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Israeli Identity on the Run: the Quest for a Non-National Position in Contemporary Israeli Literature

Abstract: My essay discusses a new attempt in young Israeli novels to break out of the suffocation and stagnation of the dominant literary protagonist. The discussion revolves around Ilai Rowner's recent novel, *Deserter* (2015), which suggests 'desertion' as an option of to overcome nationalized structures of the self and of break new ground for its existence. The protagonist's escape and quest for a non-national position is destined to failure, however, reflecting the current state of political consciousness among young Israeli authors, and, I argue, the unthinkability of political exile in contemporary Israeli novels.

The discussion presented here follows the renewed interest in Hanna Arendt's exemplary essay "We Refugees" (1943) in light of the current refugees' crisis in Europe among scholars such as Giorgio Agamben, Amal Jamal and Itamar Mann. While Agamben develops a phenomenology of being-a-refugee, severing the bond between nation and territory, his work lacks an experiential account on being a refugee. In light of this absence, I argue that Rowner's protagonist remains blind to the particular identities he encounters, actively erasing the profound differences between deserters and refugees, persecutors and persecuted. While he recognizes the haunted element in him, Rowner's protagonist's obliviousness to the specific experiential trappings of his own story effectively sterilizes the novel's political acuity through the effort to adopt an all-human perspective.

Keywords: *Contemporary Israeli Literature; Israeli Nationality; Desertion; Refugees; Hanna Arendt; Giorgio Agamben*

Introduction

In an essay discussing the function of Palestinian ruins in Israeli literature, Gil Hochberg identified a "poetics of haunting" running through canonical works of Israeli fiction, where the ruins of destroyed Arab villages represent the haunting history of 1948. She traces the ghostly presence of the Palestinian tragedy looming in the heart of the Jewish Israeli Zionist narrative: the unresolved and ongoing historical violence of the Palestinian forced exile, which "though seemingly finding little direct expression in the Israeli literary Hebrew Canon,

nevertheless finds its way into these texts as a growing *visible invisibility* – the haunting mark of a muted ghost” (Hochberg, 2012, p. 56). Pointing to the silent presence of the physical ruins of Palestinian villages running through such seminal works by leading novelists S. Yizhar, A.B. Yehoshua and Y. Koren, Hochberg called for not only the re-embodiment of Palestinians as actual characters, but also for an entirely new model for the literary protagonist in Israeli literature, an alternative to the dysfunctional, guilt-ridden, and suffocated Israeli protagonist of canonical literature (Ibid, p. 67).

In recent years, a new literary trend in Israeli novels attempted to break out of the dominant mold of Israeli literary protagonists. Novels such as *The Old Homeland* by Lilach Netanel (2014), *Neuland* by Eshkol Nevo (2011), *All the Rivers* by Dorit Rabinian (2014), *To See a Whale* by Ron Dahan (2016), *Orian* by Shira Pinkas (2014) and *Walkman* by Ma’ayab Ben Hagai (2017), all written by a new generation of writers, portray the stories of young Israeli men and women who decide to leave Israel and try permanently living abroad. Though the *topos* of traveling or living abroad could be traced in some canonical Israeli novels, such as *Past Perfect* by Ya’acov Shabtai (1984), *The Return from India* by Abraham B. Yehoshua (1994) or *The One Facing Us* by Ronit Matalon (1995), the new trend reflects a substantial shift in the view of land of Israel. For the younger writers’ protagonists, Israel ceases to be the main center of life for the characters: their eventual return to it is no longer assured, even sometimes outrightly rejected. This mode might be part of a larger Israeli literary shift towards deterritorialization and a growing preoccupation with other settings of literary production, evocative, perhaps, of the historical roots of Hebrew literature in 19th century Odessa or Berlin.¹

In investigating the contours of this recent shift, I will focus on Ilai Rowner’s recent novel, *Deserter*, published in 2015 and shortlisted for the prestigious *Sapir* literary prize in 2016. Rowner, born 1979, is a young Israeli writer, a translator and a scholar of French literature. *Deserter [Arik]*, his first novel, takes up the theme of desertion as a vehicle through which to explore the national structures of the self and to found new grounds for existence. As I will demonstrate, however, the protagonist’s desertion and subsequent quest after a non-national identity is ultimately doomed, a literary *cul-de-sac* representing both the current state of political consciousness among young Israeli authors, and, I propose, revealing the very unthinkability of political exile in contemporary Israeli novels.

