

LIVES OF WARS AND TRAUMA

Adia Mendelson-Maoz
The Open University of Israel
adiamen@openu.ac.il

A review of

חיי מלחמה: על צבא, נקמה, שכול ותודעת המלחמה בפרוזה הישראלית (War lives: On the army, revenge, grief and the consciousness of war in Israeli fiction). By Nitza Ben-Dov. Pp. 396. Tel Aviv: Shoken, 2016.

and

אנחנו שברי חרוזים: פוליטיקה של טראומה בספרות הישראלית (We are broken rhymes: A politics of trauma in Israeli literature). By Hannan Hever. Pp. 299. Jerusalem: Magnes, 2017.

“Of arms and the man I sing”: these famous opening words from Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Book 1) enshrine the theme of war as a source of literary creation. From antiquity to the present day, authors have depicted wars in poetry, drama and prose, in biographies, historical accounts, and novels. Wars have been described in rhyme, and figurative language, as well as in narratives, through complex characters, as well as through realistic and fictional portrayals. Many theories of drama and prose, as well as the development of the concept of the literary hero, have been shaped by the literature of war. The universality of war as a social phenomenon raises moral, psychological, and social issues all of which can be presented powerfully in literature. The cruelty of conflict engenders traumatic experiences, which are reflected in many ways in literary texts.

The concept of trauma was initially formulated by Sigmund Freud in his studies on hysteria at the turn of the twentieth century while treating mostly female patients. Yet clearly trauma has existed as long as humankind has walked the earth. After World War I, and with a greater intensity since World War II and specifically in the last few decades, the theory of trauma has become a key part of literary studies. The confrontation with extreme situations and the contemporary awareness of trauma has led to a rethinking of the concept of representation, and prompted literary scholars (mainly as of the early 1990s) such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Judith Herman, along with theorists from other fields such

as Dominick LaCapra, to develop literary trauma theories.¹ In these theories, trauma is not only a disaster but also a mode of experience associated with the notions of retrospection, deconstruction, and reconstruction of memory, repetitions, and fragmentation. Thus it is not surprising that the literary theory of trauma has evolved through the writings of post-structuralists and deconstructionist scholars (such as Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Francois Lyotard). Today, trauma theory is a critical category of literary studies promoted by such scholarly voices as Anne Whitehead, Ann Kaplan, and Deborah Horvitz, to name a few.²

The non-linearity, arbitrariness and incomprehensibility of trauma challenge traditional concepts of representation, but its non-representability provides a rare opportunity to depart from concepts of the true or the real to better reveal underlying socio-political situations, cultural and historical contexts, and ethical issues. Thus, literature, unlike other disciplines such as history, psychology, and sciences, can create what Iris Murdoch (in the context of ethical criticism) called not only facts but a “new vocabulary of attention” when dealing with war and other extreme situations of suffering.³

This problematization of the representation of war and trauma associated with the power of literature is a key concern in Modern Hebrew literature. Hebrew literature, and Israeli literature in its wake, was fused with the history of Jewish people in the twentieth century and the Zionist ideological mission. Literature played an active role in the educational system and the creation of Israel. Literary texts from the start mirrored ideological complexities, ethical issues, and traumatic lapses. For instance, debates on Jewish masculinity were major components of Hebrew literature at the beginning of the twentieth century from Peretz Smolenskin, through the works of Micha Josef Berdyczewski and Uri Nissan Gnessin to Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Uri Zvi Greenberg. Later, major canonical Israeli writers continued to grapple with the Zionist national ideological myths and their relationship to questions of masculinity,

1. C. Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); C. Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); S. Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992); J. Herman-Lewis, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); D. LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

2. A. Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); A. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2005); D. Horvitz, *Literary Trauma* (New York: Suny Press, 2000).

3. I. Murdoch, “Against Dryness,” *Encounter* (January 1961): 20.

military conduct, trauma, and bereavement (Moshe Shamir, S. Yizhar, A. B. Yehoshua, and Amos Oz to name a few).

The urge to tell a story that cannot easily be told has prompted many authors to find different literary venues, both in prose and poetry to walk the narrow path between the personal, intimate, empathetic narrative, and retrospective, broken, shattered, and critical visions. Nitza Ben-Dov and Hannan Hever, two prominent scholars of Hebrew literature, have recently written comprehensive works on the topics of war (Ben-Dov) and trauma (Hever) and provide an interesting and insightful reading of Hebrew and Israeli poetry and prose. Although they follow different sets of theories and practices of reading, both books illustrate the ever-widening criticism of the teleological Zionist narrative by focusing on texts that characterize the disparities and fractures in the ideological story which for years justified war and repressed or denied the existence of trauma.

