

"The Sound of Cannons has Subsided" – On Three Israeli Army Novels

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Abstract

*Within the framework of, or alongside, the genre of war literature it is possible to discern a more or less distinct sub-genre of army literature. In contrast to war literature, which focuses on the combat activity that stems from a clash between rival armies, army literature focuses on what might be called the military way of being, a way of being that is not necessarily related to war and that can exist in isolation from any warlike situation. This article aims to analyze three significant Israeli army novels: *Hitganvut Yehidim* by Yehoshua Kenaz, *Lochdey Arikim o Roman al Mishtara Tzva'it* by Amnon Navot, and *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* by Yitzhak Laor. These novels were chosen both because they are excellent representatives of the corpus, and because each of them embodies a different poetic model. Breaking the army theme through the prisms of various poetic models makes it possible for the literary system to shed light on it in a multifaceted, rich and complex way. At the same time, it provides a platform for examining the unique characteristics, the *diffentia specifica* of each of these poetic models.*

Within the framework of, or alongside, the genre of War Literature it is possible to discern a more or less distinct sub-genre – Army Literature. In contrast to War Literature, which focuses, as its name implies, on the combat activity that stems from a clash between rival armies, on the intense, stunning experiences that this activity involves, and on the emotions that arise from these powerful experiences, Army Literature focuses on what might be called the military way of being, or being-in-the-world, to use a Heideggerian term, a way of being not necessarily related to war, and that can exist in isolation from any warlike situation. In this literature, the

army is perceived as a locus, a site, an essentially tense and loaded field of power, with its own characteristics and dynamics. Of course, the boundaries between the two genres are not sharply defined and sometimes there are areas of overlap. For example, S. Yizhar's great *Yemey Tziklag* (Days of Ziklag), the best-known war novel in Modern Hebrew Literature, contains, alongside detailed, plastic descriptions of battles, extensive sections devoted to the description of the periods of time between battles, which are essentially descriptions of the military way of being, with its ceremonies, customs, and social dynamics. In fact, one of Yizhar's most effective insights regarding what could be called the ontology of battle is that most of the time nothing happens, and that the basic experience (especially, of course, of the ordinary soldier and the junior officer) is one of endless, tedious waiting that numbs the soul and wraps it in a thick mantle of dullness and apathy (or, alternatively, awakens in it a lust for murder).¹ In a more general way, we can say that every war story is, in and of itself, also an army story, yet the reverse is not true.

This article aims to analyze three significant Israeli army novels: *Hitganvut Yehidim* (Infiltration) by Yehoshua Kenaz, Amnon Navot's *Lochdey Arikim o Roman al Mishtara Tzva'it* (Gladiator [Studebaker], or a Note on the Military Police), and *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* (The People, Food for Kings) by Yitzhak Laor, novels² that are at the center of what could be called the Israeli Army Literature. These novels

¹ Yizhar's story "Beterm Yetzi'a" (Before the Attack) from his collection of war stories *Arba'a Sippurim* (Four Stories), (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1959, 7–34), which focuses on the stream of consciousness of an anonymous fighter before he sets out to battle, and ends with the moment when he goes, can also be attributed to the genre of Army Literature.

² Yehoshua Kenaz. *Hitganvut Yehidim* (Infiltration) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1986). Appeared in English in the translation of Dalya Bilu, under the title *Infiltration*, (South Royalton, VT: Zoland Books, 2003); Amnon Navot. *Lochdey Arikim o Roman al Mishtara Tzva'it* (Gladiator [Studebaker], or A Note on the Military Police). (Jerusalem: Keter, 1992); Yitzhak Laor. *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* (The People, Food for Kings). (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1993).

were chosen both because they are excellent representatives of the corpus, with its characteristic tensions and themes,³ and because each one of them embodies a different poetic model. Breaking the army theme through the prisms of various poetic models makes it possible for the literary system to shed light on it in a multifaceted,

³ Among the works included in this corpus are the novels *Heder* (A Room) by Youval Shimoni (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1999); *Et Hazamir* (A Time for Trimming) by Haim Beer (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987); Pucho's *Havura Shekazot* (What a Gang) (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1957); *Hanafshiyim* (The Mentals) by Amichai Shalev (Tel Aviv: Yedioth Achronoth, 2010); Boaz Neumann's *Hayal Tov* (Good Soldier) (Lod: Zmora Bitan, 2001); Mishka Ben-David. *Hayalim Smechim* (I Have Not Seen Happy Soldiers). (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 1982); A. B. Yehoshua's stories "Hamefaked Ha'aharon" (The Last Commander) and "Basis Tilim 612" (Missile Base 612), published in *Ad Horef 1974: Mivhar* (Till Winter 1974: An Anthology) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1975, 58–72; 254–285); David Grossman. "Yani al Hahar" (Yani on the Mountain), in *Ratz* (Jogger) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1983, 75–140); Yehoshua Bar Yosef's "Par'oshim" (Fleas) and "Hayerivim" (The Rivals), in Benny Hamagad (Benny the Battalion Commander) (Tel Aviv: Twersky, 1950, 23–37; 67–75); Anat Einhar's "Hamefaked Ha'elyon" (The Supreme Commander), in *Tmunot Eirom* (Mind Blowing Ecstasy) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2015, 147–211); Amos Oz's "Minzar Hashatkanim" (The Trappist Monastery), in *Artzot Hatan* (Where the Jackals Howl) (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1965, 75–91); Etgar Keret's short stories "Naylon" (Nylon), "Matrat Dmut" (Human-Shaped Target), "Bakum" (Induction Center), and "Yamim Kmo Hayom" (Days Like Today) in *Tzinorot* (Pipelines) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1992, 86–88; 89–90; 124–126; 134–136). If we broaden our view to the pre-State period, we can include the (Russian, Turkish, British) army stories of L. A. Arieli "Le'or Havenus" (In the Light of Venus) and "Yeshimon" (Wasteland) in *Yeshimon: Sippurim Umahaze* (Wasteland: Stories and a Play) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1990, 7–84; 107–175); Yehuda Burla. "Hatzala" (Rescue), "Aref Shawish" (Aref Shawish) and "Hahayal Vehapirda" (The Soldier and the She-Ass) in *Bli Kochav* (Without a Star) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1988, 155–184); "Migilguley Hazman" (From the Revolutions of Time) in *Lekol Hatze'ada* (Marching In) (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1965, 153–163); Yaakov Churgin "Be'agaf Hashvuyim" (In the Prisoners' Wing) and "Rostum Haya Adam Kechulanu" (Rostum was a Human Being like All of Us) in *Professor Leonardo* (Professor Leonardo) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1990, 119–140). If we broaden it even further to the Hebrew literature written in Europe, it is possible to include in the corpus Y. H. Brenner's novella *Shana Ahat* (One Year) in *Kitvey Y.H. Brenner* (The Collected Works of Y.H. Brenner) Vol.1. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1964, 146–173) and Gershon Shofman's barracks stories "Ben Hahomot" (Between the Walls) in *Kol Kitvey G. Shofman* (The Writings of G. Shofman) Vol. 1. (Tel Aviv: Dvir and Am Oved, 1960, pp. 68–88); "Ba'ashmoret Hatichona" (On the Middle of the Night Watch). (Ibid., 156–7); "Lamilhama" (To War). (Ibid., 188–196); "Al Hamishmar" (On Guard). (Ibid., 207–209); "Nekama" (Revenge). (Ibid., 210–215); "Me'itot Batzava" (Seasons in the Army). (Ibid., Vol. 2., 17–20); "Kol Hayamim" (All the Days). (Ibid., 75–83); "Feldwebel Haritonov" (NCO Haritonov). (Ibid., Vol. 3., 142–144). If we expand our view to the medium of visual narrative art, we can include the films *Giv'at Halfon Eyna Ona* (Halfon Hill Doesn't Answer) (Asi Dayan, 1976); *Sapiches* (Private Popsicle) (Boaz Davidson, 1982); *Ha'ah shel Driks* (Driks's Brother) (Uri Inbar, 1982); *Efes Beyahasey Enosh* (Zero Motivation) (Talya Lavie, 2014); *Ehad Mishelanu* (One of Ours) (Uri Barbash, 1989); and *Masa Alunkot* (Journey of the Stretchers) (Judd Ne'eman, 1977) as well as the television series *Tironut* (Basic Training) (Uri and Benny Barbash, 1998–2001); *M.K. 22* (Yaron Nisky, Doron Tzur, Ohad Elimelech, Assaf Harel, 2004) and the military skits of Hamishiya Hakamerit (The Chamber Quintet – an Israeli comedy show) (Asaf Tzipor and Eitan Tzur, 1993–1997).

rich and complex way. At the same time, it provides a platform for examining the unique characteristics, the *differentia specifica* of each of these models.

