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Textual Ethos Studies

or Locating Ethics

Edited by

Anna Fahraeus

and AnnKatrin Jonsson



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION Textual Ethos Studies—or Locating Ethics <i>Anna Fahraeus</i>	7
The Novel, the Social and the Event: An International Ethical Encounter <i>Nancy Glazener</i>	35
Excruciating Speech: Louis-Ferdinand Céline's <i>Bagatelles pour un Massacre</i> <i>Nicholas Chare</i>	53
The Grotesque on <i>Fleshing Out</i> the Subject of Ethics <i>Sara Cohen Shabot</i>	67
Playing Ball With God: Breaking the Law in <i>Breaking the Waves</i> <i>Becky McLaughlin</i>	85
Post-textual Ethics: Foucault's Rhetorical Will <i>Stuart J. Murray</i>	101
Shakespeare's <i>Othello</i> : Jealousy and Hermeneutics <i>Michał Paweł Markowski</i>	117
The Ethics of Modality in Pauline Smith's <i>The Sisters</i> <i>Myrtle Hooper</i>	133
Telling Stories: Alterity and Ethics in John Banville's <i>The Untouchable</i> and <i>Shroud</i> <i>Pietra Palazzolo</i>	145
"All this tractate is but a dream": The Ethics of Dream Narration in Thomas Nashe's <i>The Terrors of the Night</i> <i>Per Sivefors</i>	161
Reading Kristeva and Beyond: Psychoanalysis As Textual Ethics <i>Linda Belau</i>	175
Bodily Formations and Reading Strategies in John Donne's <i>Metempsychosis</i> <i>Siobhán Collins</i>	191

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<i>Checkpoint Syndrome: Violence, Madness, and Ethics in the Hebrew Literature of the Intifada</i> <i>Adia Mendelson-Maoz</i>	209
<i>The Uses and Abuses of Children: Fairy Tales and the Pornographic</i> <i>Victoria Best</i>	229
<i>Representations of Rape in Apartheid and Post-apartheid South African Literature</i> <i>Anne Reef</i>	245
<i>Nightwood and the Limits of Representation</i> <i>AnnKatrin Jonsson</i>	263
<i>David Mamet's Altered Ethics: Finding Forgiveness or Something Like It, in House of Games, The Spanish Prisoner, and State and Main</i> <i>Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack</i>	281
<i>"Your otherness is perfect as my death": The Ethics and Aesthetics of Li-Young Lee's Poetry</i> <i>Zhou Xiaojing</i>	297
<i>The Look of Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas, Léo Bronstein, and the Interhuman Intrigue</i> <i>Chris Thompson</i>	315
<i>A Mind Poised Between Desires: The Ethos of T.S. Eliot's Poetry and Criticism</i> <i>David Watson</i>	333
<i>Sentimentality in Postmodernist Fiction: From Ethical Problem to Ethical Possibility</i> <i>Jakob Winnberg</i>	349
<i>Notes on the contributors</i>	365
<i>Index</i>	371

**CHECKPOINT SYNDROME:
VIOLENCE, MADNESS, AND ETHICS IN
THE HEBREW LITERATURE OF THE INTIFADA**

ADIA MENDELSON-MAOZ

This essay discusses Hebrew texts written in Israel in light of the current Intifada that describe the reality in the Occupied Territories and reexamine the prototypical image of the Israeli soldier. The case in point is Liran Ron-Furer's *Checkpoint Syndrome* (2003), an experimental work written as a collection of short poems, which depicts the conflict between the omnipotent Israeli soldier and the helpless Palestinian at the checkpoint, and follows the process of moral corruption experienced by many soldiers during their service. By putting together realistic pseudo documentary experiences with surrealist hallucinations, the text introduces an alternative presentation of the Horrible in accordance with the poetics of the extreme, where the borders between sanity and madness are often tested.

[...] suddenly I find myself kicking one of these guys and shouting at him, lie on your stomach, you piece of shit. And that guy, young but balding, hurries to oblige and rolls on his stomach and whispers to me, begging, like, please, please, *déhilac*, and I put my foot down on him and see this dark stain spreading on his ass. Come here, I scream, shaking with laughter, *walla*, don't know what got into me, maybe joy because someone was that afraid of me, come here, Etzion: he was so afraid he shit his pants! And Etzion Morad stops stomping on the stabber and I see the stabber's face, he must have lost consciousness, it's totally mangled, like a big iron grate scraped it, no nose and no mouth, it's all this red meat. And then, when we're all laughing at that guy who couldn't hold it in and shit, *ya 'ani*, his pants, I suddenly feel that I have also peed in my pants.