Although not directly addressing the site of the ruin and the persisting legacies of the *Nakbah*, *Deserter* exhibits what Hochberg called ‘a legacy of haunting’ in significant ways. Its protagonist, a young man named Avshalom, is haunted; his disquiet leads him to attempt to uproot himself from the Israeli situation, and to sever his ties to his homeland. A young soldier in the IDF, Avshalom deserts his post and, AWOL, hides in a retirement home in Jerusalem, where he nurses invalid old women on their deathbeds. He burns his uniform, his beret, his military shoes and the dog tag with his personal number. He soon attempts to

¹ I wish to thank one of the reviewers of this article for this important comment.

leave Israel altogether, hoping to find a place where he may “[...] see the world in a different manner”: “I realized ... that I do not carry the scar, that my body is clean of the Israeli wound, the Jewish wound, whatever that includes, the whole unease that traps your soul and blinds your eyes” (Rowner, 2015, p. 25).² He decides to emigrate to Paris, hoping that there he may be able to embark on his new life. He chooses Paris naively, based on his impression of its reputation as a haven, a cradle of artists and intellectuals escaping their oppressive homelands, noting that “all the poets that I like have passed through Paris” (p. 39). Over there, he believes, “for the first time I realize that I am rescued, that I am beyond History” (p. 48). The novel follows his life in Paris, and his attempts to grapple with his unshakable feeling of being haunted, rooted, we learn towards the middle of the book, in a violent clash with Palestinians he has had as a soldier stationed in Hebron.

The novel is written as his feverish monologue in an attempt to escape: from military service, from the family and from social connections to the refuge of the elderly shelter, from the state of Israel to pursuing academic studies in Paris, then from the academia, from the attentions by an interested girl. But he also wishes to escape from literature, from language itself. The entire text is written in the urgent pace of the hunted prey, panting and frenetic, full of commas, rife with sudden turnabouts, as if written on the run.

In praise of forgetting

In the opening fragment, the narrator tells of “a deep certainty that the end is near, that it is closing in on us [...] our future catastrophe. I mean, the catastrophe that would demolish this place, like the Jews back then, a frozen pile of old men. They did not stand on guard, they left us with their icy gaze, their suffering, they taught us to shut our eyes and shut up” (p. 9). This opening monologue poses the memory of Jewish victimhood in the Holocaust as a paralyzing and silencing memory, a specter that explains the sense of stagnation and helplessness of Israeli literary protagonists facing past and future catastrophes, *and* the sense of haunting that will torment Avshalom throughout the novel. His work at the elderly home is painted in similar colors:

You see, old age is contagious. For six months I’ve been seeing the old ladies dying here in the elderly home, these medical mannequins – how they stare into eternity, corroded with forgetfulness, don’t give up their little square in bed [...]. I tell myself everything drowns in abstract filth, everything is washed with empty words, I have to forget, not to think – that’s what I tell myself, maybe I’ll close my eyes, maybe not knowing would save me and protect me from any change (p. 10).

² All excerpts from Rowner’s book are my translation.

Escaping Israel is therefore likened to escaping an “old age disease”. It is an escape from an overbearing memory that inhibits natural motion, development and growth, a disease that atrophies its victims’ feet, and plunges them into in a mire of motionlessness, paralyzing them in the face of a looming disaster. Avshalom’s initial exuberance at being “free from the Israeli wound” is experienced as a recovery from that disease, a liberation from the burdens of history and memory. Ironically, the notion of escaping Israel as a cure for the diseases induced by the Israeli experience is, in a sense, a mirror-image of the Zionist idea of the return to Zion as a cure for the ‘Diaspora disease’.

Avshalom’s desertion could be thus read as an example of what Amal Jamal, following Hanna Arendt, termed “an epistemological self-expulsion”, engendered by a “refugee by will”:

An aware exit into conscious spaces that ask for thinking, observing and even communicating with otherness as a founding interaction and as a mirror to reflect the self. It is an encounter with an unstable identity and acquaintance with the social and the political conditionings of identity [...]. Self-expulsion liberates the mind from its ontological obligation to selfhood and from its narcissistic obligation to an a-priori identity and to the very historic taking of place [...] that characterizes the individual or the collective modern subject – and it also liberates from a moral imperialism in the version of individualistic liberalism (Jamal, 2015, p. 148).

Following Jamal, we could read Avshalom’s desertion from his family, the Israeli army, and the country he grew up in as an intentional act of self-seclusion from the collective, an act seeking to evade the fixations etched by the nation unto the psyche of the self. His desertion is an attempt to find a freer, less inhibited perspective, a vantage point from which to see the human variety from a universal moralism and cosmopolitan experience. Such a consideration of self-expulsion also resonates Giorgio Agamben’s aspired state of cognition, in which “the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is” (Agamben, 2008, p. 95).