Ben-Dov's book *חיי מלחמה* (War lives) presents a new account of Hebrew war literature. The book, which is made up of an introduction and eleven chapters, consists of an in-depth examination of canonical Hebrew texts which are connected chronologically to specific wars. The book opens with World War I (The Great War) as described in Shmuel Yosef Agnon's *עד הנה* (To this day, 1950) that deals with an uprooted protagonist who finds himself in Germany. Then it discusses texts related to the Jewish Brigades, the Holocaust and the 1948, 1956, and 1967 wars and finally the Lebanon war of 1982 and the Intifada. Of these texts, Ben Dov analyzes Hanoah Bartov's *פצעי בגרות* (The brigade, 1965), Yehuda Amichai's *לא מעכשיו, לא מכאן* (Not from now, not from here, 1963), Amos Oz's *מיכאל שלי* (My Michael, 1968), Ron Leshem's *אם יש גן עדן* (If there is a heaven, 2005), David Grossman's *אשה בורחת מבשורה* (To the end of the land, 2008), and Sami Michael's *יונים בטרפלגר* (Pigeons in Trafalgar Square, 2005).⁴ The last chapter is both a conclusion and a discussion regarding the absence of women authors and gender issues in the texts reviewed in this book, and an appeal for further research on war novels by female authors.

Ben-Dov's book is entitled *War Lives*, and not "war stories" or "war narratives," since she focuses not only on the portrayal of wars in Hebrew literature but also on the scars of wars on people's lives. This dictates her

4. Ron Leshem's book *אם יש גן עדן* (If there is a heaven) was translated into English: R. Leshem, *Beaufort* (New York: Delta, 2009).

choice not to discuss the canonical novels related to certain wars but rather to examine more inclusive texts. For example, Amichai's *Not From Now, Not From Here*, which is set in the context of both the 1948 War and the Holocaust, enables her to discuss his ruptured poetics as a way to challenge the basic notions of Shoah and Tekuma (Holocaust and Revival). The same goes for the decision to discuss Grossman's *To the End of the Land* in the context of the Yom Kippur War. Whereas the novel shows how the wounds of captivity can be re-opened, it more fundamentally points to the cyclic nature of war, trauma, and remembering in which the depiction of one war always resonates with previous conflicts. The traumatic links between the Six Day War in 1967, the Yom Kippur War in 1973, and the "mud" of Lebanon reveals that Israeli existence is in fact a continuous, multigenerational trauma, "war lives."

Ben-Dov's book examines a range of different issues, such as military experiences, the individual soldier and his peers, the encounter with the enemy, the relations between soldiers and civilians, and the wrench of trauma and bereavement. Although dealing with canonical texts, the book tends to veer away from the teleological Zionist narrative to center on traumatic encounters that critically examine the role of war in Israeli society.

Three key issues emerge from these readings and are used to buttress the book's main argument: masculinity and the role of the army as a rite of passage to Israeli manhood, Mizrahi writing on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the retrospective gaze. Jewish masculinity is closely linked to the history of Zionism, as illustrated through literary texts that were instrumental in formulating an ideal representation of the Zionist hero. This representation played a key role in nation-building in the 1940–1950s. Over the years, however, as a result of political upheavals and the rise of theoretical discourse on gender representation, the subversion of the concept of Israeli masculinity has fissured this ideal representation, and Hebrew literature has become an instrument harnessed to criticize the national formulation of this image of the Sabra.

Military experiences are often perceived in Israeli society as important stepping stones in achieving true manhood. Military service, especially in elite units, places undue emphasis on a dichotomous notion of gender in which masculinity is contrasted with women and gay men, and promotes "manly" values such as power, coarseness, bluntness, and emotional dis-

tance. Military service was and still is essential to an Israeli boy's entitlement to membership in the inner circle of adult males.⁵ As shown in van Gennep and Turner's discussion of liminal zones and the "rite of passage," the Israeli army is a sphere in which young people go through a set of experiences that test their ability and strengthen (or weaken) them to become full-fledged members of society as adults.⁶

Many of the texts discussed in Ben-Dov's book correspond to the concept of the military service as a rite of passage, but also reveal the blind spots in this ideological picture. Ben-Dov's readings of Hanoach Bartov's *The Brigade*, Yehoshua Kenaz's *התגנבות יחידים* (Infiltration, 1986), and Ron Leshem's *If There Is a Heaven* portray the deceit behind the image of ideal masculinity. Ben-Dov shows how these stories depict military failures, describe soldiers with disabilities, reveal military passivity, and articulate the artifice of the cover stories soldiers swallow to cope with their military situation, to reveal the operations of a cynical war machine that markets itself as the royal road to the spirit of manhood yet eventually destroys the soldiers.