Yitzhak Ben-Ner (1989: 36-37)¹

In Yitzhak Ben-Ner's novel *Delusion* (1989), Holly, the protagonist—whose name might hint at his virtuous nature—finds himself cruelly kicking a Palestinian Arab. Initially, his friends had encouraged him to begin torturing the Palestinians, and as he recounts the incidents of the Intifada he seems to

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all passages quoted in this paper have been translated from the Hebrew by Ofer Shorr.

be thanking his comrades for drawing him close to them. The "straight-laced kid" from Tel-Aviv is surprised to discover the power he wields, and feels satisfaction when he sees that the Arab, out of fear, loses control over his bodily functions.

Ben-Ner's extreme text depicts the violence of the Israeli soldier in a direct and graphic manner, as a factor which will ultimately come back to harm Israeli society. Holly and his friends scorn the battered youth, who has lost control of his bowels. But at the same time it appears that Holly himself cannot control his own incontinence. Ben-Ner's scene thus constructs an inverted picture—the violence not only denies the Arab victim his human dignity, but at the same time comes back to haunt the perpetrator—stripping the Israeli soldier of his humanity.

Delusion is but one example of Hebrew literature written by Jews in Israel in light of the Israeli occupation and the first and second Palestinian Intifadas. This literature describes the reality in the Occupied Territories, and reexamines the prototypical image of the Israeli soldier. Following an introduction of modern Hebrew literature and its role in the formation of Zionist national and military objectives, and a presentation of major literary works published at the time of the first and second Intifadas, I will focus on Liran Ron-Furer's *Checkpoint Syndrome* an experimental work, published in 2003 which depicts the meeting of the omnipotent Israeli soldier and the helpless Palestinian at the checkpoint, and describes the process of moral corruption experienced by many soldiers during their service in the Occupied Territories. By moving from realistic experiences to surrealist hallucinations, the text introduces an alternative presentation of the horrible in accordance with the poetic of the extreme, where the borders between sanity and madness are often tested.

The development of modern Hebrew literature provides a dramatic example of the production of national imagination, whose construction involves, as Benedict Anderson has taught us, a writing and rewriting of historical memories and shared narratives that seek to shape the reader's understanding of the nation and its identity (Hever 2002: 2). Since its resurrection at the end of the Nineteenth Century, modern Hebrew literature has had an important role in the consolidation of the Zionist enterprise, and the formation of a new national Jewish identity in The Land of Israel. In this respect, literature has played a significant part in shaping the image of the Israeli soldier. The literature written just before and in light of the 1948 war—which was seen by the Jews in Israel as a war of survival—constructed the heroic image of native Israeli *Sabra*.² This period saw the writing of

² The Sabras were the first Israelis—the first generation, born in the 1930s and 1940s,

many *Bildungsromane* which portrayed the *Sabra* as a healthy, strong and hard-working young man, wholeheartedly committed to toiling for the country, whether it be in the fields, in the construction of roads and buildings, or in defence of the homeland (Shaked 1993: Vol IV, 71-72). The *Sabra* was perceived as a fearless warrior, possessing great intelligence, courage and a willingness to sacrifice his life in defence of the Jews in Israel.

The Hebrew war poetry written in the 1940s and 1950s continued this trend, striving to strengthen the Zionist narrative by constructing an essentialist Zionist history, in order to give meaning to the war and the sacrificing of thousands of young soldiers on the "altar of the homeland" (Miron 1992: 29). The Zionist narrative, which justifies the use of military force in order to create a haven for the Jews, was unanimously accepted, so much so that even the publication of stories such as S. Yizhar's "Hirbat Hiz'a" in 1949, which describes the senseless deportation and killing of Palestinian villagers, could not unravel the thick web of consensus. The story received a lenient and justifying critique, which emphasized the dangers posed by the enemy or blamed the soldiers only for their immaturity or indiscretion.³

Despite fledgling attempts to conduct a critical assessment of the Jewish-Arab relations in the Hebrew literature of the 1960s, as in the early works of A.B. Yehoshua and Amos Oz, the military realm remained for the most part unexamined. The first chinks in the armor began to appear after the Yom-Kippur War in 1973, and the political upheaval in 1977 continued this trend, initiating a literary response (Hever 1999: 116-121). The Lebanon War in 1982 gave rise to another trauma, which further weakened the Israeli consensus and led to a deeper reexamination of the goals of Zionism and their possible realization, casting doubt on the country's just path. Many saw the Lebanon War as a "war of choice"—an unjust and preventable war, which constituted a criminal deviation from the declared humanitarian tradition of Zionism. The military establishment, hitherto a fortress of trust and admiration, was badly shaken with the foundation of the refusal movement—a group of officers and soldiers who announced their specific refusal to take part in Israeli military actions in Lebanon—and found itself on the defensive,

to grow up in the Zionist settlement in Palestine. Socialized and educated in the ethos of the Zionist labor movement and the communal ideals of the kibbutz and moshav, they turned the dream of their pioneer forebears into the reality of the new State of Israel. See Almog, 2000.