For Avshalom, liberation from “the Israeli wound, the Jewish wound, whatever that includes” means an individual desertion from the national collective psyche trapped in an endless dialectic of a persecutor and a persecuted, a hunter and a hunted, an occupier and an occupied – a circuit ultimately inflicting destructive violence onto all those who come in contact with it. His desire to desert not only physically, from the army, but also to desert figuratively, from the burden of memory, is reminiscent of the firm message sent by Yehuda Elkana, voiced in an intensely discussed short essay published in 1988 in *Haaretz* daily newspaper, titled “The Need to Forget”:

Too much of “Zechor!” (Remember) and addiction to the past undermine the foundations of democracy [...]. I see no greater threat to the future of the State of Israel than

the fact that the holocaust has systematically and forcefully penetrated the consciousness of the Israeli public, even that large segment that did not experience the Holocaust, as well as the generation what was born and grew up here [...]. “Zechor!” can easily be understood as a call for continuing and blind hatred (Elkana, 1988).

Elkana, himself an Auschwitz’ survivor, wrote the essay only a few months after the first Intifada broke out. As Uri Ram noted, this publication was directly spurred by a series of so-called “unusual” incidents, whereby Israeli soldiers were documented brutally treating Palestinians, incidents that climaxed when four Palestinians from the village of Salem were buried alive under a pile of dirt (Ram 1999, p. 355). In his essay, Elkana linked such crimes of hatred to the sense of victimhood instilled in Israeli citizens through an inculcation of “Holocaust lessons” into nationalist narratives.

Provocative as it was, Elkana’s tract argued against the ‘victimhood complex’ (Sagiv, 2015) pervading Israeli society in an attempt to strengthen its democratic foundations, to allow it to live in a confident, tranquil national community, one with a proportional attitude towards its past and a healthy vitality towards its future. Avshalom’s willful forgiveness, by contrast, lacks any such optimistic or constructivist spirits. His urge to forget stems from, and is exacerbated by, an impending sense of calamity, and is led by a self-preserving instinct, an odyssey after an imaginary home, where he might finally to be protected from memory, history, and national belonging.

Avshalom’s attempt fails, and his attempt to evade history produces a false historical consciousness that revokes its own historicity and a distorted sense of identity that is based on a rejection of its very foundations. My view juxtaposes Avshalom’s desertion and self-blinding mode of being-a-refugee, with the concept of “conscious pariahs” suggested by Arendt (after Bernard Lazare). Avshalom’s confused odyssey reflects a real, widely shared experience of distress pervading young Israelis, who do not find their place in the culture of memory and the state militarism that constitute Israeliness, perpetuate the conflict and supercharge it with the sediments of perpetrator’s trauma. Avshalom’s desertion fails, in other words, because it is purged of political reflections through the effort to adopt an all-human perspective that erases personal experiences, not because it is not fueled by genuine distress.

We refugees

In her celebrated 1943 essay, “We Refugees”, Hannah Arendt, then a young Jewish-German refugee fleeing Nazi persecution and a recently admitted refugee living in New York city, proposed the condition of being a refugee as a political perspective possessing a unique vantage point to history:

Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their people – if they keep their identity. [They] get in exchange for their unpopularity one priceless advantage:

history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of Gentiles (Arendt, 1994, p. 119).

In contrast with 'the Jew as pariah', whose political perspective is bound by his people's historical memory, Avshalom exemplifies a refugee condition that consciously seeks to evade politics and history – and that is his main failing. He is defeated by his trauma and his false a-historical and a-political reading of the trauma and of the relations between persecutor and persecuted in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Some 50 years after Arendt's "We Refugees", Giorgio Agamben wrote an essay that begins with the argument Arendt ended with. Arendt, Agamben writes, "turns the condition of the countryless refugee – a condition she herself was living – upside down in order to present it as a paradigm of a new historical consciousness" (Agamben, 2008, p. 90). Based on her ideas, Agamben attempted to consider the refugee as an agent of an alternative political existence, one potentially capable of replacing the perspectives imposed by the modern nation-state: "Given the by now unstoppable decline of the nation-state and the general corrosion of traditional political-juridical categories, the refugee is perhaps the only thinkable figure for the people of our time" (Agamben, 2008, p. 90).

In many ways, Agamben's influential attempt aided the development of a phenomenology of being-a-refugee as a state from which one is able to break the fetters tying identity to memory and nation and territory. In his vision, Europe becomes:

an aterritorial or extraterritorial space in which all the (citizens and non-citizens) residents of the European states would be in a position of exodus or refuge; the status of European would then mean the being-in-Exodus of the citizen ... In this new space, European cities would rediscover their ancient vocation of cities of the world by entering into a relation of reciprocal extraterritoriality (Agamben, 2008, p. 95).