Hebrew War Literature has been studied by many scholars, among them Avner Holtzman,⁴ Hannan Hever,⁵ Glenda Abramson,⁶ Nurit Govrin,⁷ Dan Miron,⁸ and Uri S. Cohen.⁹ Army Literature as such, on the other hand, has not been studied (although, naturally, texts belonging to it have well been studied). At the same time, it seems that some of the research on Hebrew War Literature is also relevant to Army Literature. This is especially true for the critical-poetic distinction made by Dan Miron in the introductory chapter of his *Mul Ha'ah Hashotek* (Facing the Silent Brother), "Knisa: Hayoshev al Hakelim Vehayored Bamilhama" (Entrance: Him That Tarrieth by the Baggage and Him That Goeth Down to the Battle). In this chapter,

⁴ Avner Holtzman. *Avigdor Hameiri Vesifrut Hamilhama* (Avigdor Hameiri and War Literature) (Tel Aviv: Maarachot, 1986); "Michvot Esh: Arba'im Shnot Ktiva al Milhemet Yom HaKippurim" (Forty Years Later: The Yom Kippur War in Israeli Literature). *Ot: Journal of Literature and Theory* 4 (2014), 43–74; "Political Aspects of the Literature of the Israeli War of Independence." *The Journal of Israeli History* Vol. 31: 2 (2012), 191–215.

⁵ Hanan Hever. *Pit'om Mar'e Hamilhama: Le'umiut Ve'alimut Beshirat Shnot Ha'arba'im* (Suddenly, the Sight of War: Nationality and Violence in Hebrew Poetry of the 1940's). (Bney Brak: Hakibbutz Hame'uchad, 2001. Appeared in English under the title *Suddenly, the Sight of War: Violence and Nationalism in Hebrew Poetry in the 1940s*. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2016); "Leah Goldberg Kotevet Shirey Milhama" (Leah Goldberg Writes War Poems). In *Pgishot im Meshoreret: Masot Umehkarim al Yetzirata shel Leah Goldberg* (Meetings with a Poetess: A Collection of the Works of Leah Goldberg). Ruth Kartun-Blum and Anat Weisman (Eds.). (Jerusalem: The Institute for Jewish Studies, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 2001, 116–134); "Shirat Haguf Haleumi: Nashim Meshorerot Bemilhemet Hashihur" (The Poetry of the National Body: Women Poets in the War of Independence). *Teoria Ubikoret* 7 (1995), 86–95; "Yom Kippur. Ze Beneynu" (Yom Kippur. It's Between Us). *Zmanim* 84 (2003), 86–95; "'Shum Gerush Lo Poter Klum': Al *Khirbet Khizeh* me'et S. Yizhar" ('No expulsion solves a thing': On S. Yizhar's *Khirbet Khizeh*). *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* 28:2 (2013), 601–614; "Mashber Ha'ahrayut be 'Hashavuy' me'et S. Yizhar" (The Crisis of Responsibility in S. Yizhar's "The Prisoner"). In *Shvuyim* (Captives). Merav Mack (Ed.). (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History and The Van Leer Institute, 2014), 247–269.

⁶ Glenda Abramson. *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*. (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008).

⁷ Nurit Govrin. "Nos'ot Hakelim: Nashim Bema'arachot Israel, Bir'i Hasifrut Ha'ivrit" (Women in Israel's Wars in the Mirror of Hebrew Literature). *Iton* 77 264 (2002), 20–25, 46; "Adam Bemilhama" (Man and War). *Kesher* 23 (1988), 45–56; "Milhemet Ha'olam Harishona Bir'i Hasifrut Ha'ivrit Bashanim Ha'ahronot" (The First World War in the Mirror of Recent Hebrew Literature) *Zmanim History Quarterly* 126 (2014), 96–109.

⁸ Dan Miron. *Mul Ha'ah Hashotek: Iyunim Beshirat Milhemet Ha'atzma'ut* (Facing the Silent Brother: Studies in the Poems of the War of Independence). (Tel Aviv: The Open University, 1992).

⁹Uri S. Cohen. "Unraveling the Wars of 1948." *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 18: 3 (2012), 120–135.

Miron states that as a consequence of World War I being so prolonged and as a result of the shocking, incredible slaughter that took place in it—in the Battle of the Somme alone more than a million were killed or injured, among them close to sixty thousand British soldiers on the first day of the fighting; all in all, the Central Powers lost three and a half million soldiers; the Allied forces lost over five million—a conceptual revolution had taken place. Its source had been

in the sense, that in modern battle a unique existential reality had come into being, a reality possessing certain dimensions that expropriated it from any context known to man from the reality of his life before it or after it. Hence the norm that requires that combat experiences should be expressed in a way that disengages from the customary conventions of narration and description and takes place almost exclusively within the framework of a confession, which is in essence a testimony of "I saw with my own flesh." Consequently, war literature would consist of the direct, totally reliable exposure of a stunned psyche, organizing a pulverizing experience via a tight personal delivery (diary, memoir, confession, stream of consciousness) and calling into question the very gesture of literary description, especially the gesture in its traditional mimetic embodiments.¹⁰

¹⁰ Dan Miron, *Mul Ha'ah Hashotek*, 16. Translated by Hannah Komy. On the role of World War I in shaping modern consciousness and modern literature, see Paul Fussell's excellent book, probably the best known work on World War I literature, *The Great War and Modern Memory*. London: Oxford UP, 1977.

Yet, against the norm of "literature (both prose and poetry) that is existentialist, impressionistic, diary-like or confessional, fluid in terms of its forms, that does not lead to endings that provide 'release' and catharsis, that is anti-historisistic and anti-ideological," there presented itself the norm of "literature that is essentialist, mimetic, told or sung by a narrator who is not in the heart of the experience, that is traditional and solid in its structure, that leads to endings that provide closure and is historisist and ideological in its perception of time."¹¹ Miron's differentiation between "directness and reliability versus striving for meaning"¹² will serve us in the following discussion.

In the spring of 1954, in response to the murder of a Jewish citizen in Ra'anana, a force of seven fighters, most of them former soldiers of Unit 101,¹³ was sent to retaliate against the Jordanian Legion camp near Azzun, on the Qalqiliya-Nablus road. The force was headed by scout Meir Har-Zion. The force set out at six in the evening, before dark, from Kibbutz Eyal. Across the border, the soldiers encountered a Jordanian patrol, which opened fire on them. The force returned fire and attacked. Despite the encounter, Meir Har-Zion and the commander of the force, Aharon Davidi, decided to continue their mission. On the way, the fighters discovered another ambush. They bypassed it and came to a watermelon field, where they found a suspicious character. Har-Zion killed the man, who later turned out to be a civilian, with a knife. Because of a Jordanian patrol in the wadi, the soldiers climbed the terraces and walked through the thorns. After six hours, Davidi ordered them to

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

¹² Ibid., 23.

¹³ Unit 101 was an Israeli commando unit that was established in August 1953 for the purpose of carrying out retaliatory attacks across the border as a solution to the many incursions into Israel of infiltrators from Jordan and the Gaza Strip. In January 1954 it was merged, under Ariel Sharon's command, with Paratrooper Regiment 890. It existed as an independent unit for only five months.

return. He understood that they would not have sufficient time to perform the operation and cross the border back into Israel under the cover of the night. Har-Zion pressured him to continue, and the force continued to move ahead.