³ Yizhar's "Hirbat Hiz'a" has not been translated into English. See Yizhar's "The Prisoner," 1975: 294-310. Shapira, 2000, presents a detailed description of the story's reception.

undergoing a reformulation of its values.⁴ The literary community, as always an important part of the cultural arena, immediately "enlisted" in the cause, yet this time it did not glorify the Israeli soldier, army and country, but described the Israeli army as a cruel oppressor. The committed poetry written by well-known poets such as Natan Zach (1984), Dalia Rabikovich (1986) and Yitzhak Laor (1982, 1985), brutally depicted traditional Zionist roots as well as a graphic description of its victims.

With the exception of a handful of works which dealt with the first Intifada, Hebrew literature abandoned many of its political elements during the 1980s and the 1990s. The Israeli identity crisis of the last two decades, embodied in the growing alienation between different social groups in Israel, and the formulation of the peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the 1990s, led Hebrew literature, or at least its secular liberal elements, to an escapist mode which Balaban describes as "a striving for a good and comfortable life while ignoring all ideologies (save for a general belief in the liberty and rights of the individual)" (Balaban 1995: 32). But this trend did not last long, and after the outbreak of the second Intifada in 2001, Hebrew literature again started confronting social and political problems, writing about the occupation and describing the chaos of values in Israeli society.

Ben-Ner's *Delusion*, written in 1989, at the time of the first Intifada, is one of the first Hebrew novels to describe the horrors perpetrated by Israeli soldiers toward Palestinians, and to examine the Israeli introspection. The novel consists of four parts, each narrated by a different character. The first part of the work, narrated by Holly, describes the gradual moral degradation of the Israeli soldier. The second part is narrated by Holly's father, Oded Tzidon, a doctor who lost his wife in a shooting attack and who describes himself as a warrior for peace. The third part is narrated by Charul, a secret service agent searching for wanted Palestinians, and the final part is narrated by Michel Sachtout, an Israeli soldier institutionalized in a psychiatric hospital. The work creates a distinct link between the figures of Holly Tzidon, the sadistic soldier, and that of the mentally ill Michel Sachtout, to the point where they seem to appear as one. This linkage sketches a process of collapse, in which all the qualities of the Israeli hero, as constructed by Hebrew literature, melt away. Thus, in *Delusion*, the brave hero moves between the image of a violent and brutal character which builds upon its sense of superiority over another human being, and that of a fragmented and terrified character, incapable of functioning in civilian life.

⁴ See Linn, 2002, for further inquiry into the phenomenon of moral disobedience in the Israel Defense Force. Also see Harden and Zehavi, 1985.

Another view of the first Intifada is presented in Ronit Matalon's novel *Bliss*, published in Hebrew in 2000, which describes the friendship of two women, one of whom is a photographer who documents life in the Occupied Territories, maintains ties with Palestinians and brings the images of the occupation to Tel-Aviv. This work expresses the repression of Israeli society, and describes the roots of violence which ultimately wrap themselves around the nucleus of the family and destroy it.

Israeli reality in the time of the second Intifada, where terror strikes everywhere, is represented by Orly Castel-Bloom in her hallucinatory novel *Human Parts* (2002). The title *Human Parts* refers not only to the parts of people's lives which the work portrays, but also, literally, to the body parts scattered on the road after a terrorist attack in the heart of Israel. Through her unique style, which moves between several language registers and constructs a chaotic and incohesive plot devoid of motivation, the author creates a banal description of death, even inserting humorous elements into the bleeding mass of the novel. A. B. Yehoshua, who dealt with the subject of terrorism in his 2001 novel *The Liberated Bride*, also takes on the current situation in Israel, where random death strikes the inhabitants of Jerusalem. His latest novel, *The Mission of the Head of Human Resources* (2004), depicts a journey of spiritual and psychological dimensions in which the head of the department of human resources in a large bakery strives to return the body of a woman killed in a terrorist attack in Jerusalem to her homeland in Europe.

In conjunction with the description of Israeli civilian reality during the second Intifada, in the last three years Hebrew literature has concentrated on depicting and examining the reality inside the Occupied Territories, or in the friction points between the Palestinian population and the Israeli soldiers. These texts posit at their center the Israeli soldier or the secret service agent, and reexamine their role and behavior. The submissions for the annual short story contest of the Israeli daily newspaper "Haaretz" point toward this trend.

The winning story of 2003, written by Efrat Naveh, describes a group of Israeli soldiers in a helicopter carrying a dying Palestinian terrorist to the hospital. The narrator, overwhelmed by the firefight that took place minutes earlier in which his best friend was killed, tries to memorize the friend's face while looking for an answer in the eyes of the wounded terrorist, whose life he should now be trying to save. The story deals with the moral and psychological dilemma of saving the one who killed your friend. Another story, written by "Bambi," deals with an Israeli army unit during Operation Defensive Shield in the Jenin refugee camp, in 2002. The narrator, a reserve soldier, describes the banal and cruel manner in which he and his friends shoot a handicapped Palestinian, simply because he did not stop riding his wheelchair when ordered to.

