

# "The Private Shadow and the Shadows that are Cast upon Me": What is a Mizrahi Writer? On Shimon Adaf's Early Poetry<sup>1</sup>

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## I. The Hidden Mizrahi Voice and the Shadow Cast Upon It

In a 2002 interview titled "They Want Me to Put a Little Couscous into the Poems," Shimon Adaf spoke of the personal and cultural conflict that arises from his two books:

First of all, there is **my private shadow**, which I **attempt to reduce as much as possible**. Then there are **the shadows cast upon me**: Zionism, Western culture, *Mizrahiness*, [...] I live in conflict: I was educated in school and at the university in the Western method, but my parents spread the Mizrahi worldview.

Adaf differentiates here between two kinds of shadows. The ones cast on him are his consciousness of social dictates: the representation of home, the fantasy of the Greek heroes, and Zionist culture (which appears through descriptions of Tel Aviv) are revealed as shadows that surround him, as various costumes that prevent him from creating for himself a private shadow of his own, an autonomous, disconnected world. Thus, the way in which Adaf succeeds in creating for himself a new, autonomous world appears as a practice of evasion of locations as a marker of the distance between him and the shadows cast on him.

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I would like to approach the question of Mizrahi identity by posing the question "What is a Mizrahi writer?" as part of the process of deconstructing the subject. Here I take my inspiration from Michel Foucault's question, "What is an author?," which followed from Roland Barthes' notion of the disappearance of the author from the text. Foucault claims that:

Writing unfolds like a game that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, Foucault relates to the author as a function and claims that the spaces within which this function operates must be identified as empty.<sup>3</sup> According to Foucault, the author is a system of discourse that makes it possible to unite several texts, to differentiate them from others, and to establish among them an apparent relationship of homogeneity, closeness, and authenticity.<sup>4</sup> Foucault presents the author and the act of writing as a place of absence. At the same time, he chooses not to dwell on the empty place of the subject, but rather on the ways in which the empty places that remain act as a function of certain fields of discourse in society.<sup>5</sup> As I will claim, "Mizrahi" identity is a marker of movement. Jacques Derrida defined the term

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault (1986) [1969]. "What is an Author?" in: *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1984, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-108.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. Hanna Soker-Shvager investigated the way in which the construct "Yaakov Shabtai" was constructed by the critics, trendsetters in the literary establishment, journalists, and family members. Hanna Soker-Schwager. *Mechashef Hashevet Mimeonot Ovdim* (The Tribal Wizard from Workers' Dwellings). Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad. 2007. See also Yigal Schwartz, *Pulchan Hasofer Vedat Hamedina*. (The Cult of the Author and the State Religion). Or Yehudah: Dvir, 2011.

"difference," trace, as part of the structure of the possibility of return and meaning. This is a structure within which exist perpetual movement and a gap between the effort to define and the object of the definition, which evades the possibility of capturing it,<sup>6</sup> so that the attempt to define a category of identity is doomed to failure from the start. The definition of *Mizrahi* identity always leads to a constant movement of the marker, and in the end to the failure of the definition. Adaf's poetry succeeds in challenging and expanding the boundaries of the essentialist term "Mizrahi author" as referring to someone who has one ethnic background and a "unified" subject of writing in his books.

The Israeli critical discourse still sets up clear boundaries between *Mizrahi* and Western writers. "Mizrahiness" is defined by Hanan Hever, Yehouda Shenav, and Pnina Mutsafi Haller as "containing Ashkenaziness,"<sup>7</sup> so that the attempt of Mizrahi authors to enter Israeli or Western culture is still perceived as part of "Mizrahi perspectives" that repeatedly fix it in the Mizrahi category and prevent it from breaking through the categorical boundaries of identity. On the other hand, the category of "white" has remained "transparent."

In this article, I will explore the way in which Adaf's poetry resists the construction of the "Mizrahi author / subject" as a fabricated unity and as an act of resistance that moves between predetermined locations and definitions without making a place for itself. In his poetry, Adaf seeks to establish a poetic speaker who objects to the identity category of "the Mizrahi voice." It seems that at the foundation of his poetic character lies a hidden vacuum that can be filled through a practice of evading defined locations, but, at the same time,

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, (1978) "Cogito and the History of Madness", *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 37-76.

<sup>7</sup> Hannan Hever, Yehouda Shenav, and Pnina Motzafi-Haller (Eds.) (2002) *Mizrahim Beisrael: Iyun Bikorti Mechudash*. (Mizrahim in Israel: A Critical Observation into Israel's Ethnicity). Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: The Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, p. 17.

Adaf acknowledges the materials of reality and the shadows of culture that penetrate and populate this vacuum.

Adaf's first book, *Hamonolog shel Ikarus* (Icarus' Monologue) (1997), was very well received. It was awarded the prize for first books of the Israeli Ministry of Education and was accepted into the Ministry's curriculum upon publication. With the publication of his second book, *Mashechavti Tzel Hu Haguf Haamiti* (That Which I Thought Shadow is the Real Body) (2002), Adaf was appointed editor of Keter Publishing's original books, and became a trendsetter of literary tastes. Yet, despite his rapid and positive reception, most of the critical articles written on Adaf's first two books, while they described him as a new voice in Hebrew literature, in certain ways "imprisoned" him in the category of the peripheral Mizrahi writer. As Alon Alters writes, Adaf finds his voice precisely when he gets to Sderot, and not when he writes about the West.<sup>8</sup> Only a few critics chose to abandon the stereotypical categorization for the universal and related to the urban legend that Adaf spun in the border areas between the local and Greek myth.<sup>9</sup> Dror Burstein writes that "every word has a flight coordinate that takes off into the horizon of the imagination"<sup>10</sup> While most articles addressed the transition from the local to the mythical, but chose to emphasize the poems that focused on Sderot, not one of them addressed the questions of why all of Adaf's words have "flight coordinates," why he escapes into imagination, what he is escaping from, to what places his imaginings take him, and what his fantasy contains. In this article, I would like