The refugee thus becomes a figure not defined by his lack of a stable national identity, legal status or tangible home; it is, rather, the vehicle where human beings are allowed to develop as such, free from to the inflections of nationalism, fixed community or the laws designed to control global movement. Criticizing Agamben's approach, Itamar Mann turns our attention towards the absence of "an experiential account on being a refugee" in Agamben's text:

Once the argument becomes that sovereignty abandons citizens and refugees alike, we can no longer relate the particularity of their biographies and experiences [...]. Can a phenomenology of being-a-refugee deny the fact that one person flees while another person keeps a key to his former house and dreams of coming back? (Mann, 2010, p. 27).

Mann warns against Agamben's call to recognize the very fact of humanity ('homo-sacer'), without recourse to history. By contrast, Arendt's call to acknowledge 'humanness' is

rooted in a specific historical and a biographical conceptualization of being-refugee, drawing on human experiences of Jewish refugeehood during World War II. Contrary to Agamben, Arendt is interested in the specific aspects of being a refugee, noting thoughtfully that “the fate of the Jew is not a fundamental model to be applied on any citizen in any other state”. This way, “after Arendt, we can develop an understanding of being-refugee that is not blind to the particular identities of real men and women” (Ibid, p. 31).

Avshalom, then, stands at the rupture between Arendt and Agamben – his is a gaze ardently oblivious to his own privileges, he is blind his personal trauma (a blindness which, in itself, could be considered symptomatic of post-trauma), and to the particular identities of himself and of the people he encounters. This blindness collapses significant differences, making Avshalom virtually unable to distinguish between the trauma of the perpetrator and that of the victim, nor account for the gulf dividing deserter and refugee, persecutor and persecuted. While his gaze seeks out the haunted element in every person, seeing the potential of being-a-refugee in everyone he encounters, his blindness to the specific experiential weight of his own story and the accentuations of its particularities, makes his an a-political gaze incapable of critical introspection and crucially deficient in engaging morally.

Paris: Germany, Israel, Palestine

As a student in Paris Avshalom befriends a German girl named Irene. A foreign student like Avshalom, Irene self-identifies as a German and bespeaks her generational and national convictions when she gives voice to narratives of the young German generation vis-à-vis the Holocaust: “no racism in us, Germany has changed,” she says (p. 63). The encounter of a young Israeli who deserted his military service in the occupied territories and a German girl evokes the loaded triangle of Germany-Israel-Palestine. But this dimension, it seems, remains subconscious or unformed in Avshalom’s mind. He is full of tacit criticism towards Irene:

the spirit of her homeland speaks through her body, through the sparkle in her eyes [...] I tried to tell her [...] that as far as I’m concerned, she does not have to atone for the past crimes of her nation, she does not have to feel this need, this guilt (p. 68).

For him, Irene is a subject unable to truly break free of her bonds to her nation’s past crimes. Himself former soldier wishing to renounce a personal burden of guilt through desertion, Avshalom experiences Irene’s natural attempt to reconcile the history of their national affinities as threatening to his own attempt to be a subject free of any national affinity. Avshalom disregards the fact that the very opportunity he had, to choose to desert from nationality, was based on his status as a citizen of a sovereign national state.

At the university library in Boulevard Saint-Michel he discovers that the books of French classic literature on the shelves are stamped with the swastika and the Führer’s picture hides

between the pages – a testament to the days when the third Reich sustained French culture. Arguing with the librarian, Irene says: “Look, Madam, it’s a simple matter. On the first page you will discover the real name of the book, its real author, here it is: ‘Heil Hitler! Zieg Heil!’ Has the third Reich had financed part of your French library?” (pp. 81–82).

For Avshalom, the Nazi stamp in the opening pages of a book by the Marquise de Sévigné marks her as a collaborator of the Nazis, notwithstanding the fact that book was written over two hundred years prior. The fact that the book has not been burned when the city was retaken is evidence enough to attest to the collaborationism of France. Avshalom’s discovery floats the inevitability of the presence of the Holocaust in Europe, and teaches him that the ‘elite’ literature that drew him to Paris has been irredeemably supported by the horrific infrastructure of Nazism, violence and antisemitism: “Here is the first lesson I learn about this place: underneath the land of France flows Germany” (p. 81).

Avshalom’s choice to move to Paris is not based on any familial or historical affinity. Indeed, the truth is the very opposite: it is a literary choice. He imagines Paris as a wellspring of inspiration, a shelter for refuge-seeking writers, poets and artists that manages to prosper as such even in the face of the horrors of history. The first lesson that Avshalom learns therefore implicitly dispels the main illusion that led him to Paris: the dream of literature as a pure dimension of art, transcending the circumstances in which it has been created, a pure expression which history can neither touch nor stain.