Both these stories try to locate the origin of misery and despair in Israeli reality, by presenting opposite views of the Israeli army and its operation during the Intifada: Naveh's story takes a humane and moral approach towards the enemy—an adaptation of the traditional approach, which sees the army as holding established and lofty moral values. Bambi's story, on the other hand, undermines the army's morality by showing the brutality and inhumanity of the Israeli soldiers.

These two extremes are astutely and meticulously exemplified in the texts of Ron-Furer, Roy Polity, and Asher Kravitz. Polity's novel, *Roof Rabbits* (2001), which, as its byline states, is based on a true story from the first Intifada, describes the lives of Samir, a Fatah activist, and Ofer, an Israeli Secret Service (Shabak) agent, and the inevitably tragic encounter between them. The book constructs the Shabak agent's character as sensitive and moral, yet at the same time reveals the terrible quality of the unequal relationship between the two. Ofer decides to exploit Samir's distress, brought on by his cancer-ridden father's desperate need of treatment in Israel, and demands he cooperate with the Shabak and disclose information regarding the resistance groups. He admits that "the whole affair was just shameful and unjust. Abu-Hamad was trying to save his father" (Polity 2001:406), yet Ofer's confidence, based on his position as the "powerful side" in the conflict, leads him straight into the hands of his killer Samir, who is trying to avenge his honor.

Kravitz's *I, Moostafa Rabbinovitch*, published in 2004, portrays an Israeli sniper waiting for the right moment to shoot the right person. In this work, the writer also attempts to develop the protagonist as a moral being: the Israeli fighter vows not to kill. "I've decided to serve my life on this wretched planet without killing. I don't want weighing on my conscience the responsibility for cutting down the soul of a human being which, according to the best of sources, was created in God's image [...] most people would find it very easy to adhere to such a vow. Not me. That's how it is when you're a fighter in *Duvdevan*" (2004:6).⁵

In contrast to these two works, Ron-Furer's experimental work *Checkpoint Syndrome*, published in late 2003 does not try to portray the Israeli soldier as carrying out a double role—an occupier, but at the same time a person of moral awareness. *Checkpoint Syndrome* depicts the Israeli soldier as devoid of awareness and describes, with unprecedented harshness, what goes on in the checkpoints built by the IDF (Israeli Defense Force) in

the heart of the Occupied Territories, a meeting point of the omnipotent Israeli and the helpless Palestinian:

I was really excited, first time at the checkpoint, we were all pretty nervous, talking nicely to the Arabs, checking every car thoroughly, the Arabs saw right away that we're new, [...]

[...] smiled at us with that smile of theirs [...]

pretty quickly we learned to work at the checkpoint, felt more comfortable, and the Arabs didn't scare us so much anymore, we slowly realized that they are the ones who should be afraid. [...]

we can also make their lives very difficult. (6-7)

Checkpoint Syndrome is written in short, broken poetry-like lines and does not construct a linear narrative—each episode recounts a different experience, real or imagined. The text is divided into five sections, three of which are given a time and place: "Gaza '97," "Gaza '98," "Gaza '99," which correspond to the three years of military service ("The army conscripted me at age eighteen / and discharged me at age / twenty one" [94]). In between, there are two other sections: the first, entitled "Action," describes an actual capture of a Palestinian suspect, and the second, entitled "Fantasies Pass the Time," describes how the violence and the cruelty take over the domains of human imagination as well.

The dominant sensation in the first section of the work is the boredom of the soldiers at the checkpoint—"Sometimes the boredom at the checkpoint can kill you" (8). The soldiers guarding the checkpoint typically come from combat units, and are trained to engage a defined opponent equal to them in strength. Their stay at the checkpoint—often lasting for days on end and usually consisting of seemingly endless cycles of four-hour guard duty, followed by four hour rest—turn the boredom into a powder keg. The search for "action" and the adjustment to the specific power relations, bring them to alleviate unnecessarily the friction with the Palestinian population passing through the checkpoint, and ultimately lead to the outbreak of violence.

⁵ Duvdevan ("Cherry") is the nickname of an elite combat unit, whose members operate deep inside Palestinian areas, often disguised as Arabs and blending in with the local population.