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<sup>8</sup> Alon Alters, "Ilanot Gevohim" (High Pines). Haaretz Literary Supplement 28. October 8, 1997, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> Rafi Weichert, "Achul Beahava" (Eaten Up by Love), *Yediot Aharonot, Saturday Supplement on Culture, Literature, and Art*. June 6, 1997, pp.167-8.

<sup>10</sup> Dror Burstein, "Orfeus Misderot" (Orpheus from Sderot). *Haaretz Culture and Literature Supplement*. April 12, 2002. E2.

to examine how in each of the poems Adaf's personal shadow deals with a sense of remoteness and rejection—both his own and of "Sderot" as a place—cast upon him by the shadows of the hegemonic culture. I aim to show how, with the aid of his imagination, Adaf turns that rejection into a wonderful fantasy about himself, and transforms the ugliness of Sderot into something fabulous. Shimon Adaf's writing represents a new voice in Hebrew literature, a voice that succeeds in complicating the terms "center" and "periphery" and break through the category "Mizrahi," and by doing so inverts the relationship between Tel Aviv and Sderot and establishes a new center.

## **II. Between the Poetic Speaker and the Threatening Father**

Adaf turns his own sense of remoteness and that of the place where he grew up into a wonderful fantasy and Sderot's ugliness into something wonderful. There is a great deal of courage and power in the attempt to turn the sense of rejection toward the place into a fantasy and its ugliness into beauty, but there is also a price to be paid: it fixes Adaf in the infantile stage, the imaginary stage, at which he is unable to be liberated from the split between the present place—the culture of his parents and Sderot—and the fantasy that he is weaving. Adaf defines himself as "I" from within the split, just as a child looking in a mirror experiences the split between the "I" that lacks, which is cut off, as he experiences his body, and the "I" that is reflected in the mirror, as a perfect and all-powerful "I", in Lacan's description of the mirror stage of development.<sup>11</sup> The imaginary escape turns the experience of remoteness and rejection into a mythical-powerful fantasy, but at the same

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan (1966). "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Ecrits*. London, New York: Routledge, p. 3.

time it is revealed that the child's personal sense of rejection and the remoteness of the place infiltrate into the fantasy and disrupt it.

In order to understand the location Adaf is formulating in his poetry and the tension within the poetic speaker between Israeli culture and the Mizrahi sources of his father, it is necessary to examine the relationship of the generations to one another as well as the tension that exists between the poetic speaker and his father. At the foundation of the relationship between the speaker and his father there is a sense of threat. Freud describes the situation of being threatened as ambiguous and belonging to two spheres: the familiar, the pleasant and the unknown, the hidden, frightening, and repressed.<sup>12</sup> The source of the sense of threat lies in repressed childhood feelings and the return of the repressed in the present and in adulthood. One of the sources of the sense of threat is the anxiety associated with the childhood castration complex. The sense of threat is expressed in monstrous characteristics such as repeated physical injuries that are awakened in a person precisely in a domestic context, in an environment that is supposed to be protective.<sup>13</sup> I would like to examine the cutting-off point between the Oedipus complex and the various cultural locations of the father in the world of Adaf's poetry. For the poetic speaker, the father represents what is threatened, since he is familiar, part of the speaker's "I," and also the Moroccan "other," through whom the Moroccan culture that the speaker is trying to repress makes its presence known. The father, by his very presence, constantly undermines the speaker's repression and his attempt to distance himself from the father and from Moroccan culture.

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<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud. "The Uncanny." *Freud; Art and Literature*. London: Penguin Books, 335-376.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

The poem "Evening Prayer" presents the Oedipal story of a small, threatened boy in his bed and his father, who is praying nearby. The Oedipal relationship could have been solved through identification with the father, but such a solution is impossible in a society in which the father represents the repressed "other." Therefore, the speaker conducts an ambivalent and fractured mirror relationship with his father and experiences his position as threatened. The sense of threat awakened in the presence of the father's Moroccan accent leads to the speaker's attempt to repress the exilic accent and to compensate himself by endeavoring to control the hegemonic Hebrew language.

**Evening Prayer<sup>14</sup>**

I'm not understood

by the words.

At some age

when you still wet the bed

and there is a father praying nearby, behind a wall

He is, He is. I am not just saying it,

he exists like an axe blow reaching my neck,

cracks appearing along the length of the air

and through them

Sabbath evening.

The Song of Songs

falls with an untamed roar

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<sup>14</sup> Shimon Adaf (2002). *Ma shechashavti tzel hu haguf haamiti* (What I Thought was Shadow is the Real Body). Jerusalem: Keter (translation by Becka Mara McKay).

of lust.

“Here it comes,” the voice bent,  
cruel only to the degree  
that a father is cruel, which is to say  
a lot.

Syllables are burned in the throat’s reaches.

I’m cruel too,  
but not enough to cause love.  
The voice’s sweet fragment slips away  
and in the mouth the Hebrew language  
is already a whore  
easily seduced by the temptations of distant exiles.  
She is thick as blood, her kisses  
stolen  
or of death,  
but all that remain  
for another small eternity.