The second issue that emerges in the book is the way Mizrahi writers portray relationships between Israelis and Palestinians. As is generally known, during the process of absorbing Mizrahi immigrants into the State of Israel during the 1950s, the Zionist elite chose to separate its ethnic discourse from the national one. While the Arabs (Israeli Palestinians) were part of the national discourse, and thus were excluded from the Jewish nation altogether, the Mizrahim were regarded as an ethnic group, namely, Jews with a different (Arab) culture. This division led to a situation in which, in order to show their loyalty, the Mizrahim had to distance themselves from their culture and their Arab mother tongue, which was regarded as the language of the enemy. Ella Shohat notes that this constituted an enormous missed opportunity, since these immigrants could have formed a bridge of peace between East and West and between the Jewish state and its Arab neighbors.⁷

5. A. Perlow and M. Perlow, "Transition to Adulthood during Military Service," *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 47 (1988): 40–76.

6. A. van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (trans. M. B. Vizedom and G. L. Caffee; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960); V. W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

7. E. Shohat, *זיכרונות אסורים: לקראת מחשבה רב־תרבותית* (Memories are forbidden: Toward a multicultural thought; Tel-Aviv: Bimat Kedem, 2001).

It is thus fascinating to read Ben-Dov's interpretation of two books written by Mizrahi authors: Eli Amir's *יַסְמִין* (Yasmin, 2005), which describes a love story between a soldier and a Palestinian girl during the Six Day War, and Sami Michael's *Pigeons in Trafalgar Square*, which draws on Kanafani's novella "Returning to Haifa" and creates a unique familial relationship between Jews and Palestinians. These novels depict the great loss brought about by the repression of the Jewish-Arab identity, as can clearly be seen when comparing the portrayal of Arabs in these texts to the depiction of the Arab twins in Amos Oz's *My Michael*. Amir and Michael are clearly capable of describing an alternative coexistence between Israelis and Palestinians, yet the two novels, by using different modes and tones, reveal the distractive national context that makes these relationships impossible.

Another key element discussed by Ben-Dov is the retrospective nature of these texts. The book is organized chronologically according to the date of each war, and not in the chronological order in which these books were published. For example, Eli Amir's *Yasmin* and Sami Michael's *Pigeons in Trafalgar Square* which were published in the same year (2005) are discussed in the context of different wars; namely, *Yasmin* in the context of the Six Day War and *Pigeons in Trafalgar Square* in the context of the First Intifada. This choice serves to underscore the traumatic aspects of war and forms associations between current wars and the memories of other wars, as in Amichai and Grossman. Adorno noted that "the ability to keep one's distance as a spectator and to rise above things, is in the final analysis the human part, the very part resisted by its ideologists."⁸ Clearly, things that can be seen at short range are different from those perceived at a distance, in particular when the trauma continues to fester and gains subversive power. By elaborating on this retrospective gaze and dealing with the trauma that often telescopes different wars, Ben-Dov shows how these narratives present a sweeping perspective on the cycle of trauma, history, and memory in Israeli literature.

Hanan Hever's book *We Are Broken Rhymes* deals with major traumas in Israel and their representation in poetry and prose. In his watershed 1990 article on Amos Oz, A. B. Yehoshua, and Amalia Kahana-Carmon, "Majority as a National Minority,"⁹ Hever made a deliberate attempt to go

8. T. W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, [1966] 1973), p. 363.

9. H. Hever, "Israeli Fiction of the Sixties: The Majority as Minority," *Prooftexts* 10 (May 1990): 129–147; H. Hever, "Majority as a National Minority in Israeli Fiction of the 1960's," *Siman Kri'a* 20 (May 1990): 126–147.

beyond the claim that Israelis are in fact, as Amoz Oz put it, a “bunch of half-hysterical survivors.”¹⁰ Rather, he argued that traumas have political implications for Israeli subjectivity and in particular the conviction that Israelis cannot see themselves as the majority. In this book, which is mostly a collection of articles published from 2011 to 2016, Hever discusses the subversive power of writing about trauma in Israeli literature, specifically as regards the 1948 War and the Nakba, the Holocaust, and immigration and orphanhood.