In the first section of the text, the provocation directed at the Arab population includes humiliation and torture which does not involve direct physical violence. When a taxi driver refuses to turn off the radio, "I take a bullet / out of my / magazine and start / to take the air out / of their rear tire" (10). Others are ordered to stand in line and sing an Israeli song, or are forced to get out of their car and bend to gather their ID cards, after a soldier flings them in the air deliberately. When the regimental commander is about to pay the company a visit and the soldiers need to tidy the checkpoint, "Shachar, the Yemenite bastard / stops this cab full / of kids, he bends over and says / something in Arabic to the kids, / eight little Arab children / get out of the cab / and start to / clean the checkpoint enthusiastically [...]" (26). The soldiers, realizing all their schemes are successful while the Arabs "arrive at the checkpoint with / these huge smiles," as if "trained," begin taking booty from them—first shiny prayer beads, then cigarettes.

In the second section of the work, "Action," the text digresses to a description of physical violence perpetrated by the soldiers towards a Palestinian. The "action" begins with the news about a suspicious figure the soldiers track and catch. The narrator strikes the Arab and ties his hands while the other soldiers step on him. When he cries they continue to beat him until "our Arab / was in bad / shape we beat him up / pretty good" (50). The narrator feels elation at his ability to act violently and does not show any remorse, even when it turns out that "our Arab / just a/sixteen year old kid / mentally retarded" (53).

The soldiers' boredom and their constant urge to check the limits of their power in the first section of the work are replaced by an unrestrained outbreak of violence directed towards a mentally retarded boy in the second section; as described by Ron-Furer in an interview: "Our level of sensitivity was dropping and dropping. The more power-drunk we were, the more the level of cruelty rose and we became more sealed off" (quoted in Shalita, 2003: 17). The description of the "action" as an act of violence towards a mentally ill boy embodies the effects of the mental, emotional and moral distancing of the soldiers, who do not synthesize the meaning of their own behavior.⁶ Furthermore, it seems that the military masculine peer group encourages the violent actions, as a part of the boys' wishes to adopt manly norms of roughness and aggression.⁷ Thus the author states that "we had a

⁶ See Grossman, 1995, for an analysis of distancing mechanisms in the military setting. See also Holmes, 1985: 276, 361; Ball, 1999: 220.

⁷ See Meisels, 1995: 98. UNESCO's expert group meeting report, "Male Roles and Masculinities in the Perspective of a Culture of Peace" argues that "Boys' peer group life, military training, and mass media often promote a direct link between being a 'real man' and the practice of dominance and violence" (1997).

couple of guys who said it's not nice and were classified as losers right away." (quoted in Shalita 2003: 18).

In the third section of the work, "Gaza '98," the violence becomes so routine that the soldiers almost compete among themselves who will carry out more "surprising" actions, "[...] Shachar / stood above / the Arab, took out his cock / and started pissing on / the Arab's head" (62), while Dado forces an Arab to kneel on all fours and orders him to bark like a dog, while shouting at him "bad dog! Why /did you piss on the carpet?" (65). The description of the daily horrors at the checkpoint soon crosses over into the realms of fantasy and imagination, as witnessed in the fourth section of the work.

This rifle, on me
all day and I
don't even feel
it on me,
looks so natural
walking around with
a rifle, but I
look at it
now, thinking how
much damage you can
do with that
thing, a picture
appears in my head,
to put the barrel
of the rifle into
a woman's cunt,
and shoot
—wonder how it
will look... (68)

Militarism, which encourages "manly" values of physical stoutness and emotional coarseness, is characterized to a large degree through the gender opposition between men and women, or between "men" and homosexuals. The intense preoccupation of the homosocial military society with the formulation of masculinity and sexuality, leads to diffusion of military language and violent references into the domain of sexual relations between men and women.⁸ Sex has a tangible presence in Ron-Furer's text, through

⁸ Holmes describes the "overlap between the language of sex and that of battle" (1985: 57). Lieblach and Perlow, 1988, hold that the military service in Israel is perceived as essential to a boy's right to belong to the inner circle of adult males.

the description of the sexual relationship between the narrator and his girlfriend and his habit of masturbating while looking at pornographic movies and magazines, and later through his fantasies, reveries and passions. The fantasy of inserting the barrel of the rifle into the female genitals is maybe the harshest metaphor for sexual violence. Yet the author does not stop with this description, but goes on to describe, in great detail, the violent rape of a Palestinian woman, accompanied by her murder and defilement, then proceeds to a second rape image, this time of a pregnant Palestinian woman. The brutal images of rape are concluded with two scenes involving the narrator and his girlfriend. In the first, the narrator wants to ask his girlfriend if she thinks he is a good person, and in the second he tries to violently sodomize her, "she screamed in pain, / and I took it out right away / and started to say I'm sorry [...] / [...] and I felt / like a rapist" (82).

The book concludes with the section "Gaza '99," and the narrator's declaration that he shot someone that day. In the midst of a demonstration, the narrator spots an Arab man who incites and directs the demonstrating children. He fires one bullet and wounds him: "I've waited for this since / basic training, in fact / to shoot someone, / the real thing" (87), he explains. After his friends "slap him on the shoulder / 'way to go, dude! / you're the man!" (87), all he does is walk around the checkpoint and count the days until his discharge.