His desertion and flight notwithstanding, Avshalom is a privileged young man. While planning his illegal escape from Israel, he does not forget to make the necessary arrangements to acquire a student visa, enroll at a university in Paris, and pay in advance his tuition fees for the upcoming fall semester. Though pieces of information essentially recasting his self-fashioned “flight” in an entirely new light, these details are mentioned casually, without any reflection on the gap between the posture of desertion and the arrangements he makes, implying the privileges of class and freedom of movement. Perhaps this is why the beginning of his life in Paris looks like an obstinate struggle to shed off the bothersome burden of these privileges.

The renunciation of the privileges of class, nationality and societal expectations is what enables Avshalom to imagine that he also shakes off the heavy burden of guilt and responsibility linked to the life he left behind. Shortly thereafter, he quits his studies and starts living a totally marginal life, ensconcing himself in a stinky, one-room apartment, reducing himself to incessant calculation of his next meal, leading a life of loitering and bare survival, and dedicating his days and nights to writing literature, ironically replicating the superficial romantic image of the poverty-stricken bohemian writers and artists living in the Parisian exile. Yet his writing, too, is marred by failure: “every time I write, I mourn myself, I mourn the impossibility” (p. 130). The images he surrounds himself with are repeatedly torn, revealing their hollowness. As we shall see, Avshalom’s haunting is also a literary one: despite his aspiration preoccupation with European literature, it is Israeli literature that bites at his heels and thwarts his dream to take off.

Trauma, memory and identification

Shedding off privileges is conveyed by an intensifying preoccupation with the experience of haunting, the realities of being-on-the-run due to his status as AWOL with the Israeli army. Alone in his room in Paris, Avshalom is still horrified by the possibility that army officials might be after him: “I know how it is to frighten someone, to bully him, to besiege him, I’ve done it myself, in the cities and the villages of the west bank [...]. You take the suspect out of bed, you uproot him, you drag him to the door”. Only now, he realizes, the persecutor has become a persecuted: “I tell myself: now it’s me, they’re after me” (p. 102).

The deserter’s state of mind that Avshalom assumes intensifies and increases his identification with the real refugees he sees strewn throughout the streets of Paris. When he witnesses an arrest of a foreign resident, probably a refugee, and the beating he takes by gendarmes, he identifies with him: “he must have also been uprooted to here, swept away into this place, no identity, spacing out in time” (p. 108). To his mind, his desertion, and his state as a foreigner in Paris, make him akin to the situation of the city’s many refugees, notwithstanding his relative security and his legitimate traversal of borders in order to France. He sees himself in what happened to the refugee: “They can easily arrest me, make me disappear, they will knock on the door, throw me into the white car, no one will notice” (p. 108). It seems as if amidst the identification with the “bare life” of the refugee, Avshalom’s mind glosses over the manifold differences between the one forced into this condition and the one who willfully chose it. Desertion in itself becomes a fantasy of being-a-refugee. Even if Avshalom seeks to renounce his nationality, he has to admit that it is nationality, and his legitimacy in the eyes of law of another, which enable him to observe the man’s arrest from the outside, as a passerby, instead of being in it. While nationality protects him, it destroys the refugee.

In their article “Thinking of Memory, Trauma and Nationality in Israel/Palestine”, Amos Goldberg and Bashir Bashir describe identification (following Lacan, Bauman and others) as a false mechanism, potentially concealing an undercurrent of aggression:

Identification is involved in one of two actions – appropriating or becoming subjugated, because in order for it to happen the person has to reduce the other to his own terms or to subjugate himself to the other’s terms. Identification always seeks to abolish the distance between two subjects – that fundamental gap that derives from their essential and the irreducible difference. That is, identification always seeks to blur the fundamental otherness of each one in relation with an other, therefore it always conceals an aggressive or even violent potential (Goldberg & Bashir, 2015, p. 36).

In a previous work, I pointed to this mechanism in the Israeli literary and cinematic imagination, where the identifying recognition of the Palestinian catastrophe enables, in fact, its appropriation and subjugation to the Jewish Holocaust-centered frame of reference

(Stav, 2012). It is no accident that witnessing the persecution and abuse of a refugee plunges Avshalom into his own memories and experiences, nor is it accidental that this identification eventuates in a twisted mirror image, erasing the difference between persecutor and persecuted.