The point of departure of the book is that Israeli literature from 1948 onward has been caught between several traumatic experiences, with the Holocaust as its fulcrum. This has engendered a state of emergency which has led in two opposite directions. The first is articulated through the narrative of *משואה לתקומה* ‘from holocaust to revival’, which appears to be part of the hegemonic Zionist narrative, whereas the second involves narrating the defeated subject and his destruction. In addition to the Holocaust, Hever’s analysis of the trauma of the Nakba shows that Israeli Jews can be both victims and perpetrators involved in the trauma of others. Hever argues that for years, the repression of trauma has served as a political tool for establishing the literary canon in the spirit of Zionism. The literary attitude of revealing trauma to fight ideology is an articulation of responsibility on the part of the witnesses, the victims, and the perpetrators.

We Are Broken Rhymes is made up of an introduction and thirteen chapters, each of which deals with a single work or works by a single author. Unlike the Ben Dov book, the chapters are organized chronologically by the date of publication (and not by the date of the wars or the trauma), starting with Yizhar and Yeshurun in the context of the 1948 War and forward by Lea Goldberg’s *בעלת הארמון* (Lady of the castle, 1955) and the Holocaust and the world of living dead. Hever reads Alterman, Appelfeld, Pagis, Biton, Ballas, and Be’er, and concludes with Rivka Basman Ben-Hayim’s Yiddish poetry. The entire collection which merges the reading of both poetry and prose illustrates Hever’s theoretical direction in the last few years and its inspiring results.

Hever’s readings center on three issues which partially overlap those raised in Ben-Dov’s book: the notion of responsibility for the Palestinian

10. A. Oz, *סיפור על אהבה וחושך* (A tale of love and darkness; Jerusalem: Keter, 2002); A. Oz, *A Tale of Love and Darkness* (trans. N. De Lange; London: Vintage Books, 2005), p. 330.

Other in the context of 1948, ways to attend to the trauma of Arab-Jews, and the subversive power of autobiographical writing.

Hever's discussion of Yizhar's *חרבת-חזעה* (Khirbet Khizeh, 1949) and Avot Yeshurun's "פסח על כוכים" (Passover on caves, 1952) sets the trauma of the 1948 War of Independence against the backdrop of the Holocaust and an awareness of the Palestinian Nakba. Hever suggests that Yizhar's best-known text fails to create responsibility for the Other, in particular in the famous scene when the narrator achieves an understanding of the Palestinian situation through the charged Jewish term "גלות" (Diaspora). Whether Hever's interpretation of Yizhar is effective or not, he does make the important point that analogies may lead to an erroneous understanding of the Other and can in fact simply be a narcissistic attitude that does not generate responsibility.¹¹

Levinas noted that Western philosophy can engender an "imperialism of the same," where the subject's search for coherent structures of meaning subordinates the particular to the general and reduces the unknown to the framework of "sameness." This reduction also occurs in a relationship in which one party actually projects his or her thoughts, feelings, and desires onto the imagined Other, while deliberately ignoring the differences between them. Given the canonical Zionist narrative in which Jews were persecuted in Europe and sought refuge in their homeland where they became victims of Arab violence, a comparison of the Israeli and Palestinian traumas leads to a stance where the Jewish-Israeli position can be empathetic yet passive, and fails to take responsibility. Alternatively, one can internalize that the Other cannot be imprisoned within my agonistic framework and "does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me."¹² Thus, the Other remains a subject I cannot grasp or fully understand. This Levinasian notion, which is not always spelled out in detail in Hever's text, dictates many of his readings of the 1948 War, as in Yizhar's text and Yeshurun's brave artistic experiment. It is also reflected in Hever's reading of Appelfeld's "בקומת קרקע" (In the ground floor, 1962) in terms of the narratives of the Holocaust and the Nakba. In all these cases, Hever points to the vagueness of Other's

11. See T. Amiel-Houser and A. Mendelson-Maoz, "Against Empathy," *Journal of Literary Theory* 8.1 (2014): 199–218, and A. Mendelson-Maoz, "On Analogy, Empathy, and the Risk of False Pretention" (paper presented at the 21st-Century Theories of Literature conference, University of Warwick, April 6–8, 2017); available online at <http://openu.academia.edu/AdiaMendelsonMaoz>.

12. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (trans. A. Lingis; Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1991 [1961]), p. 194.

identity and the way the authors and the characters fail to create a stable portrait of the Other in relation to the self.