Checkpoint Syndrome is but one example of a text of protest, written in the veins of committed Hebrew poetry and of the contemporary extreme in the Hebrew literature. Its poetic roots can be found in the committed poetry written by Natan Zach, a key figure in modern Israeli Poetry, following the Lebanon War. Zach's committed poetry fuses brutality and banality:

So there was a great exaggeration in the body count:
some counted a hundred and some, hundreds
and someone said I counted 36 burnt women
and his friend said you're not right, because only eleven
and the error is deliberate and political, not accidental
and since I've begun, I'll also say this
only eight women were slaughtered,
because two were shot
and one is in doubt and it's not clear
if she was slaughtered, raped or just stabbed in the belly
and also about the children the last word hasn't yet been said
everyone admits that six were crucified and one tortured,
before his head was bashed in...

in these things one mustn't exaggerate
and should be wary: these are human lives
for the reports, God forbid, may be wrong

[.....]

for the wish to be accurate is no less human
than the wish to kill, rape, bash and exterminate
your enemy, rival, next door neighbor, the suspicious stranger, or just
any man, woman and child in the world. (1984:60)⁹

This poem, "On the Wish for Accuracy," brings discomfort not only because of the graphic descriptions of the horrors, but also because of its criticism towards the attempts to describe what happened, attempts which aim to bypass the moral and human aspect of the problem and thus, according to David Fishelov, "constitute a continuation and an indirect collaboration with the horror itself" (2002-2003: 184-5). In this respect, *committed poetry* criticizes not only the events themselves but also their representation, which is, influenced by the sort of introspection the society perpetrates—or does not—in regard to them. Ron-Furer's text combines these two levels by forming a gap between the graphic descriptions of the horrors and the vague and humorous manner in which the soldiers perceive their actions. The radicalization of the situations and the soldiers' lack of any critical examination create chaos and incoherence in the text.

Checkpoint Syndrome's radical nature builds on the contemporary extreme in the Hebrew literature of the last decades, particularly in the style exemplified by Orly Castel-Bloom.¹⁰ The new poetics of Hebrew literature strive towards a disintegration of a coherent world-view through a series of rhetorical devices such as shifting from an authoritative narrator to an unauthoritative and unreliable narrator; using "slim language," with a deliberately narrow vocabulary, a colloquial style and basic grammar "flattening" the psychological and emotional complexity of the characters dissolving borders between the self and the world and between the private body and its environs; relinquishing a clear and linear plot, and creating implausibility in the description of the fictional world (Hever 1999: 142-170; Balaban 1995: 48-59). Emotional and spiritual abundance is replaced by the extreme which, in the spirit of post-modernism, aims at "[t]esting the limits of human experience [...] with extreme states of mind and body—hallucination, madness, sexual excess—and deliberately violates social norms through scandalous or criminal behavior" (McHale 1987: 172).

In its social context, the poetics of the extreme creates a relationship between the physical and the political: "The collective is arranged according to the individual, to his limits and physical proportions," in Hannan Hever's

⁹ Rabikovich's poem "On the Treatment of Children in Wartime," 1986: 69-70 corresponds with Zach's.

¹⁰ See for example *Dolly City and Human Parts*

words (1999:153). A sharp example of this can be found in Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City*:

The baby was still lying on his stomach. I put him to sleep, even though I still didn't know where I was going to cut [...] I took a knife and began cutting here and there. I drew a map of the Land of Israel—as I remembered it from the biblical period—on his back, and marked in all those Philistine towns like Gath and Ashkelon, and with the blade of the knife I etched the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River which empties out into the Dead Sea [...] drops of blood began willing up in the river beds cutting across the country. The sight of the map of the Land of Israel amateurishly sketched on my son's back gave me a frisson of delight [...] my baby screamed in pain but I stood firm [...] I contemplated the carved-up back: it was a map of the Land of Israel: nobody could mistake it. (44)

Castel-Bloom's *Dolly City* is the story of a Jewish-Israeli mother. Dolly is an extreme example of the "Yiddisher-Mama," loving, overprotecting and unable to let her son live his own life, but she is also an Israeli patriotic mother, who takes upon herself the sacred mission of raising an Israeli soldier. This unbearable conflict is expressed through the metaphor of the baby's body: The map of the Land of Israel, carved by the mother on her baby's back, symbolizes the fact that his body belongs to the country; when he grows up he will serve in the Israeli army, patrolling the borders of this controversial map.¹¹

Ron-Furer's work is deeply rooted in the poetics of the contemporary extreme, characterized by harsh, anomalous and incoherent situations which often deviate from realism and create a sensual and cognitive dissonance. In this respect, not only does the work present extreme situations, but it also constructs them within a banal framework. In doing so, it tends to turn the horrific into the grotesque, and acclimatize the reader to the description in order to derive her, temporarily at least, of her judgment.¹²

In Ron-Furer's work, as in Castel-Bloom's, it is the physicality which builds up the extreme situations and conveys the emotional and mental illness. The narrator's violence towards the Palestinian men and women, and later towards everyone in the world, is borne out of physical advantage. In

¹¹ It is interesting to note that later on in the novel, when the son is an adult, Dolly looks at the map she had carved on his back and discovers, to her amazement, that it has "returned" to the '67 borders. The debate over the questions of the Occupied Territories is thus embodied through the physical and the personal.

