in all spheres and from all nations (Aryeh Sivan, Dan Tzalka).

Italy – admiration and repulsion at one and the same time (Dan Tzalka).

2. Venice

The tension between the deceptive external form and its true essence: between the static solid and the liquid flowing; between the stable and the passing; between the built and the crumbling; between splendor and its traces; between the standing and the sinking (Yehuda Amichai, Avner Holzman).

Jerusalem the city of stone is the twin and opposite of Venice: stone vs. water; stones eroded by water; “Jerusalem, port-city on the shore of Eternity” (Amichai); the Temple Mount as a great ship: “Jerusalem is God’s Venice”.

The water-canals of Venice are like arteries in a living body (Amichai, “Venice Three Times”).

The flow of Venice is its stability and constancy.

The splendor of Venice is poisoned and brings death in beautifully designed glass goblets (Yaacov Horowitz).

Venice – an impression of great desolation, a situation of imprisonment, everything is surrounded: the city is surrounded by sea, the houses by canals, the room in the monastery. A sense of absolute physical and spiritual enclosure. The traces of the past only strengthen the sense of desolation, alienation and closedness (Leah Goldberg).

Venice – connected-disconnected; free-enslaved; celebrating-lamenting; meeting-separation; sea-land; near-distant (Ezra Zussman). A royal house that has become a prison house (Ezra Zussman). A small closed place, from which people set out to discover the world (Ezra Zussman).