At one in the morning, the fighters reached the legion camp's fence. Each pair of soldiers stormed a tent. The legion soldiers recovered from the surprise and threw grenades at their attackers. The bursts of the Israeli soldier's tommy gun fire silenced the opposition for a while. Then the fire resumed and Yitzhak Jibli¹⁴ was wounded. Davidi ordered him to lie down and wait until the operation was over, when they would return to collect him. When the fighters arrived, Har-Zion threw Jibli over his back and began to run. Har-Zion and another soldier took turns carrying Jibli. During the retreat, Jibli took another bullet. He asked his friends to leave him on the ground, since otherwise they would not reach the border. Only two hours remained before dawn, and a thirteen-kilometer walk to the border over a hilly road awaited them. After much consultation and hesitation, it was decided to honor his request. They all came to bid him farewell. Wounded in the leg and neck, alone under an olive tree, Jibli lay and sang the song "Sh'on Hatotahim Nadam" (The Sound of Cannons has Subsided), whose lyrics (set to the Russian melody of Vladimir Zakharov) Natan Yonatan had written some ten years earlier:

The sounds of cannons has subsided

¹⁴ Yitzhak Jibli was born in Egypt in 1930. He spent the first nine years of his life in a center for abandoned children run by the Tel Aviv municipality. He was then adopted by the Aloni family of Tel Adashim. At age sixteen, he came to Kibbutz Maoz Haim with a group of youth from The Working Youth Movement as part of a training program. During the War of Independence, he was drafted into the third regiment of the Palmach. After the war, he was the driver and assistant of Rehavam Zeevi (Ghandi) in the Southern Command. After he was discharged from the IDF, he worked for two years with Mekorot, Israeli's national water company. In October 1953, when he heard of Operation Shoshana (the Qibya Operation), he left his job and joined Unit 101 (on Jibli and on the battle, see Uri Milstein. *Hahistoria shel Hatzanhanim* (The History of the Paratroopers) Vol. 4. (Tel Aviv: Shalgi, 1987, 1696–1714).

The field of slaughter is forsaken.
A solitary soldier wanders there
Singing with the clouds and wind.
From the hills a vulture rises,
Then it falls upon the corpses.¹⁵

After some two hours, the legionnaires reached Jibli, attacked him, beat him and fired another shot in his buttocks. A legion officer protected him from the other fighters. Jibli was taken prisoner, underwent an interrogation, and, following four months in a Jordanian prison, was returned to Israel.

The story of the battle and Jibli's abandonment occupies an important place in the mythology of Alon, the youth from the kibbutz who is out of place in the group of non-combat soldiers whose basic training course is the basis and foundation of the novel *Hitganvut Yehidim*¹⁶ by Yehoshua Kenaz. Among the group of these failed soldiers, the defective ugly ducklings, the sickly children of Sparta,¹⁷ Alon is like a beautiful, white swan. Alon tells this story to his friend Micky while they are on

¹⁵ English translation from *Infiltration* (Trans. Dalya Bilu), p. 572. Natan Yonatan became acquainted with the Russian melody through Ben-Zion Tomer, whom he met (apparently in 1944) after Tomer arrived in the country as part of the Tehran Children Aliyah at the Shomriya educational institution in Mishmar Ha'emek. At first, the poem had only one stanza. Several years later, Yonatan wrote an additional stanza: "The light of day shone from above/To his home a soldier returned/Through the fields of slaughter he will wander no more/Because he loved a peaceful little hut/There, when dawn rises upon the villages, he will listen /To the singing of the birds." After his eldest son, Lior, fell in battle in the Yom Kippur War, Yonatan could no longer identify with this optimistic additional stanza, and he deleted it from the later editions. I thank Nachumi Har-Zion and Natan Yonatan (z"l) for their generosity and patience in providing me with the relevant information.

¹⁶ The novel deals with basic training that took place in 1956.

¹⁷ See: "Yes, something sickly emanated from that building, like a foul miasma, the contagion of the flawed, rejected bodies of the lost children of Sparta, left out on the bleak mountain to die." (*Hitganvut Yehidim*, 47; *Infiltration*, 43) All quotes from *Hitganvut Yehidim* are supplied from Dalya Bilu's English translation *Infiltration*. Page numbers in the Hebrew edition will be directly followed by page numbers in the English translation.

guard duty together.¹⁸ He tells him about it with total identification both with the fighter who demanded to be left alone to die, and with the pain of his comrades who were forced, against their will, to abandon him.¹⁹ Alon 'embellishes' the story somewhat, adding plot details such as terrible tortures that Jibli was allegedly subjected to in the Legion's cellars, tortures that, of course, he bravely withstood without revealing anything but his name, rank, and blood type (according to Jibli's own testimony, which appears in Milstein's four-volume work, he was never tortured);²⁰ probably, this is how the story came down to him, in the way of such mythical stories that, as they are passed on from one teller to another, are embellished with all sorts of adornments. This story, as well as other typical stories (among them other stories from "the 101"'s folklore, such as the story of how Arik Sharon snatched Meir Har-Zion from the Nahal Brigade where he was serving and annexed him to his unit,²¹ the story of Uri Ilan, who committed suicide in a Syrian prison, and the ur-

¹⁸ Ibid., 415-417; *ibid.*, 408-409.

¹⁹ See the description of the abandonment in Meir Har-Zion's diary: "The only choice left, crawling deep inside me and paralyzing in its horror. Jibli must stay, must die [...]" (translated by Hannah Komy) Meir Har-Zion. *Pirkey Yoman* (Chapters of a Diary). (Tel Aviv: Levin-Epstein, Inc., 1969, fifth edition), 192.

²⁰ Uri Milstein, *Hahistoria shel Hatzanhanim*, 1711-1712.

²¹ In the moments of terrible humiliation, in the nightmarish limbo in which he found himself after the unfortunate discharge of his bullet (during a nighttime exercise he imagined he saw before him one of the fedayeen), standing for days at a time at tense ease with a stick on his shoulder (his gun, of course was taken away), or alternatively, marching back and forth in military parade exercises in a kind of crazed scurrying around accompanied by insults, swearing, and deafening shrieks, shrieks that no longer insulted, that destroyed the insulating partitions and are now working directly on his nerves like violent noises, Alon finds refuge in his inner world. There he sees himself as Meir Har-Zion, who, after learning that Unit 101 is preparing to transfer him to its ranks, began to walk around his Nahal base in short trousers and sandals, to pay no heed to the astonished instructors, disobey orders, and disregard all the rules of discipline. Har-Tzion's last days at the base were days of license. "Complaints and reports were made against him – and he knew that none of them mattered. He was going where he belonged. Someone over there was thinking about him, summoning him. Arik would come and take him away, dismiss all the charges against him, laugh at all the complaints. A new life would open up. And indeed, not long afterward, a command car appears at the base with Arik Sharon inside of it. All the officers on the base begin to shake in their boots, they go mad with excitement, sucking up to Arik. Arik hardly bothers to answer their questions. He takes Har-Zion, and their command car charges off at

narrative of the suicide of the rebels at Masada), is part of the conscious ideological framework that drives Alon. Alon is almost a parodic embodiment of the mythological figure of the sabra, a figure of a warrior hero bubbling with the willingness (even the desire) to sacrifice his body and soul on the altar of the nation (this sacrifice, with the possibility of the heroic death it conceals within itself like a pearl, is perceived by Alon as a romantic, sublime, thrilling option, wrapped in a misty halo of radiance). Alon is strong, determined. His body, his soul, his reactions, his movements, his instincts – all seem to have been created and designed specifically to form the perfect combat soldier. Alon illustrates this in his endurance (the physical tests the soldiers are required to pass do not usually require any special effort from him, and on the surreal scattered march at the beginning of training he even carries Rahamim, the chubbiest and most ridiculed soldier in the platoon, on his back through the dunes, on the way to the gathering point),²² in his sense of direction and ability to navigate in open terrain, in his ability to dismantle and assemble weapons at record-breaking speed and with almost poetic order and efficiency, in his lightning-fast response at the sight of the hand grenade dropped by Zero-Zero, the new immigrant, perhaps the most wretched soldier in the platoon (Alon lunges at the grenade and throws it at the target, far away from the soldiers), and in the amazing courage, on the verge of lunacy or trance, that he demonstrates on the same occasion, when, after he throws the grenade, he does not duck or hide, but stands upright in his tracks and looks fearlessly at the explosion, as though facing a hidden divinity.²³ It

terrific speed, leaving a cloud of dust and legend behind it” (see *Hitganvut Yehidim*, 437-439; *Infiltration*, 433).

²² *Hitganvut Yehidim*, 467-468; *Infiltration*, 476-468.

²³ *Hitganvut Yehidim*, 371; *Infiltration*, 365-366.

seems that Alon has reached this basic training by mistake, dropped, as it were, directly from the glamorous domain of the handsome kibbutz youth and Palmach training recruits that roam the pages of *Yemey Tziklag*.²⁴ But of all the lost children of Sparta who populate the pages of *Hitganvut Yehidim*, those sickly or defective boys who were gathered into the leper colony of Training Camp 4, it is precisely Alon—the sturdy, courageous kibbutznik, whose body works with amazing coordination and grace, who handles with knowledgeable intimacy the innards of weapons, who gazes steadily at an exploding grenade and can tolerate tremendous efforts—who is the weakest and most fragile.