As the poem opens, the speaker, from a sense of power, fractures the Hebrew with "I'm not understood by the words" (*ani lo muvan et hamilim*). In Hebrew, the faulty syntax is ambiguous, and it is not clear whether the speaker does not understand or is not understood. In an interview, Adaf noted: "Language was very interesting to me, and it was important for me to have a

command of it, also as an attempt to belong, by means of it, to Israel."<sup>15</sup> Adaf, who lives in the periphery, wants to gather his strength and belong to the Hebrew language and through it to experience his belonging to the "esteemed" Israel. Frantz Fanon emphasized the effort made by the colonized to acquire the language of the colonized:

the Negro [...] will be proportionately whiter – that is, he will come closer to being a real human being – in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. [...] a man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language.<sup>16</sup>

In a similar way, Adaf, in one sentence, marks his command of the language, but also his frustration at not understanding the words of the father, who may be praying the evening service (*arvit*) or speaking Arabic (*aravit*).<sup>17</sup>

A sense of frustration awakens in the speaker an embarrassing or forbidden memory, whose source is, perhaps, in the infantile stages of his childhood, and he confesses: "at some age / when you still wet the bed / and there is a father praying nearby, behind a wall / He is, He is. I am not just saying it / he exists like an axe blow reaching my neck." The response to the fear of the axe is bed-wetting, which hints at his sense of castration in light of the violent and aggressive father. I read the repressed threat here against the background of the repressed culture, in which the speaker

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<sup>15</sup> Yehuda Koren (2002). *Hem Rotzim Sheachnis K'tzat Couscous Lashirim* (They Want Me to Put a Little Couscous into the Poems). Interview with Shimon Adaf. *Yediot Ahronot*. Saturday Culture, Literature, Art Supplement. March 22, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Frantz Fanon (2008) "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," *Black Skin White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, p.18.

<sup>17</sup> In Hebrew, the words for "evening prayer" (*arvit*) and "Arabic" (*aravit*) are spelled the same, (but pronounced differently).

discovers that life with the father is a nightmare that appears suddenly, as it does in a declaration, from a place of resistance, in another poem: "I will yet awaken from the dreadful dream of biography."<sup>18</sup> But we must ask why Adaf has to awaken from the "dreadful dream of biography," what is it concealing, and why is it so threatening? Apparently, it is concealing the erotic-instinctive-threatening relationship of the father to language:

"The Song of Songs / falls with an untamed roar / of lust / 'Here it comes,' the voice bent, / cruel only to the degree / that a father is cruel, which is to say / a lot." The mention of the Song of Songs as an erotic love prayer between the members of a couple or its allegorical meaning of the People Israel and G-d, and the use of the word "lust" (*cheshek*) testify that the language may serve as the beloved of the father or be identified with the mother. But the beautiful love and the erotic treatment of the language are shattered in light of the father's animal-like urges toward it, and in the way he pronounces it. He is perceived as being cruel to the language, perhaps even polluting it, "raping" it: "cruel only to the degree / that a father is cruel, which is to say / a lot."

It seems that the speaker is attempting to distance himself from the prayer and from his father's foreign accent, but at the same time, beneath his attempts to repress the father's language, to define himself in opposition to the father, there suddenly appears an image that testifies to the relationship of duplication between father and son, as the duplication of the erotic treatment of language. In the third stanza, it becomes clear that the voices, saturated with the guttural sounds typical of the Moroccan

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

language, take over the speaker/son as well, and are described as penetrating his throat as a violent and castrating act: "Syllables are burned in the throat's reaches. / I'm cruel too, / but not enough to cause love. / The voice's sweet fragment slips away / and in the mouth the Hebrew language is already a whore." The Moroccan accent as something internal that bursts forth from an undefined place may be the father's or the son's, without their having control of it: "an untamed roar of lust," "syllables are burned," sweet fragments," "cracks appearing along the length of the air." The sounds are described as roars of breakage, of smashing, lacking meaning and emphasizing both a sexual, wild, unknown, and castrating element and Adaf's inability to contain and control these wild sounds.

At the same time, the place where the speaker / son slips into the use of the Moroccan language is the place where Adaf creates an additional act of control of the Hebrew language: "and in the mouth the Hebrew language / is already a whore / easily seduced by the temptations of distant exiles." With a kind of "bad boy's" defiance and insolence, the speaker uses the Arabic word for whore, "*sharmuta*," perhaps angry or defying the fact that the "clean" Hebrew language is fragmented into harsh, insolent Hebrew that dares to challenge the superior, standard Hebrew. At the same time, Adaf's "Evening Prayer" refers to Yona Wallach's "Hebrew," where she wrote "Hebrew is a woman bathing."<sup>19</sup> But while Wallach compares Hebrew to a woman bathing, Adaf compares Arabic / Hebrew spoken in a foreign accent (of "distant exiles") to a woman behaving like a whore. While Wallach emphasizes the cleanliness of the

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<sup>19</sup> Yona Wallach (1992) *Tat Hakara Niftachat Kmo Menifa*, (selected poems 1963 – 1985), Tel-Aviv: Hkibutz Hameuchad, pp. 180-181. (translation Hannah Adelman Komy Ofir)

language, Adaf discovers the polluted, forbidden places in which the language becomes a submissive whore. The submissiveness and promiscuity of the Hebrew language, which allow the exilic Arabic language to penetrate it, touch the speaker in a pleasurable and forbidden way. Choked by forbidden kisses, he shouts: "[s]he is thick as blood, / her kisses / stolen / or of death, / but all that remain / for another small eternity." The speaker's use of the words "thick as blood" to describe the language bring to mind the blood relationship with his mother; the forbidden touches between the speaker and the language are the forbidden kisses between him and his mother.<sup>20</sup>

The speaker's repressed ambition to touch the exilic Moroccan accent, to be a part of it, like a child's desire for its mother, also a "forbidden place,"—the exilic Moroccan place that threatens and castrates and ends in death. Thus, the incestuous relationship with the language, which may have been raped by the father and is now making love with the son, leads to death and castration, but the language also touches eternity.