The beating Avshalom witnesses stirs in him a memory from his time in military service. The arrested refugee reminds him not only of himself, but also of a soldier whose face was smashed by stones thrown by Palestinians protestors. In his recounting of the event, the armed Israeli soldier becomes the victim, and Paris and Hebron fuse into one: “now I turn my gaze: the Metro’s tunnel looks like a Kasba, like a roofed market, suddenly I don’t know what is happening [...]. I feel the earth starts moving, children running around me” (p. 109).

At this point, towards the middle of the novel, it is brought to the fore that underlying Avshalom’s haunting by national dictates is a different haunting by trauma, in fact a double trauma: both a trauma of a victim *and* a trauma of a perpetrator. His traumatic memory, from the time he was a soldier in Hebron, consists of two successive parts, one in which Avshalom is the persecuted and the other where he is the persecutor. In the first part, he is trapped with a group of soldiers on the roof of a Hebron house, besieged and stoned by a Palestinian crowd: “I begin to understand: can’t you see, it is their turn now, they will not leave us until we’re done for” (p. 111). One stone hits one of the besieged Israeli soldiers in the face, and he is killed. Under the torrent of stones, Avshalom imagines his flesh being eaten and devoured by the crowd surrounding him.³ The crows are finally dispersed by riot control weapons, but by then the soldiers’ psyche is severely imprinted with a trauma of helplessness.

The vector of power reverses in the second part of the memory. The very same night Avshalom takes part in the soldier’s reprisal, raiding the neighborhoods of Hebron, mass-arresting suspects and abusing them. Rowner portrays this event as shocking to Avshalom, one that plays out in his memory as an experience of a nightmare experienced both from within and from without:

One of the detainees holds prayer beads and plays with it with his fingers [...]. He raises his eyes, looks at me, I could have been his son, he is looking for me, he knows it. He knows we are going to cock our weapons, to execute them somewhere, in some forest in Lithuania, in Poland, where there is no History, where Satan shaves (p. 117).

The nightmare unfolds in a meta-temporal place, where Israeli soldiers become Nazis and persecuted Palestinians replace the Jewish victims. Here once more we see how a lack of historical sight (“where there is no history”), and the absence of an experiential relation

³ This may refer to Mahmud Darwish’s well-known poem, “Identity Card” (1964), written as defiance towards the occupiers: “But if I become hungry / The usurper’s flesh will be my food / Beware... / Beware... / Of my hunger / And my anger!” (see: Darwish, 1964).

to being-refugee serves to collapse reality and foster a false symmetry, in which one of the sides swallows up the other in his own identity: through the eyes of the perpetrator, the hunted man is afraid he will be executed “in a forest in Lithuania”. His fright is expressed by the imagery of the Holocaust, mediated by the consciousness of the Israeli soldier, who cannot but interpellate his victim by evoking images from the Jewish Holocaust. The victim is therefore stripped of the ability to experience his fear of Avshalom on his own terms, nor is he allowed to voice it in recourse to his own people’s history of violence and persecution. Rowner may be critical towards this concept of ‘no history’, but Avshalom is not.

This game of mirrors is described as a trap where the two are inextricably locked together.⁴ Together with other soldiers, Avshalom chases one of the detainees who tries to run away and is consequentially shot. The injured man collapses on the young soldier: “his body is smashed backwards, he is injured, thrust on me, I fall back, buried under him, he still quivers in my arms” (p. 121). Even though one is a persecutor and one is a persecuted, it is the injured body of the shot Palestinian that ‘buries’ the soldier. “A quick movement of light, and the gaze of the captive is uncovered”, as Avshalom holds the dying body of the Palestinian detainee, his identities change in rapid succession in front of his eyes – the dying body embodies a range of human possibilities, a voice of a young girl, which then turns into “an old shriveled Palestinian woman” with a bag of bones for a body.

The description of the chase, the arrests and the death is soaked with references to the two well-known novellas by the seminal Israeli writer S. Yizhar, *The Captive* and *Khirbet Khizeh*, both published in 1949. As with Yizhar, Rowner’s language compounds into the violence of the Israeli occupation of Palestine phrases, terminology and visual images imported from the repertoire of the Holocaust’s visual representations: the beams of flashlights, the officers with their hound dogs, the dark trees around, the dead body as a bag of bones.

Like Yizhar, The author that depicted those quick illusive replacements between offender and offended more than any other Hebrew writer (Gertz, 1983), Rowner touches upon one of the most loaded and volatile matters in Israeli existence: the deep memory of victimhood that lies within it, as it engages, repeatedly and violently, in the perpetual assertion of its sovereignty. From Yizhar’s seminal works onward, narratives that portray the mirror relations between the Holocaust and the Nakba focus on the moment of conversion, when the Jewish-Israeli realizes that he has transformed from persecuted to persecutor and is astounded to find a perpetrator deep within his self-fashioned identity of the ultimate victim. That is the moment in which the Holocaust, as a signifier of persecution and being-refugee, ceases to allude to the Jewish-Israeli and starts to bespeak the traumas of Arab-Palestinian identity.