Never, it seems, has the Israeli soldier, the war hero, the Sabra, been presented as such a fragile and brittle figure, pathetic, heart-rending, ridiculous and naive, arousing empathy and, at the same time, rage at the weakness so openly exposed. The reader almost sympathizes with Benny, the sadistic commander, who after the unfortunate discharge of Alon's rifle, turns him into the victim of a wild and systematic abuse, public denunciation, and terrible humiliation. This is a furious response, a reaction of wrath not devoid of frustrated disappointment, almost a personal insult (Alon has been cultivated by Benny and the other commanders. It had been assumed that he would be honored as an exceptional trainee, and he had even been promised assistance in realizing his dream of being transferred to the paratroopers).

The shaping of the character of Alon is one of the central pillars of Dan Laor's interpretive thesis, which locates the main cognitive, emotional, and moral thrust of

²⁴ Alon undergoes basic training for soldiers unfit for battle due to some physical defect, apparently in his heart. He is convinced that this is a mistake.

the book in its subversive, iconoclastic element. "In shaping [...] the character of Alon," Laor says, "Yehoshua Kenaz exacts revenge on the image of 'the mythological sabra.'"²⁵ Laor adds to this "revenge" other elements he finds in the book – such as the fact that the relationships within the group are not characterized by the wonderful, deep comradeship whose praises are sung in Palmach songs, but rather "contain little deceits, constant teasing and aggression, snitching, malicious joy, and physical violence" – and connects it with the general atmosphere that emerges from the book, an atmosphere that transmits "skepticism towards, detachment from, and alienation with" the "unchanging essence: the fact that the State of Israel is a Spartan society in which the military is a central and decisive focus of national life," in order to reach the conclusion that "in this book, Yehoshua Kenaz dared to penetrate the inner sanctum of Israeli society, the army" and lay "a bomb at the heart of the myth."²⁶

Dan Laor's thesis or reading, which is not unfounded, still requires various qualifications. First of all, it stands to reason that in order to lay a bomb at the heart of the myth, one must *penetrate* the heart of the myth. In order to shatter the icon of the Sabra War Hero, one must penetrate its natural habitat, the areas in which this icon is revealed in its fullness and entirety. In order to subvert or undermine the myth of militarism, it is necessary to penetrate those sites and plots in which it is most characteristically played out. In this respect, Kenaz has not penetrated the heart of the myth, nor has he attempted to penetrate it.

The beam of Kenaz's literary light is not directed at the center, at the heart of the military experience and the heroic myth that accompanies it. Rather, Kenaz

²⁵ Dan Laor. "Ptzatta Belev Hamitos" (A Bomb at the Heart of the Myth). *Haaretz*, December 19, 1986.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

directs his literary light from the center to the periphery. From the tanned, curly-haired boys of Tziklag, sweltering in the terrible heat, pounded by constant shelling, plunged into the raging vortex of battle, and after it is all over—tired, burning hot, dusty, sweating, victorious—turning their eyes like Tolstoy's Prince Bolkonsky to the clear blue sky that calls unto them—from these boys Kenaz turns his gaze to the defective, pale youths, who lack the proper social and ideological background, who carry diseases or refined artistic inclinations, to the lost children of Sparta who have been sent to a forsaken place, to the province of those rejected and impure, to the IDF's boot camp for those unfit for battle. Indeed, the motifs of impurity, leprosy, remoteness, illness, and defectiveness are woven throughout the novel, including direct allusions to Dante's *Inferno*.²⁷ One of the main achievements of the book is the suggestive, 'objective' representation of the sense of being imprinted with this mark of inferiority and humiliation, of being part of this despised, spurned, hateful human colony. This is a chilly, bleak representation, devoid of any trace of narcissism, that analyzes as if with the indifferent, accurate, unsentimental scalpel of a pathologist this experience, in which, of course, the narrator is immersed up to his neck. Basic training for those unfit for combat is presented in the book as a dark pit, a cursed zone, an abstract mystery play of humiliation and ostracism, illuminated by a frozen, almost metaphysical light.

In the overall framework of his local naturalistic realism, Kenaz knew, throughout his works, how to turn his careful, consistent literary attention to thematic areas characterized by a certain paradoxical duality: on the one hand these are very close areas, not exotic in any way, areas situated in an almost intimate fold of reality.

²⁷ See, for example, *Hitganvut Yehidim*, 382; *Infiltration*, 377.

On the other hand, these are hidden, unvisited spaces, existing in the cognitive shade as it were, blind spots in terms of the public and literary eye. It might be said that Kenaz almost specialized in the methodical and sensitive illumination of the backyards of the Israeli public sphere, those spaces, so close (and in certain ways so familiar and banal) that the unresponsive eye passes over them briefly or does not see them at all, those neglected, unattended spaces in which weeds and thistles and couch grass spring up, in which the old, rusting, rotting, and crumbling remains of tools and debris lie.

Kenaz's thematic innovation in *Hitganvut Yehidim*, namely the cautious illumination of that forgotten backyard which we all have, in a way, passed by dozens of times and never really seen, is palpably embodied in a series of detailed, expressive, fiercely portrayed, almost clinical scenes. From the abundance of possible examples, we can bring the opening scene, in which the narrator faints and is revived during the sentry takedown exercise ("[m]y waking friends gave back my reflection as in a mirror. How ugly this awakening was, how wretched the eye rolling, the limb jerking, the head shaking, the stupid, glassy looks from the frightened eyes, the gray faces, frozen in the terror of oblivion"²⁸), the scene in which the narrator wanders around inside the camp after he parts from Arik, his friend who is in the same camp but in a different company, a scene that illustrates his humiliating lack of any sense of direction:

But it wasn't the same place. The darkness had changed it beyond recognition, obliterating all the ways out, shuffling like a pack of cards all the landmarks I had succeeded in rescuing from oblivion. I

²⁸ Ibid., 9; Ibid., 5.

tried to get back to the little hill where Arik and I had been sitting not long before, but it had disappeared. A strange feeling, the likes of which I had never known before, began to clutch at the back of my neck: This must be what a fugitive feels like! Something standing in his way, inimical to him, making him go around in circles, closing off all his exits. But instead of the circle closing in on him, it expands like ink spreading on blotting paper, like a slow fire in dry grass. Time, too, begins to deceive, conspiring with the hostile forces on the ground²⁹

and the Christian-pagan 'revelation' scene of Ofra the PTI (physical training instructress) with her golden curls, the grave, musical harmony of all the measurements and lines of her body, the restrained softness of her bosom and the royal loftiness of her neck, Ofra – that noble beast who runs, natural, sensual, and unfettered, after her dogs, whose bodies are long and narrow, arched like bows, whose legs are long and thin, whose coats, short and sleek, gleam in silver light on the soft protuberances of their backs and legs, and the "stripes of silver curl and stretch rapidly but softly and harmoniously, rippling in waves such as a breeze might make on a calm, clear lake, bathed in the light of the moon."³⁰ In fact, this last scene is a scene of double revelation; Ofra is revealed to the group of recruits standing on the hillside, but at the same time they are also suddenly revealed to her. They see—and this is conveyed especially through the sensitive eye of the narrator—the way in which she sees them: "Even from where we stood we could see the sharp recoil

²⁹ Ibid., 386; Ibid., 380.

³⁰ Ibid., 30-32; Ibid., 26.

passing like an electric current through her body, and the practiced effort to inhibit the impulse, subdue it, and disperse it into a thousand tremors that merged imperceptibly into the complex movements of her body."³¹ They see the recoiling; they see the nausea: "and we stood on the low hill not far from her, like a little band of survivors from a shipwreck waiting to be rescued, half naked in our rags, utterly wretched and miserable opposite the marvelous girl who would not favor us with so much as a glance."³²

Aside from the fact that the subversive or revolutionary or innovative sting of the novel is not ideological, but rather thematic, certain narrative plots that are included in it, as well as, perhaps even especially, its end, its closure, tend precisely to validate and confirm key Israeli cultural myths, among them what is possibly the greatest national myth of them all, the core of Zionism's revivalist metanarrative.

The first myth that *Hitganvut Yehidim* reinforces is the myth of basic training—the entry stage into the military world—as a period that is the climax, and

³¹ Ibid., 31; Ibid., 27.