### **III. The "Happy" Imagination**

The threatening "mirror" relationship between the father and the speaker and the unsolved attitude toward the father's place of birth cause Adaf to escape from reality to the fantasy of the world of children. Under the title "From the Fairytales of my Childhood," the poem "Ice Age" presents a picture that opposes and completes the one in the previous

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<sup>20</sup> In an interview, Adaf revealed that for him, the East is found in his mother's glance. See Yehuda Koren (2002). *Hem Rotzim Sheachnis K'tzat Couscous Lashirim* "They Want Me to Put a Little Couscous into the Poems." Interview with Shimon Adaf. *Yediot Ahronot. Saturday Culture, Literature, Art Supplement*. March 22, 2002, p.6.

poem, the mirror image of an ideal and perfect "I," against which the fragmented, castrated, and interrupted "I" is experienced:

### **Ice Age<sup>21</sup>**

When the Ice Age came labored I,  
keeper of the forest, with an axe and a saw  
to maintain the fire  
save for a distant tree that was close to my heart  
In its drooping branches  
the sediment of light pooled.

Drops of frost rose to bite the wind  
and the snow turned blue on the slopes.  
The arcs of water tilted and froze  
in calculated angles.

By night, wonderful rains grew from the sky  
And the stars twinkled among them like droplets of dew.  
By night stormy limbs of spider-like godliness stretched.

The lightening plundered the poor stumps  
as much as it could,  
as far as I could guess, malicious intent behind it.  
The history of happiness rewrites  
the history of misery

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<sup>21</sup> Shimon Adaf (1997) *Hamonolog shel Ikarus* (Icarus' Monologue). Tel Aviv: Gvanim, p. 64 (translated by Hannah Adelman Komy Ofir).

to justify itself.

Adaf is preparing like a superhero. Unlike the frightened, weak boy revealed in the poem discussed above, here he crowns himself a mythological hero and declares his role: "... labored I / keeper of the forest, / with an axe and a saw / to maintain the fire." Looking in the mirror blurs the image of the "I" and we move to the realm of the imagination, to his reflected image as a keeper of forests, with a steady, perfect, masculine body, who is struggling (according to the common mythological model) with extremely powerful entities. Myths, Joseph Campbell claims, reflect our character and present the potential that man has for perfection in his power and ability to bring the light of the sun to the world.<sup>22</sup> The story of Prometheus, who sought to bring fire to man, echoes through Adaf's personal myth, in which his strong body and his powers will distribute heat and save the world. Thus, Adaf becomes part of the mythological-Western story, and forgets his parents' home and Sderot. In this fantastical world, the intercultural tensions that arose in the previous poem are seemingly solved and appear to exist no longer. This is a mythical, primeval world that belongs to classical Western culture.

However, Adaf's attempts to recruit the heroes of Greek myths, such as Icarus, Orpheus, and Oedipus, as perfect and omnipotent "I"s are frequently undermined, revealing his own sense of destruction, alienation and "lack" until the childhood experience raised in the previous poem by memories of bed-wetting and the physical, intimidating presence of the father also penetrate the poem "Ice Age," so that the powerful place

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<sup>22</sup> Joseph Campbell (1991). *The Power of Myth*. New York: Anchor Books, p.154.

becomes cracked and is disrupted. The cracks that are revealed in the mythical-fantastical image of the world arise from the mythic subtext, in which the struggle between a life-preserving force and destruction is concealed. The myth of Prometheus, which, in fact, undermines the relationship of control between the gods and mortals—he was punished, ending his life chained to a rock with an eagle pecking at his body—echoes through the words of the poem "Ice Age." The poem reveals that the imbalance between nature and man and man's destruction of his environment are a kind of self-destruction. This is a painful and threatening age in which nature destroys itself. The attempt of the keeper of the forest to save the trees from the mighty forces of nature fails: "save for a distant tree that was close to my heart / In its drooping branches / the sediment of light pooled / ...The lightning plundered the poor stumps / as much as it could ..." The term "keeper of the forest" here is deceptive, because it turns out that the speaker does not protect the forests, but rather destroys them, since his job requires him to preserve the heat of the world, and so he finds himself working as a source of destruction. His ax and saw are tools of destruction; it seems that the speaker has cut down all the trees except for one that is close to his heart. It is with this tree alone, its branches drooping, that the speaker identifies, revealing his perception of himself, which stands in stark contrast to his initial presentation of himself as strong, sturdy, powerful, and in control. Similarly, the physical description of the trees as castrated "stumps" hints at the speaker's perception of his body as fragmented.