⁴ I use the term ‘game of mirrors’ following Elias Khoury’s article “The Mirror”. Khoury writes about the representation of the Palestinian villagers in *Khirbet Khizeh* by S. Yizhar as a method of mirroring the Israeli protagonists: “The Palestinians in this poor village have to play the role of the Jews for the Jews. They serve as a mirror (...). Literature becomes a mirror of the self, and misunderstanding the other a tool that enables us to see ourselves with greater clarity” (Khoury, 2008, p. 36).

Yizhar shaped it as a shattering moment, with crucial implications for Jewish self-perception and its future. And indeed, since Yizhar's 1949 novellas, Israeli writers keep on dramatizing, in recurring ways, the conversion of identity, and revisit it as the nerve-center of the Israeli crisis: The 'Yizharic' specter flickers again and again between the lines of contemporary Israeli literature, an unresolved moment that remains "here, between us, unfinished", as noted in the ending words of *The Captive*.

We find such moments also in *Deserter*. In an intensive scene, Avshalom helps a handicapped woman cross the street. Suddenly, a foreign boy appears and steals her purse. Avshalom starts to chase him, calling "Thief!" The two run the streets of Paris while passers-by watch them with amazement without intervening. Soon, however, the straightforward division of the scene between the "decent" Avshalom and the unnamed little thief is suddenly disrupted, twisted. The chaser becomes the chased, as the Parisian crowd turns to chase Avshalom:

Finally, the Parisians awake, they probably think that I am part of this, that I am her real thief [...]. Now they are all running after me, chase me, they want my skin, my flesh ... I have to run away, to save myself, I knew this would happen, it should have happened, I knew I'd be caught in the end (p. 164).

At the heart of this novel lies this slippery moment when the persecutor becomes the persecuted, in a way that reveals his inner persecution (hence Avshalom's deterministic remark, "it should have happened"). Avshalom may not have wanted anything to do with the past, but his past chases him. No matter how strongly he renounces his nationality and consciously tries to abolish his sense of national belonging, he ends up finding himself mired in them, just as Paris, the city of art and literature, cannot mask its current and former history of oppression.

Chased by a mob, Avshalom transfuses different moments of persecution:

Soon they will start to throw stones on me, they will stone me, a first salvo, then a second salvo, I will run with the helmet and the weapon in the streets of the third quarter [...]. they would trample me, this crowd with its songs of freedom, Viva Palestine! They will strip off my costume, they know I am an imposter (p. 165).

It is no accident that the moment of conversion occurs during Avshalom's chase after a thief. The theft is far more than an act of survival by the refugee boy: it is a routine symbolic motif in Israeli literature that deals with the conflict – whether it involves confiscation of the property of an enemy that fled (like in Yoram Kanyuk's *Tashakh*), the border-jumping of so-called 'infiltrators', or the issue of identity theft (like in Sayed Kashua's *Second Person Singular*). This motif conceals a pattern in which the prevention of the realization of Palestinian sovereignty leads to an act of counter theft, in which the Palestinian victims rob

their Israeli oppressors the very sense of victimhood and persecution that was so seminal to their collective identity. This is why Avshalom sees himself as “an imposter”.

Portraying the theft as a moment when a persecutor turns into a persecuted, and vice versa, traps, however, the two subjects in an endless play of interchanging mirrors: “he and I are already tied to each other, bound to each other [...], together in the pulse of time”. In all the conflictual moments in the novel, Avshalom describes both sides as equal in power and weakness, in their fight and in their flight, swinging up and down an essentially symmetrical swing: “All we have between us is a hidden distance, an abstract difference that moves everything – these Palestinians, they are mammals and we are birds, they live in water and we live on land” (p. 118). This mode of description creates a ‘zero sum game’ between Israelis and Palestinians, denying the actual gap in their power. Time and again, Avshalom puts himself in the same continuum with refugees – when he is a soldier in Hebron and when he is a foreigner in Paris. It is a game of mirrors mired in a false symmetry and enables one to imagine an equal share in the historic responsibility for the suffering of both peoples, or, conversely, the exact opposite, to shoulder no responsibility whatsoever. Goldberg and Bashir write about the false symmetry in the discourse of the conflict:

What occurred in reality in Paletine/Israel puts Jews and Palestinians in different moral and political positions, which make it difficult to engage in an equal discussion [...]. Such symmetry seeks to blur the reality, where we have an occupier and an occupied; a sovereign and its subjects; those who drive out and those who are forced to exile; a people that founded its homeland and a people that lost its homeland and turned into a people of refugees; a people with rights and a people that was deprived of its rights by the other people (Goldberg & Bashir, 2015, p. 23).