³² Ibid.; Ibid. The motif of the double gaze, in which the subject looks at another subject and sees his own reflection in the disgust, the nausea, the terror that he detects in that subject's gaze back at him, is one of the most characteristic and effective Kenazian motifs. The 'Other' becomes a sort of terrible Lacanian mirror, in which, with supreme, immediate, intuitive, cruel, and inevitable objective (or, rather, inter-subjective) transparency, the subject sees his image as it is constituted by the revulsion and scorn of the 'Other' (see, for example, the way in which Benny looks at the new recruits, or the gaze of the child Micky at his father, humiliated and despised by his pupils [pp. 232–233]). An interesting reversal or variation of this motif, a kind of warped internalization of it, can be found in the scene in which the narrator and his comrades see on the hill opposite them a group of new recruits: "We couldn't see their faces clearly, only their clumsy shapes in the new uniforms, sitting uneasily with their possessions at their feet and the sun beating down mercilessly on their heads. I didn't try to understand the meaning of the hatred that flooded me at the sight of them. I had long ago forgotten my vow to observe things from the sidelines, to try to explain them to myself exempt from the burden of belonging. The feelings of anger and hostility aroused in us by the new recruits sitting on the hill were stronger than anything else. As if something precious to me, precious to all of us had been desecrated, as if their very presence constituted some new threat, some humiliation worse than anything we had known up to now. They were tainted, contagious, a caste of untouchables who had come to infect us with the very thing we had been struggling so long and at the cost of so much struggling to cleanse ourselves of. Our voices grew louder and we all chorused together: 'Raw meat! Raw meat!' like some magic formula that would rid us of the taint, remove the invaders from our borders" (Ibid., 173; Ibid., 170).

in a sense the aim (and the end) of adolescence, a period during which a boy becomes a man. Basic training is seen in this myth as a kind of transformative mechanism in which, at the high temperatures of effort, pain, sweat, sleep deprivation and physical and verbal humiliation, extremely powerful and intense personal processes take place, a kind of kiln that takes in soft, un-crystallized objects and turns them into finished, resistant, tempered, hard-shelled ones. In accordance with this myth, basic training is seen not as the culmination of a gradual, cumulative process or as a stage on a long developmental road that begins long before it and ends much after, but rather as a sharp transition (albeit one that takes several months), as a kind of Rubicon whose crossing comprises a unidirectional passage between two types of existence: the first a fluffy, preliminary, padded, lightweight childish existence, devoid of real meaning, in a protected family womb, and the second a tough, focused, masculine existence of coping head-to-head with the difficulties, challenges and real conflicts that life summons for the adult human male. Kenaz illuminates the entire process of this transition in a way that highlights the humiliation and misery associated with it, both for new recruits and for the commanders. The entire human experience depicted in the novel is one of ugliness, failure, and dreariness. Despite this, Kenaz's protagonists in this novel are not liberated from the power of the process, and experience it firsthand, against their will, as it were.

The words of the squad commander, Benny – the complete and convincing epitome of the sadistic junior commander (the physical disgust, the weary, refined contempt he feels for the new recruits, the thin, bitter smile with which he examines

them, the way in which he mumbles in his dry voice "[h]eaven help us"³³ are completely authentic³⁴): "I don't understand why they take scum like you into the army in the first place. But that's not my decision [...] [My job is to] turn that scum into men, soldiers. And for your information that's exactly what I'm about to do. The vacation camp is over,"³⁵ are, as horrible as it may sound, about to be realized. Despite the fact that basic training is depicted in the book (very suggestively, as noted) as an endless and purposeless series of failures, absurd humiliations,³⁶ a tattered collection of human ugliness, both physical, and ethical, that does not accumulate and does not lead anywhere – not in the sense of acquiring military skills, not in the sense of gaining ground in some sort of human-existential process of growth or development, in the end this grinder of flesh and spirit, this shameful hell, works.

This metamorphosis, which the whole platoon is going through, is concretized, almost symbolically, in the figure of Micky. Micky, who begins basic training as an arrogant, stubborn, and condescending youth, with a primitive and rigid ideology of cruel and alienated Social Darwinism and an uncompromising

³³ Ibid., 155; Ibid., 152.

³⁴ That is, they are not just empty rhetoric.

³⁵ Ibid., 162; Ibid., 159.

³⁶ In the book, the ability of this distinct human situation to produce more and more humiliation, both on the personal and on the collective level, is portrayed in a highly convincing manner. An example of such personal humiliation is the story (apparently false) of Benny the squad commander at the campfire about his familiarity with Mellabes the narrator: "In grade school once I was the same class as Mellabes. On Fridays, when we had programs in honor of the Sabbath, he would bring his violin to play for us. He would scrape away and produce the most ghastly sounds. You've never heard anything like it in your lives. The teacher would close her eyes in ecstasy, and we would split our sides laughing. You should have seen him, standing there like a sissy, teacher's little pet, who ran to tell her tales about everybody to suck up to her, standing in front of the music stand and scraping his violin. What a joke! He deserved to have something done to his violin, I'm telling you. But nobody there would have had the guts to do it" (Ibid., 485; Ibid., 479).

argumentative and contentious tendency,³⁷ completes it as an adult human being, young for sure, but mature and balanced, with an outlook of cautious openness towards the world.³⁸ This transformation is reinforced and gains a sort of formal approval by virtue of the fact that toward the end of basic training Micky passes the most archaic and basic test of masculinity, and has sex with a woman for the first time (albeit a 'professional' prostitute who works in the adjacent immigrant transit camp). In the prostitute's room, facing the real thing, Micky is afraid at first to take off his underwear, but, overall, his functioning and reactions throughout this situation, which is not a simple one, and especially following it (dealing with the disparaging reactions and laughter at the story of the underwear when he and his comrades return to the camp), demonstrate rare maturity.³⁹

³⁷ See *Ibid.*, pp. 11-16; *Ibid.*, 7-11.

³⁸ Consider, for example, the curious and interested attitude, tinged, grantedly, with a dose of skepticism ("I don't believe and I don't not believe," he says), that he shows toward the two dubious recruits from the neighboring platoon – the medium who communicates with the dead, and his 'impresario,' the ginger, with the skull ring. When Kippod (Hedgehog), who joins him when he goes to them, demands: "You remember how you yourself said on the march to the series that it was disgusting, that it was sick to take freaks like him in the army," Micky says frankly: "I thought then that I knew everything" (see *Ibid.*, p. 590-595; *Ibid.*, 591).

³⁹ Micky's sex scene reveals Kenaz's at times characteristic combination of thematic exceptionality (or unique treatment of familiar themes) and psychological flatness. On the one hand, in a way that completely suits his direct, mundane, antipathetic poetics, Kenaz avoids illuminating this scene in an intense light, whether traumatic-catastrophic or exotically-romantic. Accordingly, the prostitute is not a charming maiden, a sexual angel who relieves the man of his virginity, and neither is she "something ugly, twisted, rotten." She is a downtrodden new immigrant whose mother, sitting in the small bedroom and receiving the customers, speaks incessantly in Yiddish, recounting her troubles and swearing. At the same time, it is difficult to accept the lightness, the psychological indifference with which this charged situation is described. The loss of virginity is presented as though it is not accompanied by a complex psychological process in which all the layers of the psyche are involved, and as though it is not an experience whose shockwaves are felt through the whole personality. From Micky's casual agreement to go with his more experienced friends to the transit camp to "have a good time," to the dialogue between Avner and Micky after he leaves the prostitute's room ("The whole thing seems like a dirty business to you, right?" "Look, she's a whore, isn't she? And after all the men she's been with." "Sure," said Avner. "Tell me, it's your first time, right?" "Yes," Micky said. He was silent for a moment and then he went on, "I always hoped that the first time would be different. With someone I loved, someone who loved me. But it all turned out differently. I don't have any luck with girls," [*Ibid.*, 580-581; *Ibid.*, 577]), the whole scene is overly reminiscent of Hollywood adolescence films or American Television teenage series, genres in which the flat, synthetic, crass portrayal of human psychology is a staple.