Nevertheless, in the second and third stanzas of the poem, there is a description of a pastoral, primal, nature erupting: "The arcs of water tilted and froze / in calculated angles. / By night, wonderful rains grew from the sky / And the stars twinkled among them like droplets of dew." A close examination of the text reveals that the speaker is not present at all in these stanzas, suggesting that his rough presence as it is described in the first stanza interferes with maintaining the world. This fact leads to the peak of the tensions that are building up in the fantastical figure of Adaf, the keeper of the forest, between power and control, between protection and destruction, between wholeness and fragmentation, between exaggerated presence and absence (shadow), until in the harmonious moments Adaf's fantasy does not contain him at all, because it is only when he disappears from the picture that it becomes harmonious. And the destruction of nature replaces the speaker as part of a pattern of amazing beauty bursting forth.

Yet, the speaker is once again present in the fourth and final stanza, with the tormented recognition that "[t]he history of happiness rewrites / the history of misery / in order to justify itself." Until this point, the poem describes a mythical, primordial world beyond history, in which there are no people, only trees (with the exception of the speaker), so that it is free of historical interpretation, through which people attribute meaning to processes that occur in the world. Thus, the intense cold in the second and third stanzas is described as a process that is meaningless and full of beauty. Nonetheless, in the fourth stanza the speaker again imposes meaning on the world and on natural processes, attempting to guess at the

"malicious intent" behind them. The speaker's attempt to escape from history and from himself into a fantastic, ahistorical world is not successful, and the social struggle infiltrates the poem through his personal conflicts and misgivings as a poet regarding his roles in turning the history of misery into the history of happiness. The speaker is aware of this magical act, while he recognizes the problematic starting point of the need to justify his sense that history places him in an inferior, miserable position, and he wants to rewrite his private history (of the family, of their immigration) as part of the collective history.

The castrated, fragmented, and contradictory character revealed behind the mythical keeper of the forest is the frightened boy, haunted by conflicts, of "Evening Prayer." Even the axe, this time in his hands and not his father's, does not help him here. The real world of Sderot, full of cultural tensions, ultimately penetrates the culture-free fantasy world in the phrase "the history of misery."

#### **IV. Sderot: between Paradise and a Remote Place**

In an interview, Adaf explained the following:

The feeling of desolation that has accompanied me from an early age always seems always to penetrate my most beautiful moments. Somehow I have a feeling of ugliness. Because I did have representations of "beautiful"—on television, in books I read. I knew why people yearned ... in the real world, not in Sderot. At the same time an almost opposite process took place—as I looked at the beautiful places and understood that I wouldn't be able to find

beauty there, but rather in the place where I grew up, where desolation is the most aesthetically pleasing thing that exists, I realized that I would do other things ...<sup>23</sup>

The sense of ugliness, remoteness, and desolation of the place becomes an effort to find aesthetics in Sderot, an effort to redefine ugliness as beautiful. The threatening mirror relationship that exists between the father and the speaker in "Evening Prayer" and the poetic speaker's sense of rejection toward the place where he grew up, the town of Sderot, lead Adaf to escape from reality into the realm of the imagination. In the poem "History," the speaker seeks to tell the story of Sderot, constantly and restlessly moving between Sderot as a remote and desolate place and the attempt to establish it as a primordial-mythical-cosmic fantasy. Poet and critic Maya Bajernou claims that Adaf reconstructs Sderot, and makes this marginal and negligible place the center of the world, a wellspring. But I believe that Bejarano presents too optimistic a picture and ignores the fault lines. The sharp transitions of the speaker between representations of desolation and representations of fantasy create a tension between the representation of Sderot as the perfect possibility for the Creation and the disruption of the Creation, between being part of the cosmic order of the world, and breaking the cosmic order.

### **History**<sup>24</sup>

A Sderot I never knew. There

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<sup>23</sup> Mody Braun, "Everything is People," a television program on the architect Aryeh Sharon. I would like to thank Hanna Soker-Shvager for referring me to this program.

<sup>24</sup> Shimon Adaf (1997) *Hamonolog shel Ikarus* (Icarus' Monologue). Tel Aviv: Gvanim, p. 42 (translated by Hannah Adelman Komy Ofir).

a sky always broke  
before the work of laying the twilight  
was done.

Sderot whom I never gave a name  
Stretching like a river.

And I didn't say a trickle. I said  
forsaken quiet.

In the thin air  
cypresses filtered the wind  
as though it were  
light.

In summer, experienced in the art of coming  
and going,  
a slanted moon is interrupted by the pines,  
a hammered-out moon adheres to the windows  
in muttered fog.

On  
the banks of the Great Asphalt  
with the patience of delayed winters  
A Sderot I did not know waits  
like a thing that has no place,  
like a man who has no

hour.

The speaker's relationship with Sderot is complicated. It seems that he wants to erase it, but precisely from within the attempt to alienate himself from it, he finds himself again talking about it: "A Sderot I never knew. There / a sky always broke." The movement of the speaker between Sderot as a remote place that he denies and a cosmic experience in which acts of Creation occur merges with the split in the speaker's self between his sense of remoteness and his sense of being "the first man on earth," or even G-d: "Sderot whom I never gave a name." Just as G-d gave a name to the act of Creation, so the speaker in Adaf's the poem, from within his attempt to deny Sderot, creates it anew and releases it from the same peripheral remoteness with a statement that can be interpreted as being in accordance with the stereotype, but at the same time establishes Sderot as a cosmic place. Thus, the experience in "the art of coming and going" can be perceived as an attempt to escape Sderot, but the lack of ability to really do so, and seems to end up as the closed wandering of a man in paradise. In the poem, Sderot becomes like a lost paradise, the imagined happy place of all human beings, a primeval place found at the foundation of all human beings, and simultaneously a place we never knew or named.