Implicitly, the illusory symmetry in Avshalom’s gaze, and the assignment of events to a force beyond history enable him to obscure the question of the responsibility to acts of violence, and therefore evade any question regarding his own responsibility for his own part in violent acts. Thus, when he describes in his nightmarish language the chase after the detainee, who collapsed after being shot in his arms, he says: “a whistle is heard – a blow; a bullet discharged, somebody shot”. As in other violent events described in Israeli literature and media, the wording is always carefully impersonal, recognizing no active person. Similarly, the option of disobedience is only casually raised – “some guy refuses to join us, he disobeys the order, the commander leaves the office angrily” (p. 115) – and immediately revoked – “I follow orders, I do as I’m told, it’s hard to think when you’re in the middle of it, when you’re part of it, how you will stop it” (p. 116).

Guilt and responsibility

A sense of guilt associated with the ambiguity of responsibility also pervades the episode in which Avshalom, in an attempt to earn some money, babysits a little boy. The boy annoys and bothers him, and when Avshalom tries to shove him off, the boy stumbles down, gets bruised and starts to cry out loud. In front of the attractive mother of the boy, Avshalom insists that he has done nothing, but his aggression towards the boy is now channeled to a fantasy of intercourse with the child's mother, as the boy witnesses them in a twisted 'primal scene', and the mother declaring that he is not her son. The fantasy of denying a motherly bond thus reflects Avshalom's renouncement of responsibility. We also recall that Avshalom himself had denied any relation to his own mother at the beginning of the novel, and refused any contact with her, "to show her that motherhood time is over" (p. 18).

Indeed, denying responsibility and denying the bond with the mother *or* with the nation – is one and the same thing. As Hannan Hever writes,

"taking responsibility for the Palestinian suffering cannot involve withdrawal from the collective that is responsible for the Nakba [...] to say 'I am not part of the Jewish nation' is to renounce responsibility for both Holocausts" (Hever, 2015, pp. 54, 87).

Avshalom's escape from the national order is, at the same time, a return to it: a return to the prevalent ambiguity as to the responsibility towards the Palestinian victims.

Despite the strange unity of the stealing boy and Avshalom that chases him, despite their inseparable bond, their fate presents the crucial difference between them: at the end of the chase the boy is hit by a fancy car, lying injured and distorted on the ground ("this thief is finished, this little boy will be arrested as soon as patrol arrives, what do I know, they will catch him and throw him behind the border" – p. 175), while Avshalom is asked if he happens to be a doctor. The real harmed one is the real refugee. From this moment on, Avshalom begins to acknowledge the failure of his voyage, even if failing to understand the underlying reasons for this, and the political meanings of his choices. In his renouncement of any relation to the nation and of taking the responsibility that comes with this relation, and in the imaginary unification he makes between deserter and refugee, it seems that he overlooked the option suggested by Hannah Arendt, following Beranrd Lazare, of self-expulsion as "a conscious pariah" – one that translates his marginal status to political terms, and becomes a rebel that resists any kind of oppression:

[Lazare] demanded, that is, that the pariah relinquish once and for all the prerogative of the schlemihl cut loose from the world of fancy and illusion, renounce the comfortable protection of nature, and come to grips with the world of men and women. In other words, he wanted him to feel that he was himself responsible for what society had done to him. He wanted him to stop seeking release in an attitude of superior indifference or

in lofty and rarefied cogitation about the nature of man *per se* [...]. Politically speaking, every pariah who refused to be a rebel was partly responsible for his own position and therewith for the blot on mankind which it represented. From such shame there was no escape, either in art or in nature (Arendt, 2007, p. 78).

Like the conscious pariah, Avshalom is full of contempt to the frauds of society; but unlike him, he does not consider the rebellious option. He finds no refuge in art, nor in the literature he wishes to write, which is also haunted by earlier generation's patterns. He finds no place where he can stand outside of history, outside of nationality, outside of his own concrete traumatic experience as a perpetrator and as a victim, outside of responsibility and political meaning. He is hopelessly entangled in his renouncements and can no longer undo his choices. Tragically, the only rebellious act he can think of is suicide – desertion from life itself. The reason for suicide, as he states it in the final lines of the book, is the lies of human beings and their language, who “won't give you the eternity”. Indeed, living *with* human beings and among them entails political awareness, historical consciousness and responsibility towards the other – without it, so it seems, no exile can solve past or present injuries.

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