¹² See Mendelson-Maoz, 1998: 162-177. On the state of uncertainty and cognitive dissonance, see the term "negative capability" in Tsur, 1985: 144-145, and in Adamson, 1998: 101-102.

contrast to the robust soldier, who "has a really / great body, with muscles / in his arms and this six-pack / in the stomach" (39), the Arabs are presented as grotesque and deformed, "an Arab midget on a cart" (32), "[...] the face / of a deformed boy, / and a big, stout body" (45), and the women are mainly portrayed pornographically. The soldiers act without moral awareness, and even when the narrator shoots the Arab and faces an inquiry, he admits to feeling nothing. The lack of any critical consciousness leads to a banal description of the terrible situations, some of which depict hallucinations of violence and rape; the repetition of these events and the absence of a linear narrative create circularity, as if we were in a warped world with no way out.

The discord between the physical and the mental leads to madness, which is manifested from the very first pages of the book, in the author's introduction:

Hello to all you human beings the little slaves how are you I'm great I'm flying high above the world and don't give a fuck about anything [...] now I'm finally free and far away from all the crap you have there in you're crappy country fuck I'm never going back now I'm free the crazy energies of Goa have opened up my head and my chakras I get your plans how you were pulling my leg and fucking with my mind I forgot what I was you stuck me in stinking Gaza and before that you brainwashed me with your guns and the training you turned me into dirt until I couldn't think anymore and the only thing that kept me sane at the end was the drugs [...] you used me like a robot and only now on some beach in Goa [...] it all came together and I saw what you tried to do to me I was afraid of smiles you turned me into something else I wasn't me it's somebody else. (3-4)

This excerpt leads the reader into a distorted and impossible world. This is a world where the sane is the one who escapes reality, travels to India and takes drugs, and the insane is the one living in the country. Thus the oppositions between real and imagined, between sanity and insanity, between human awareness and robotic behavior, collapse in this work to create a world devoid of meaning and value. Yet in spite of the collapse of hierarchies and the dissipation of identity, this work displays a lack of acquiescence which is a necessary condition for any possibility of moral justification. Thus, in Adi Ophir's words, it is this presentation of ethical nebulosity, this constantly rising threshold of sensitivity which characterizes contemporary culture, bombarded as it is with images of atrocities without any criticism, which constructs the moral viewpoint of the work (2000:115-133).

Ron-Furer's biography illuminates the process which led him to write the book. Born in the Israeli city of Givatim in the 1970s, he went to the

private and lucrative Thelma Yalin High School for the Arts, enlisted in the army and served in the *Shimshon* unit, which was solely designated for service in the Occupied Territories. Ron-Furer served in the territories during the late 1990s, not at the time of the Intifada, but the timing of the text's publication makes it impossible to disassociate it from the current violence.

Ron-Furer was not the typical fighter of his unit. He came from an artistic background, and was considered a moderate soldier. Nevertheless, his lengthy service led him to check the limits of his power feeling at ease with the new violence emanating from him.

I was carried away by the possibility of acting in the most primal and impulsive manner, without fear of punishment and without oversight. [...] It gradually becomes coarser and coarser. [...] the checkpoint became a place to test our personal limits. How tough, how callous, how crazy we could be [...]. (quoted in Levy 2003)

After his discharge Ron-Furer traveled to India, like many other Israelis who wish to cut loose from Israeli reality after their service. He returned to Israel to study design at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. Since his release, Ron-Furer had felt that the memories of his service in Gaza were still haunting him, and that he could not continue living his life without doing something about it. Towards the end of his studies he decided to write the book, in order to break the Israeli code of silence:

You can adopt the most hard-line political positions, but no parent would agree to his son becoming a thief, a criminal or a violent person [...] The problem is that it's never presented this way. The boy himself doesn't portray himself this way to his family when he returns from the territories. On the contrary—he is received as a hero, as someone who is doing the important work of being a soldier. [...] no one talks about it around the dinner table. (quoted in Levy 2003)

Following the values he was raised upon, Ron-Furer joined the army wishing to do his part for the country. He continued serving in the army reserves and even took part in operational activities in the territories during the current Intifada. When he was called to serve at a checkpoint he did not turn to refusal, but rather to an army psychiatrist. Despite his radical book Ron-Furer is not politically committed, and does not feel comfortable “with the political affiliation connected to the refuseniks” (quoted in Shalita 2003: 93).