Apparently, the remoteness of Sderot actually grants it the status of a primeval place where "a sky always broke / before the work of placing the twilight / was done." Through the work of laying the sky above Sderot, the story of the creation as a masterpiece of God, recreating the world step by step, can be heard. But Sderot remains an unfinished, primordial creative act in which the work is not completed and the sky has not had

time to heal. The sense of ugliness in Sderot also penetrates the creation story and disrupts it because, as always, the sky is broken in Sderot and the work always seems to be abandoned in the middle.

And yet, even this disrupted creation story is full of power and tension between immobility and cosmic movement. The endless immobile expanses of Sderot stretch deceptively, until, paradoxically, they become a river in the eyes of the speaker. Thus, the poetic speaker, like G-d who distinguished between the heavens and the water, attempts to see water in Sderot: "stretching like a river. / And I didn't say a trickle. I said / forsaken quiet." This is Sderot, perhaps forgotten and abandoned, perhaps remaining as a place of immorality, and perhaps breaking through the immobility and rising to the level of an act of cosmic creation. Adaf's craftsmanship of the poem continues as he notices vegetation: "a slanted moon is redeemed in the pines, / a hammered-out moon adheres to the windows." But the attempt to repeat the stages of creation in Sderot and to distinguish between the creation of the lights and the plants reveals that one phase of creation interrupts another and violates it. The moon cannot fully provide illumination and the pine trees fracture its light until it turns into tiny fragments of light reflected in the windows.

Sderot breaks through the boundaries of concrete existence to mythological existence: "A Sderot I did not know waits / like an object that has no place, / like a man who has no / hour." Here Adaf refers to the expression "For there is no man who has not his hour, and no thing that has not its place," whose source is *Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot)*, and whose meaning is that each person must have a special time of his own

when the special qualities for which he was created will come to fruition. But Adaf omits the first word "no," in what is apparently an extreme expression of the curse that weighs on Sderot, as a town with no time and place. It seems to be an unnecessary, superfluous town that has not one quality that justifies its existence. At the same time, the attempt to evoke the sense of Sderot's superfluity reveals its amazing power. Sderot has no place and no time, it is nonexistent and at the same time dynamic and breaks down the boundaries of nature, time, and place, to the extent of shattering the world order.

#### **V. Tel Aviv—the Space of the Splitting of the "I"**

The primeval fantasy that the poetic speaker produces undermines the popular story of Sderot as a remote development town in southern Israel. But the speaker in Adaf's poems is not satisfied with a mere retelling of the story of the history of the southern town; he also marks, with his arrival in Tel Aviv, his being an integral part of the Tel Aviv space, as opposed to Mizrahi writers who came to Tel Aviv with a sense of discrimination and "otherness."<sup>25</sup> For the speaker, the entrance to Tel Aviv constitutes a new and different space for the embodiment of the "I" who wants to disappear from the family in a personal and spatial sense. In this context, De Certeau argues that in the toddler's experience of separating from his mother while playing hide and seek:

there is a joyful manipulation that can make the maternal object "go away" and make oneself disappear (insofar as one considers oneself identical with that object), making it

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Erez Biton's poems "Shopping on Dizengoff Street" (*Shir Kniya Bedizengoff*) and "Summary of a Conversation" (*Taktsir Sicha*). Erez Biton, (1990) *Tzipor bein Yabashot* (A Bird between Continents), Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad.

possible to be there (because) without the other but in a necessary relation to what has disappeared; this manipulation is an "original spatial structure."<sup>26</sup>

In other words, a person's perception of space involves his ability to separate from the mother, which also involves the internalization of her absence. The movement from Sderot to Tel Aviv, like the movement within Tel Aviv, reflects the movement within the "I". Adaf is in Tel Aviv, but relates to the place of his birth, Sderot, as hidden and distanced from his mother. The speaker presents himself as lacking a personal biography and creates himself as an "I" who is "other," in a drug addict's hallucination in a symbiotic relationship with the Tel Aviv space in the poem "Rescue from Oblivion."

### **Rescue from Oblivion<sup>27</sup>**

1. Thought

I'm thinking

that I've reached

the end of history.

Not in the meaning of philosophy. There,

reason knows itself

fully actualizing phenomenon as an idea.

No. In a simpler sense

history ceases to be

essential for definition, establishing

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<sup>26</sup> Michel de Certeau (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p.109.

<sup>27</sup> Shimon Adaf (2002) *Ma shechashavti tzel hu haguf haamiti* (What I thought was Shadow is the Real Body. Jerusalem: Keter (translation by Becka Mara McKay), p.59.

connections of development  
between early and late I lack  
fathers and mothers, bereft of poetry and swinging out the window, sent  
out of Tel Aviv, 5:00 on a December evening, feeling the air like  
a tongue  
skies addicted, skinny, dizzy,  
dilating like a pupil, collapsing  
on the ground, inside defective asphalt capillaries  
a kindled sun flows, bleeding through  
the blackening month  
crushing the wind like  
Western theory.

## 2. Exit

It's easy to know  
that all of this will pass—  
dense like poetry and like  
a man I  
go out in the rain  
that still clenches  
December  
skies.

On Allenby, noisy songbirds pierce  
storms of twittering

through the weakened  
trees.

The words convulse easily and then  
go to hell on the buses  
filled heavily with human  
flesh wanting too much.

The others are right.