But beyond the confirmation or approval of the transformative myth of basic training—the direct, honest, non-stereotypical confirmation that does not erase the humiliation, and perhaps even intensifies and fixes it, freezing it in a kind of lurid light that never stops shining—another myth breaks through toward the end of the novel, a larger myth, perhaps the largest, most significant myth of the Zionist movement. Just before the end of the basic training, during the graduation ceremony rehearsal, Muallem, the squad commander, instructs Zero-Zero, the new immigrant, the soldier whose physical appearance is the most miserable, most damaged, and most repulsive in the platoon,⁴⁰ to put on his service uniform and go home, because his wife has given birth. He is a father. Zero-Zero is astonished at the news. After the commander leaves the tent, he sits on his bed, "limp and sagging, with only the fingers of his right hand playing nervously with the pass":

He was overcome by weakness and unable to get off the bed. He placed his hand on his heart, to feel the heartbeats, which were presumably echoing inside him like exploding bombs. Boom! Boom! Boom! Suddenly he raised his head and looked at us standing around him, and a smile came to his lips, a wondering kind of smile, as he had smiled that morning at his ability to run the full course with everyone else: full of amazement at the mysterious ways of fate. "I've got a sabra son," he said, "a sabra like them," and he pointed to a few of our number. "He'll be like the kids who grow up here from the beginning. He'll talk Hebrew, and he'll sing their songs. Here it's

⁴⁰ Also his speech is 'dirty', lewdly pornographic. See his teasing exchanges with Rachamim, who is seen as a homosexual, for example, *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91; *ibid.*, 97-98.

a good place for kids to grow up. They turn out better looking, healthier, stronger. I won't call my kid any of those lousy names from over there, Lupu, Shmupu, Berko, Shmerko. I'll give him a sabra name, one of them new names, not losers' names. What a crazy world, I'm telling you, that I've got a sabra kid! I'll bring him up like one of them strong, nice-looking kids, so he'll fit into this country. So he won't be shit like me.

Something flickered in his eyes, their focus blurred, and two enormous tears, like transparent marbles, hung from his red eyelids and dropped onto his cheeks. Little streams of tears on his thin, frightened face.

"What are you crying for, you donkey? What are you scared of?" cried his friends.

"I'm happy", explained Zero-Zero in a trembling voice, sniffing again and again, "I'm happy. For something good to come out of me at least".⁴¹

When Zero-Zero goes out into the rain in his service uniform, the choir of the neighboring platoon is heard in the tent opposite practicing for the graduation ceremony, "striving to improve the combination of voices, in a difficult harmony, discordant to the unaccustomed ear, harsh in its strange, unpleasant intervals: 'Son of man, will those bones live...'"⁴²

⁴¹ Ibid., 595-596; Ibid., 592-593.

⁴² Ibid., 597; Ibid., 593.

The novel's closing scene, the news of the birth, Zero-Zero's inarticulate speech, his going out into the rain to the sound of the words of the prophet Ezekiel, is a scene of radiance. The thin, fragile layer that closes the mass of humiliation, ugliness, filth, dullness, and pettiness which fills the novel cover to cover, and which, it seems, not a page in the text nor a figure in the fictional world is free of, is an illuminate layer in which Zero-Zero's tears blend with the sounds of the ancient prophecy. It is, indeed, a wintry radiance, not without its clouds of doubt and uncertainty, but this does not detract from its authenticity and emotion. The myth of national revival, the rebirth of a nation from its old, twisted, bent, and sick incarnation, "the miracle of the emergence of the butterfly from the worm," is coming alive before our eyes.

Hitganvut Yehidim is therefore a realistic, 'full' implementation, of the distinct sub-genre of the Army Novel. This is an effective, honest, profound, dark, at times brilliant articulation that makes an intelligent use of the options of the realistic mode. This mode allows for a broad, slow, deliberate display of a human condition through the careful, meticulous construction of an imaginary world populated with a gallery of characters, some of whom at least are granted a well-rounded, rich, and multi-layered psychological development. However, Kenaz's realistic design is not free of defects.

I would locate the main problem plaguing the novel in the field of the psychological portrayal of the characters, the field of displaying them as entities possessing minds, inner 'worlds,' as autonomous systems informed by constancy and depth. In general, we can consider *Hitganvut Yehidim* (as well as *Yemey Tziklag*) as

belonging to the school of psychological realism. The essence of the psychological 'ethos' in literature is to penetrate beyond the shell of the character-as-actant—that is, as a function of the plot and as a tool of its unfolding and fulfillment—and to fill it with human, spiritual, and emotional content that is supposed to turn the actant into a complete, 'well-rounded' character, with a past, a biography, memories, ambitions, loves, hates, intense emotional feelings of pain, despair and rage, powerful and destructive desires, a complex set of motivations and sensitivities, to bring it as close as possible, in other words, to the model, or the ontological ideal, of a person in the extra-literary world.

The appearance of characters in the plot lines of novels that belong to the genre of psychological realism is similar to the appearance of the tip of an iceberg protruding from the water's surface. The great enterprise called *Yemey Tziklag* tries desperately to turn many of the characters who appear in it into distinct psychological entities through the extensive use of interior monologue (that is, a direct, immediate representation, in fact a verbal reproduction of the stream of thoughts, emotions, stimuli, memories that pass or shoot through the consciousness of the characters concurrently with the progression of the external events) as well as (to a lesser extent) through dialogues or discussions among the characters. But this attempt flounders due to the elevated, poetic, and florid language that the characters use, their baroque phrases, their overly fine, purportless vacillations which plod along in strenuous, tiresome loops, and the lofty, pure, asexual content, drowning in sticky, saccharine sentimental eroticism. There is no doubt that in general, the psychological design of *Hitganvut Yehidim* is several levels above that of *Yemey Tziklag*: Kenaz's

characters are more complex, more believable. Dark sites in their souls are repeatedly exposed in a convincing manner, the traumas are much more authentic, their relationships are characterized by, among other things, bitterness, loathing, malicious joy, verbal and physical violence, and diverse sentiments that range across the full scale of human emotions, including its low and ugly parts, not only its exalted ones.⁴³ In general, then, the characters in *Hitganvut Yehidim* are much more palpable, much more authentic, much closer to the model of a complex extra-literary figure than are those of *Yemey Tziklag*. Unlike the characters of the earlier novel, the characters in *Hitganvut Yehidim* are endowed with a realistic roughness.

Nevertheless, in one prominent aspect of psychological characterization, *Hitganvut Yehidim* is infected with the same flaw which bedevils *Yemey Tziklag*. This aspect is, in Plato's terminology, the mimetic aspect of the text. As is well known, Plato noticed (in the name of Socrates) two ways, or two modes through which the words of characters in the narrative world can be delivered to us. One is the diegetic mode, in which the narrative authority, in its own language, reports the words of the character as it does any other non-linguistic event in the fictional world (indirect

⁴³ See, for example, the narrator Mellabes' betrayal of Avner, who falls asleep while on guard and the joy he feels about the certainty of his friend soon being caught by the commanders (after he sees the commanders approaching, and when he can still rush and awaken his friend but chooses not to do so, Mellabes feels that his choice has "a beauty that cannot be mistaken," and a "new happiness well[s] up in [him] in response, a happiness similar perhaps to that of mountaineers when they reach the jutting rock before the summit of the final peak..." [Ibid., 51; Ibid., 48]). See also the feeling of schadenfreude arising among the soldiers of the platoon following the unfortunate discharge of a bullet by Alon, who imagined he had seen a suspicious armed figure approaching him during a nighttime drill ("A tremor of silent laughter ran through us, shaking our shoulders, a burst of suspect glee, a promise of freedom and strength" [Ibid., 431; Ibid., 424]). The descriptions of the feelings of joy, the tremors of intoxication, in both of these cases are given with intellectual and human honesty, and they are entirely authentic and convincing.

speech), while the second is the mimetic mode, in which the character is given the opportunity, the textual stage, to speak in its own voice (direct speech).⁴⁴

This narratological distinction, perhaps the first in Western culture, is a sensible and simple one, and it distinguishes nicely between the narrative system (both first-person and third-person) as an intermediary between the reader (or listener) and the fictional world, and the voices of the characters who populate this world, created, as it were, by the mere words of the narrator.