Checkpoint Syndrome was received with shock both in Ron-Furer's immediate environment and in the cultural and literary arenas: the manuscript of the work was rejected by several publishing houses, and Gvanim

Publishing House, which ultimately decided to release the book, wrote on its back cover that it deliberated at length before making its decision, but ultimately felt that the book is important to understand the racist syndrome.

Today I talked on the cellphone with my big sister. She's this hotshot psychologist lives in Tel-Aviv with her husband. [...] she told me again that I need to be aware of what I'm doing, and remember that these are people who pass through the checkpoint and all that. She told me about these tests that were done on soldiers who were in the Intifada, [...] and years later went into shock, and had problems [...] (21-22)

In Ron-Furer's work, the big sister represents Israelis who are aware of what is going on and are able to see the big picture, yet go on with their lives without taking action. The narrator mocks his sister “she doesn't really understand what it's like to be here” and calls her “the leftist psychologist”—“we're all good people there / in the company, we're not Nazis / who like to hurt Arabs, / like my sister might think” (22). The package she sends in the mail does not include, as might be expected, “candies and treats,” but a pamphlet called “Checkpoint Syndrome” (79), which describes the risks of psychological damage done to soldiers who serve in the Occupied Territories. Ron-Furer's text is an alternative to this pamphlet, as he replaces the sterile and professional vocabulary with his bleeding and violent descriptions.

The descriptions of torture and cruelty, as well as the brutal fantasies, all given without reflexivity or awareness, reveal the critical position of the text, whereby involvement in the dynamics of the checkpoint may lead to the development of a violent syndrome from which nobody is immune, certainly not a young soldier in his twenties. Hence, the text takes a position on one of the burning questions in the Israeli discourse of the occupation—can the Israeli soldier maintain his humanity while partaking in the dynamics of the checkpoint? Does the occupation corrupt?

This question has been the subject of heated public discussions in the Israeli media, by well known critics and politicians as well as ordinary people. “The IDF subjects itself to the highest moral standards, and

successfully lives up to them [...] it seems to me that you yourself were in great mental distress, which does not represent daily reality at all," argues Mordechai Weiss in a letter to the editor (2003:10). "It was not the checkpoint that pissed on an Arab's head, or joyfully hit a retarded boy," writes Roy Liran referring to his personal experience, "that was you and your friends. The responsibility is your own, your group's and your commanders' at the time. My comrades in arms and I never did things like these" (2003:10). In contrast to the statements blaming the soldiers' personal irresponsibility, there are the positions of the *refuseniks*. Shimry Tzameret, who is serving a lengthy sentence in a military prison for refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories, contends that Israeli society is laid bare and wounded by "the checkpoint generation": "That is the truth, those are the norms. And whoever thinks that they disappear the moment our soldiers cross the green line back into the country is mistaken. Violence against women and children, violence on the road, violence on the street" (2003: 10). Varda Cohen-Silver, in a letter to the editor, adds that "[t]hose boys are not to blame for becoming monsters, we, the generation of parents, are to blame"—the parents' generation, which still adhered to the mythical view of the Israeli soldier as doing God's work, which did not see how the state took the children and sent them to a place where force reigns. In this respect, Cohen-Silver recognizes the contemporary Israeli discourse, of which Ron-Furer's text is a part, as "a struggle for the soul of Israel" (2003:10).

Ron Furer's text, *Checkpoint Syndrome*, and other works written in the shade of the current Intifada are part of the cultural and the political discourse in Israel, targeted to examine the heart of the Israeli identity. As hinted by Yitzhak Laor, one of the main political poets in Israel of today, in his poem about Leena Nablousi, they cannot give the victims consolation or relief:

The poem about Leena Nablousi aged seven
teen from Nablus who fled the armed soldier as from
the bear made it up the stairs to the third floor
was shot with one bullet right in the head and fell dead on the stairs
there's no point in writing this poem.
What the children from Leena's class need is not a poem. (1982: 47)

What the children from Leena's class need is not a poem. And yet Yitzhak Laor has written it. He wrote it not for Leena's class but for his Israeli readers. The Palestinians waiting at the IDF checkpoints do not need Ron-Furer's text, either.¹³ His text—harsh, extreme, agitating—is read by Israelis,

¹³ Still, Ron-Furer's text is used by the Palestinian Ministry of Information's propaganda and appears on its website: [http://www.minfo.gov.ps/feature/hebrew/22-](http://www.minfo.gov.ps/feature/hebrew/22-12-03a.htm)

which today find themselves at a crossroads, struggling to find their future and moral compass.

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