It's good to know that the world is temporary  
that the suns are too sharp  
to be engraved in a day or to allow me  
vision.

At an hour like this  
in this light,  
even the cruelty  
that a man turns on himself  
is an illusion.

### 3. Route 24

What's the point of poetry if I can hardly walk  
even with a cane, I can't get there fast enough. The doors  
are already folding and the lungs biting a stronger  
piece of air. They say Kislev. Only a man's finger

can trace the sun's bloodshot eye.  
The clouds assemble  
like anger before the blow of a mutinous husband  
starved and salivating  
dark rains. I'm almost  
there, banging on the glass, open up,  
open up, you stupid slut,  
and without wanting to the bitch opens up like a husband  
eating his food with hatred, thank you, thank you. The spit becomes  
vomit outside, a storm. Only a man's hand can  
build stairs like a gallows. What is poetry for?  
If only I was more alive, knowing how to curse  
from here until further notice, the young took  
all the chairs, little shits, I have to stand, crap,  
whores.

#### 4. Return

I deny  
the cracked mouth,  
the sigh

so I don't say.

When I return late  
and tonight, what do I know

about the word, much less  
beginnings.

What is this whip of a moon and what is  
this shred of beaten darkness  
on the headboard.

I don't say.

Help, help, what is it with you?  
Help, Father, help.

What began as prayer  
now is barely  
a spell of protection.

In this poem, Adaf writes "I'm thinking / that I've reached / the end of history /...history ceases to be / essential for definition, establishing / connections of development / between early and late I lack / fathers and mothers, bereft of poetry and swinging out the window, sent out of Tel Aviv". Adaf seeks to establish himself here, distancing himself from tradition and private and general "history." He relates to the theory of Hegel, who claimed that at the end of history, at an advanced stage of comprehension, recognition, and self-reflective capacity, idea and

phenomenon will be one.<sup>28</sup> But the poetic speaker sees the end of history not as a combination of idea and phenomena and not as a progression from early to late. Rather, he creates himself as someone who seeks to mature, perhaps to arrive at the highest stage of comprehension, at which he evades the past, the biography, the "fathers and mothers," a stage at which "history ceases to be essential for definition"—that is, the popular definitions of identity cease to be relevant.

The manner in which the speaker escapes from the past and from history is reminiscent of Zionism's attempt to escape the history of Jewish life in the Diaspora, as though the Jews had been born anew from the sea.<sup>29</sup> Yoram Bar discusses the literature of the nineteen eighties and nineties on Tel Aviv as representing the city without fathers and mothers.<sup>30</sup> Adaf's writing about Tel Aviv is in conversation with the canonical writing about the city; he, too, seeks to break away from biography, and thus to construct himself without history and without definitions, and to establish a different representation of the "I." As part of the effort to connect to Tel Aviv and to writing about Tel Aviv, the speaker in the poem depicts the ugliness of the city. Hannah Soker Schwager describes how Shabtai establishes himself a native of Tel Aviv. He does so by means of a combined view: a panoramic one that presents the beauty of the city from above and a view from below that exposes the cracks and fractures in the

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<sup>28</sup> "The history of philosophy is the history of free, concrete thought – which is to say, of reason." Hegel joins concrete thought with thought on the idea, thus bringing together concept to phenomenon. Georg Hegel, *Introduction to the History of Philosophy*, (1988), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, pp. 57-82.

<sup>29</sup> Michael Gluzman (1997) *Tsionut Uminiut Bealtneuland*. (Longing for Heterosexuality. Zionism and Sexuality in *Altneuland*). *Teoria Uvikoret* (Theory and Criticism) 11, pp.145-161.

<sup>30</sup> Yoram Bar-Gal (1993), "Yerushalayim, Tel Aviv, Hadera, Nahalal, Veein Harod: Makom Kesemel Veorach Chaim" (Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Hadera, Nahalal, and Ein Harod: Place as Symbol and Way of Life) in *Moledet Vegeografia Bemea Shnot Hahinuch Hayehudi* (Homeland and Geography in One Hundred Years of Zionist Education. Tel Aviv: Am Oved, pp. 152-172.

physical and social space of the city.<sup>31</sup> Adaf also wants to establish himself as a native of Tel Aviv, but it is clear to him that he cannot be satisfied with a panoramic, repressing and spread out view, and that he must follow the cracks in space and the details: "inside defective asphalt capillaries / a kindled sun flows." The effort of the speaker in Adaf's poems to mark himself as part of canonical Tel Aviv writing defines him as part of the Zionist biography and of the biography of Tel Aviv.<sup>32</sup> The poetic speaker seeks not only to delete his personal biography, but also to highlight his belonging to the canon and the Tel Aviv space.

The attempt to be part of the canon also involves the desire to break through definitions of identity and mark a different representation of the "I" as a hallucinating "other": "sent / out of Tel Aviv, 5:00 on a December evening, feeling the air like / a tongue / skies addicted, skinny, dizzy, / dilating like a pupil, collapsing / on the ground, inside defective asphalt capillaries a kindled sun flows, bleeding through / the blackening month / crushing the wind like / Western theory." The speaker constructs himself as a drug addict "swinging out the window, sent / out of Tel Aviv." He is on the verge of collapse, perhaps feeling the air, perhaps breathing it. Like the drug addict who becomes addicted to hallucinations in order to disconnect from where he is at the moment, and seemingly forgetting the place that he wants to escape, the poetic speaker writes "I lack / fathers and mothers," and thus gives away the attempt to disappear from his biography, revealing the way in which he is attempting to become addicted to the

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<sup>31</sup> Hanna Soker-Schwager (2007). *Mechashef Hashevet Mimeonot Ovdim* (The Tribal Wizard from the Workers' Dwellings). Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, p.202.