The mimetic aspect of the text refers, that is, to those parts of it that are not part of its diegetic or narrative texture, but in which the voice of the narrator or narrative is suspended completely or almost completely, and the voice, spoken or internal, of a character prevails over the text. I refer here to direct or almost direct quotes of the character's speech or, alternatively, of his/her thoughts, meditations, memories, feelings – all the things that make up its Jamesian stream of consciousness. In this area, *Hitganvut Yehidim* is infected (like *Yemey Tziklag* – here Kenaz did not deviate from, did not rise above the problematic norms of the previous novel, norms that were in fact shared by the entire 1948 generation) by a failure that could be called 'the recitational fallacy.' This fallacy is manifested in the fact that the characters' discourse (especially discourse that is part of a 'heart-to-heart' talk or part of a serious, deep argument between characters, an argument in which their ideological world is exposed, or a discourse that is an internal discussion, whether one conducted in one voice or one between different voices within the consciousness, between the 'I' and the 'self,' as it were) is shaped based on the assumption that it is possible to pack the

⁴⁴ See Plato. *The Republic* (Vol. III). G.R.F. Ferrari. (Ed.). Trans. Tom Griffith. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.

deep, hidden, chaotic contents of the mind in some kind of easily-absorbed linguistic package, and lay it over the page like a sort of digest, that is, a compendium or summary, organized in a systematic manner. When it is implanted in a modern text with pretensions of a reliable mimetic representation of the concrete existential reality, this old-fashioned method of literary design, which is rooted in the Shakespearean soliloquy and continues in the stormy, dramatic and rhetorical monologues of the protagonists of nineteenth-century novels, erodes the credibility and authenticity of the characters, and reduces their complex and conflicted inner worlds to a cerebral-verbal layer, detached from any living mental reality. Thus, for example, the confessional-philosophical dialogues that take place between Yossi Ressler and the narrator, between Yossi and Avner, between Avner and the narrator, between Avner and Ziva, between the narrator and Arik, and between Alon and Micky,⁴⁵ are all inflated texts, overly made-up, overdone, their style too high, their texture too arranged. The confessions included in them sound like 'instant', ready-made confessions emitted at the touch of a button. The characters' philosophical meditations are flowery and full of pathos, and they possess a high level of rhetorical organization, as well as a rhythmical regulation that distances them from the raggedness and fragmentariness of spoken language, and from the emotional intensity and the seething and boiling of the inner world that they are supposed to reflect.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Hitganvut Yehidim*, 130-132; 126-129, 301-302; 300-301, 150-153; 146-149, 213-214; 208-211, 322-334; 320-337, 380-385; 374-380, 405-417; 399-410, respectively.

⁴⁶ See, for example, the "triple" rhythm of Avner's words: "It's a question of respect, perhaps. Respect for pain, for the tears of a broken man, respect for the mystery of those moments. Moments like these, like moments of love, should be protected, wrapped in mystery, in solitude" (Ibid., 213; Ibid., 209). Or "I didn't have enough of a hold on myself to analyze myself, the world, the hell knows what, I had to do something aggressive, physical, irrational" (Ibid., 214; Ibid., 210). The triple rhythm or variations on it appear in many of the dialogues (for example, Arik's words: "There was madness in it, but a

This also holds true for Kippod (Hedgehog)'s socio-political speeches and Alon's historiographical-political discourse.⁴⁷ Sometimes, as a result of this, the dialogues in the novel deteriorate to a level befitting a cheap television drama (see, for example the dialogue between Avner and his brother, Avishai).⁴⁸

The internal monologues of the characters of *Hitganvut Yehidim*, such as those of Alon, Avner, and Micky,⁴⁹ suffer from the same weaknesses as do the dialogues between them. It seems that the impression of artificiality and hollow melodrama is even stronger in the isolated, private, inner space of the monologues than it is in the dialogues.

In light of the above, it may be said that Kenaz appears before us in *Hitganvut Yehidim*, his most comprehensive and perhaps most mature novel to date, as a thematic revolutionary, as an honest, anti-genristic validator of great myths (the myth is paradoxically confirmed through a cautious and determined empirical investigation that reveals all its weaknesses, its real, pathetic, ugly, despicable face), and as a stylistic conservative.

Six years after the publication of *Hitganvut Yehidim* appeared Amnon Navot's *Lochdey Arikim o Roman al Mishtara Tzva'it* (Gladiator [Studebaker], or a Note on the Military Police). When *Hitganvut Yehidim* was published, it was widely and not unjustifiably perceived as an inverted mirror image, or the flip side, of *Yemey Tziklag*.

beautiful, liberating, rebellious madness. Admit that there's something in destruction, a kind of poetic, moving, imaginative beauty that no construction can match" (Ibid., 380; Ibid.,374–375).

⁴⁷ Ibid., 348-353; Ibid., 348–349, 475-476; 469–470, respectively.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 284-290; Ibid., 282–289. The dialogue (or the trialogue) between Micky and his parents, despite the fact that it succeeds in conveying the emotional coldness that characterizes the relationships in the family, is too clean, too orderly, and all the 'noise' and stammering of normal everyday communication is filtered out of it. It seems that the characters fluently recite texts they have studiously memorized (see pp. 219-227; 216–225).

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 246-250; Ibid., 246–250 (not continuously); pp. 291-292; 290–291; pp. 494-495; 488–489; and p. 571; 567–568.

Opposite the heroism and purity of Yizhar's beautiful young men – the finest sons of the Labor Settlement movement (Hahityashvut Ha'ovedet), the spearhead and beating heart of the Yishuv's elite as well as of the newborn state – Kenaz presented the baseness, the impurity of the lost children of Sparta. Opposite beauty, he presented ugliness; opposite health, decay and disease; opposite pride, humiliation; opposite the noble dilemmas regarding questions of 'fulfillment' (that is, in one of the two tracks open to 'good' labor Zionist youth: kibbutz or the army) versus refined poetic individualism, or questions of morality and war, Kenaz presents blatant careerist ambitions, a renunciation of the 'categorical imperatives' of the collective, and vulgar naturalistic-pornographic discourse.

But when we place Navot's book next in line in the unfolding series, the perspective expands and deepens, and a different picture emerges. *Lochdey Arikim o Roman al Mishtara Tzva'it* constitutes a major leap in terms of the degree of penetration into the thematic field of humiliation, violence, and cruelty. The book delves into a terrain that is shot through with the roughest and ugliest materials of life, materials that are commonly associated with enclosed living spaces, cells, that within their claustrophobic confines, like a system of mirrors, distill and strengthen the violent, sexual urges, the murderous impulses that exist in the human animal – cells such as those of the prison, the closed institution, or the slum, which are constantly bubbling and effervescing with veiled and overt verbal and physical violence, floating on the surface like maggots emerging from rotting meat. If *Yemey Tziklag* is painted in gold and sky blue, and *Hitganvut Yehidim* is governed by gloom, greyness, and dullness, *Lochdey Arikim o Roman al Mishtara Tzva'it* is smeared with the purple

hues of a pulsating hell steeped in semen, blood, and spilled brains. Compared to Navot's leper's tent, Kenaz's training base seems almost pastoral.

The heightening of humiliation, violence, and pain in Navot's book thus exceeds significantly from the range that Kenaz cautiously and intelligently explores. Hell in Navot is more intense, more seething, much more molten, violent, and plastic.

From the opening of the story (which takes place almost entirely inside a tent of mutinous newly recruited military police)⁵⁰ to its end, the reader's head is plunged in a textual sequence heavily layered with motifs of coercive sex, manual sex, oral sex, 'low' sex with members of groups considered ethnically inferior (sex that links individuals who have dropped out and were ejected from 'high' society with individuals from 'low' society in abandoned and rank apartments), motifs of various kinds of violent penetration (a fist penetrates like a razor blade the skin of a temple,⁵¹ a sharpened stake is pointed straight at the place where the brain is found⁵²), and in general various forms of the urge to pierce, gore, extirpate, gouge out, blind (i.e., castrate, since sight is the sense by means of which one penetrates the world, and the blind crawl across the world like worms),⁵³ themes of sadism and revenge, classic Sadean motifs such as male genitals too large for the female genitals,⁵⁴ motifs of rape, incest, taboo-breaking, various kinds of stigmatization (every female soldier or a soldier's sister, every woman, in fact, who enters the narrative world at any of its

⁵⁰ They are rebelling against having been assigned to the military police.

⁵¹ Amnon Navot, *Lochdey Arikim o Roman al Mishtara Tzva'it*, 85.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵³ See, for example, the scene where the platoon's sergeant is captured by soldiers in Haifa's Lower City ("...just lie here quietly with your cheek on the sidewalk and don't move or we could hurt you in places where we didn't mean to hurt you and smash the butterfly marble you have instead of your right eye and the plain marble you have instead of your left eye..." p. 87), as well as the scene of the blinding of the chameleon's eyes (p. 130), as a preface to burning them in a fire box (p. 131).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 5, 17.

levels is a potential whore and/or a potential victim of rape, violent loss of virginity, or incest),⁵⁵ motifs of leprosy, infection, rot, pus, scum, stench and defilement, sickness, madness, sexual, social, and human ostracism, torture, interrogation, abuse, cutting into live flesh, moderated cannibalistic motifs,⁵⁶ drinking from puddles of urine and mud, guilt, dissolution and disintegration.⁵⁷

These recurring motifs appear at all levels of the text: the level of the narrative present, the level of the biographical past (hallucinatory or 'real') of some of the characters, the level of semi-mythological childhood memories of the figure that emerges as the narrator-witness or more generally as the main focalizer of the novel, the level of the figurative language used—images and metaphors—and the level of virtual and semi-virtual plots that spring up and climb over the outline of the narrative (levels the degree of separation between which is not always sharp and smooth, and which tend to sometimes bleed into each other).