Preserving this vagueness, and the rift of any binarism, is a subversive artistic tactic that undermines the ability to summarize or appropriate the Other. Hever notes this same trend in the context of the poetry of Erez Biton and Shimon Ballas. While the Zionist mission was to divest the Mizrahim, who were the ethnic Others, from their Arabness, Shimon Ballas revealed the absurdity of the Ashkenazi ideology that fostered alienation and hostility toward Middle Eastern culture. In his 1964 book *המעברה* (The transit camp) and his essays, Ballas showed, well before the advent of post-colonialist discourse, that Israel's Western elite, a civilization that encourages development and progress, can also destroy and uproot. Not surprisingly, his provocative writing was not acknowledged in the 1960s, and Ballas remained estranged from the academic literary milieu. Hever's writing on Ballas¹³ challenges Gershon Shaked's portrayal of Ballas as simply an authentic societal expression, and focuses on his subversive strategies.¹⁴

Hever analyzes Ballas's "איה" (Aia, 1992) and the character of the non-Jewish Iraqi nanny who witnesses the departure of the Jewish family she works for from Baghdad to Israel. The lack of a clear dichotomy between Aia and the Jewish family shows the impossibility of understanding her as an Other on the basis of similarity or negation of the Jewish Arab family. She is part of the family but in fact she is not, and will stay behind in Baghdad, and the Arab-Jewish family that leaves Baghdad will not be able to preserve their hyphenated Arab-Jewish identity as an organic one in Israel. Hever shows how Ballas as well as Biton challenge the canonical literary model and gradually succeed in presenting a more fluid notion of identity that the literary arena can no longer ignore.

Hever's discussion of responsibility in his book is clearly linked to the persona of the author and to autobiographical writing. This appears between the lines, when the author undercuts his authoritative gaze and lets other voices come in. This occurs in Hever's analyses of Yeshurun, Ballas, Biton, and Appelfeld's texts, but mainly in the reading of Haim Be'er's

13. H. Hever, "'We Have Not Arrived from the Sea': A Mizrahi Literary Geography," *Social Identities* 10.1 (2004), and chapter 12 in H. Hever, *הסיפור והלאום: קריאות ביקורתיות בקאנון הסיפורת העברית* (The story and nationality: Critical readings in the canon of Hebrew fiction; Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007).

14. Gershon Shaked, *1880–1980: הסיפורת העברית* (The Hebrew literature: 1880–1980; Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1993), 4:168.

חבליים (Pains, 1998) and in the chapter addressing Be'er's "לפני המקום" (Upon a certain place, 2007).¹⁵

In the history of Western literature, writing autobiography "forms a set of 'exemplary' literary, political, and military men; they have been seen as singular figures capable of summing up an era in a name: Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin, Henry Adams."¹⁶ In Modern Hebrew narrative fiction, autobiographies were part of nation-building. However, as Tamar Hess's book *Self as Nation: Contemporary Hebrew Autobiography* has shown, in the last few decades, along with other waves of literary subversion, autobiographies "have become a site for a marginalized voice to confront the Zionist ideology."¹⁷ In her article "Three Women's Texts," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak makes it clear that the culture of confession and testimony is the major tool "giving witness of the oppression."¹⁸ This may be the case for texts by authors who are clearly located on the fringes of the Israeli canon, as well as women writers. However, the decision to read Be'er in this light is highly interesting. Hever shows how Be'er's narrative shatters the Western notion of autobiography which takes the rational and the representative protagonist as its core. Be'er's traumatic childhood experiences and his absorption of the loss of his mother create a non-linear patchwork and non-chronological frames involving a different mode of representation.

The presentation of an autobiographical book that constitutes an alternative to the Zionist *bildungsroman* goes hand in hand with challenges to concepts of authorship and the authority of the writer. In Be'er, this is manifested in a modest and often ironic approach to the role of the author and the validity of his presentation. This is an ethical stance in which uncertainty and constant vagueness serve to achieve responsibility. This challenge also engages the work of literary scholars, who are called upon to take a position of modesty, self-scrutiny, and uncertainty. I believe that this high level of responsibility is reflected in the ability of a literary scholar to keep literary works open to the gaze of others.

15. Haim Be'er's חבליים (Pains) was translated into English: H. Ba'er, *The Pure Element of Time* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2003).

16. L. Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 11.

17. T. S. Hess, "The Confessions of a Bad Reader," *Prooftexts* 27.1 (winter 2007): 154. See also T. S. Hess, *Self As Nation: Contemporary Hebrew Autobiography* (The Schusterman Series in Israel Studies; Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2016).

18. G. C. Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and Circumfession," in *Postcolonialism and Autobiography* (ed. A. Hotnung and E. Ruhe; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 7–22.