<sup>32</sup> Maoz Azaryahu describes the definitions of Tel Aviv as it was being built: "In a textbook from 1918, Tel Aviv was described as 'the crown of the new Hebrew Yishuv.'" Maoz Azaryahu (2007) *Tel Aviv, Mythography of a City*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, p.35.

hallucinatory notion that he is someone else. At the same time, the hallucination reveals the ambivalent and undecided position of the speaker in the poem; the problematic, castrated place of the speaker becomes clear from his attempt to disappear. This is the place where both the "I" and space collapse into themselves, in the absence of history, in the absence of the past, in the absence of connection to the mother, to the "I". The space is a mirror for the subject. The speaker's hallucination reflects the space as a swaying delirium: "skies ... collapsing / on the ground." The personal fantasy becomes a spatial fantasy— the sky is a mirror for the speaker, perhaps reflecting his self, perhaps deceiving him. The movement is dizzying, a circular, internal spiral that falls into Tel Aviv, unlike the sky of Sderot which is "always broken," and unlike Sderot, which erupts upwards, Tel Aviv's sky looks pale, thin, powerless, and the movement is downward into the city, like a constant collapse. Thus, the construction of the "I" as having no past also exists in a place that is damaged, "kindled," and bleeding "inside defective asphalt capillaries ... bleeding through the blackening month." The speaker's need for biography is revealed in his attempt to create himself as devoid of belonging. Similarly, it seems that the collapse reveals the speaker's control in the Tel Aviv space and his sense of belonging to this space. The fact is that the emotional process of representing space leads to the speaker controlling that space and becoming an integral part of it. His observation of Tel Aviv from the window takes place from above and is aimed toward the inner mind, and it is not certain whether the speaker is collapsing, falling, or in control, watching. The speaker's emotional spiral is the spiral of Tel Aviv

that creates a symbiosis with the landscape of Tel Aviv, and it merges with the space, "feeling the air like a tongue." Thus, with the implication of both initial sensuality and developed eroticism, the speaker replaces the symbiosis with the mother, simultaneously evoking her absence, her lack, embedded in the split place and in the split self.

In Adaf's poems there is a sense of a gap between the stereotypical image of the Mizrahi, Western culture, and Zionism and the identity of the person, realized in complex and contradictory everyday practices that appear in his poems as a way of evading fixed definitions. Adaf evades defined locations and permanent places and in doing so succeeds in not becoming fixed under a single definition of identity: that of the Mizrahi. In this way, Adaf succeeds in undermining the relationship between center and periphery and definitions of identity such as "the Mizrahi voice," "periphery," and "center." Undermining these categories allows Adaf to disrupt the hegemonic gaze at Sderot and at himself as a representative of the town and thus reflects to the establishment – in television items and in the newspapers – its stereotypical viewpoints and destroys them. Adaf breaks down the stereotypical images of the establishment by observing it from above, from a position of superiority – as an establishment trapped in its own stereotypes. It is precisely in this manner that Adaf reached a position of power and influence (his rapid reception in Tel Aviv and his appointment as the editor of original books at Keter), and thus marked himself as the founder of a new center, a center of power and control, as a

cultural, poetic, and musical trendsetter, as Yigal Schwartz,<sup>33</sup> editor of Adaf's 2004 book *Kilometer Veyomayim Lifnai Hashkiya* (A Kilometer and Two Days before Sunset), marked the protagonist Alish as "one of the most fascinating characters created in Israeli literature,"<sup>34</sup> thus positioning Adaf at the center of the literary stage in Israel.

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<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note here Yigal Schwartz's claim that the imaging of the new country in Abraham Mapu's *The Love of Zion* takes place in a reversal of the vectors of desire in the chronotopic formation of the novel: "the revolutionary kernel may be found in empowering the axis of the importance of leaving Jerusalem for the villages in favor of the axis of leaving the villages for Jerusalem ... the author recognize signs of decay in the Kingdom of Judah, points to the space contaminated space (the city) and even offers a solution in the form of regeneration using another space (the village). See Yigal Schwartz (2007) *Hayadata et Haaretz Sham Halimon Poreach?: Handasat Haadam Veitzuv Hamerhav Hehadash (Do you Know the Land Where the Lemon Blooms?: Human Engineering and Designing the New Space)* Tel Aviv: Dvir, p. 49. It is also interesting to note that the new literary writing of the nineteen nineties stands on a similar principle—the ones who establish a new center and refresh the center—the city— from its decay are precisely those from the periphery, the development towns. See also the discussion of the connection between center and periphery in the works of Shimon Adaf and Brenner: Yigal Schwartz (2012) "K'she Honi Hameagel Pagash et Ikarus: Periferia Umerkaz Baroman 'Horef' Leyud Chet Brenner Ubaroman 'Halev Kavur' Leshimon Adaf" (When Honi the Circle Maker Met Icarus: Periphery and the Center in the novel *Winter* by Y.H. Brenner and the novel *The Buried Heart* by Simon Adaf), *Mikan*. Volume XII, pp. 171-191.

<sup>34</sup> From "Comments from the Editor" in Shimon Adaf (2004) *Kilometer Veyomayim Lifnai Hashkiya* (A Kilometer and Two Days before Sunset). Jerusalem: Keter.