The drastic thematic intensification – the dense, violent, twisted contents that push their way up to the surface of the text – involve also a stylistic intensification. The stylistic intensification in *Lochdey Arikim* is so radical that it seems that the novel can be naturally catalogued under the title of postmodern literature. The first frontal

⁵⁵ The sister of Military Policeman Number Three goes through a process of alienation in order to make her foreign enough so that it will be possible to have sexual intercourse with her, with the excuse or under the camouflage of a “scientific experiment” whose results (whether the baby will be mentally retarded or not) will determine whether she is a member of the family or not (a similar process is undergone by the female deserter who is caught without clothing in a room in the Lower City of Haifa with three Arabs) (see pp. 88–92). The terrible stigma of being a military policeman (one of the overarching themes of the story) is expressed in a suggestive way in the “topography lesson for military policemen,” which mainly concerns learning, by means of marking in black on the mental map of the military policeman, those places (Kadima, Givat Olga, Nesher) that he would have to avoid because “military policemen only go into those places – they don’t come out” (p. 91).

⁵⁶ See the scene of incest between Military Policeman Number Three and his sister, which includes cutting the flesh of the sister and tasting her blood (pp. 33–34).

⁵⁷ See, for example, the comparison of a man to an old coat filled with cotton wool saturated with filth and scum (p. 25) or to an old cardboard box inside of which is a pile of snakes (pp. 78–79).

encounter with the text could give the reader the feeling that here a hand is blatantly raised against the most basic norms and conventions of the modern novel, the basic narratological norms for opening and closing a text (or sections thereof), norms for unfolding information, basic norms of accessibility, basic norms of mediation between the reader and the fictional world, norms regarding the presentation and construction of characters, norms regarding the stability of the characters, the definition of situations and scenes, the separation of fictional reality from hallucination, fictional truth from falsehood (the distinction between events that happened in the fictional world and events that were only imagined in it), as well as graphic norms related to the presentation of the text on the page and its continuity. The two most striking phenomena regarding graphic norms are the appearance of blank pages or spaces in the text and the use of footnotes, especially long footnotes that create, below the body of the text, an additional text written in a different, smaller font that accompanies the main text for many pages. The complete, or nearly complete, absence of any sort of punctuation should also be pointed out.

Nevertheless, in light of a panoramic view of the text, it is preferable, in my opinion, not to detach it from the modernist tradition and position it against it, but rather to place it within that framework, as part of the expressionist school. From this perspective, the exceptional stylistic methods, the blank spaces, the omissions (as, for example, in the sections of the investigation in which the "record keeper," as the narrator is called, is questioned by an investigative committee of soldiers), the disruptions, the footnotes, the hallucinatory diffusion between truth and fiction in the fictional world, the entire alienated, threatening, distancing aspect of the text would

be perceived as a stylistic-formal correlative — graphic, grammatical and rhetorical — of the unbearable content, the intense, violent subjective experiences. Thus, for example, the omissions, the empty spaces, especially in the context of sexually explicit descriptions, correspond with the habit of the focalizing character to seal his ears with his fists and in general with his whole attempt to seal himself off from his surroundings.⁵⁸ The empty spaces and blank pages, then, can be perceived as places where the power of the content, like a terrible sun, burns, as it were, the text, leaving behind only a scorched whiteness.

The comparison of Kenaz and Navot gains depth as we broaden our scope and examine other texts by these two writers, texts that preceded the army novels under discussion here. I refer to Kenaz's novellas collection *Moment Musicali* (Musical Moment)⁵⁹ and to Navot's two early novels *Onat Hamelachim* (Season of the Kings) and *Tisat Machshirim* (Instrument Flight).⁶⁰

Broadening our scope allows us to see that both writers constructed in their works a continuous path of initiation that begins in childhood and reaches its peak in the army. Various connections link *Hitganvut Yehidim* with the stories of *Moment Musicali* (which are also connected to each other forming a chronological chain that accompanies the same narrator-protagonist at different points and in different sites of his life). Thus, for example, characters whose acquaintance we made in the earlier collection (mainly in the novella *Ben Layla uben Shahar* [Between Night and

⁵⁸ See pp. 4–5, 76.

⁵⁹ Yehoshua Kenaz. *Moment Musiali* (Musical Moment). (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1980).

⁶⁰ Amnon Navot. *Onat Hamelachim* (Season of the Kings). (Jerusalem: Keter, 1984); *Tisat Machshirim* (Instrument Flight). (Jerusalem: Keter, 1988).

Dawn]),⁶¹ such as Arik, Naomi, Eli, and Pesach the redhead, appear or are mentioned in *Hitganvut Yehidim*. Events associated with the life of the narrator and discussed at length in the story collection (such as his excessive eye blinking and the fact that he played the violin) also appear, albeit sometimes in a distorted way, in *Hitganvut Yehidim*. Such relationships also exist between *Lochdey Arikim* and Navot's two early novels in a way that makes it possible to identify the protagonist of *Lochdey Arikim* as the late incarnation of the protagonist-youth who appears in the two earlier novels. In addition, we discover in the two textual continuums (and in the two protagonists who appear in them as they leap, as it were, from text to text within the continuum) significant points of overlap with the actual unfolding of the lives of their biographical authors. The narrator's name in *Hitganvut Yehidim*, Mellabes, reveals Yehoshua Kenaz's hometown of Petah-Tikva (Mellabes is the Arab name of Petah-Tikva). The dates of the basic training in the story also match Kenaz's biography (he was born in 1937). The original, un-Hebraized name of the biographical author Amnon Navot, Amnon Bornstein, appears in *Lochdey Arikim* and is identified as the name of the record keeper.⁶²

Kenaz's oeuvre (and within it, perhaps central in it, *Moment Musicali* and *Hitganvut Yehidim*) is justifiably part of the representative canonical landscape of Israeli literature. Navot's work has not been similarly received, probably due to its rough and alienated nature. Indeed, Amnon Navot's youth and initiation trilogy is one of the most dense, charged, and violent pieces of narrative fiction in Hebrew literature. There is nothing soft, pulpy, superfluous, or stereotypical about it. And yet,

⁶¹ The novella was published separately in 2006 (Hakibbutz Hameuchad).

⁶² See Amnon Navot, *Lochdey Arikim o Roman al Mishtara Tzva'it*, 80.

from the filth and the refuse there arises, adorned with mud and grime, a proud, skeletal outline of values – values of loyalty, honor, bearing suffering with clenched teeth, adhering to the tattered heroic myths that children and youths and adults create for themselves in their imagination, bricoleur-like, from day-to-day materials found in their immediate vicinity, even as this moral frame absorbs blow after blow and is left battered, failed, and broken.

Both *Hitganvut Yehidim* and *Lochdey Arikim* are located, then, at the end of a long, convoluted, complex, and painful process of maturation that requires several texts to present it. The result in both cases can be described as a coming-of-age saga that begins in childhood or even in early childhood, continues to adolescence, and ends in basic military training. Each of these sagas does this with its own means as it obstinately progresses along the path dictated by the poetic school to which it belongs (restrained, understated, 'analytical,' and cold impressionistic-psychological realism in the case of Kenaz; powerful, festering, intense, and violent expressionism in the case of Navot). It is possible to state that these are two of the most significant, interesting, and charged coming-of-age sagas in Modern Hebrew Literature.

The third army novel I want to discuss in this article is *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* (The People, Food for Kings), by Yitzhak Laor. In this novel also we can find motifs similar or close to those we have found in the novels discussed above. Thus, for example, we can find motifs of violence (see, for example Rafi's arbitrary beating by Zalman or the slap on the cheek Rachel receives from the brigade commander),⁶³ of abuse (see the scene of the abuse of the disrespectful soldier⁶⁴ by

⁶³ Yitzhak Laor, *Am, Ma'achal Melachim*, 211 and 423, respectively.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 344–350.

the company commander, Castro, which is reminiscent of the scene of Alon's abuse in *Hitganvut Yehidim*), and in particular of violent, degrading, brutal, blood-soaked sex, with a focus on oral and anal sex. As in *Lochdey Arikim*, these motifs are scattered and blended in different stratum of the text, from the level of the events through the level of the discourse between characters (see, for example: "The commander looked at Rafi dryly [...] and said in a voice that was drained of anger or humiliation: 'After Moishela comes here to paint, you wait for me in my office and don't move. Like a cat being fucked, you wait. Like a cat being fucked in the ass you wait for me there,'"⁶⁵ or "The defector looked at the clerk and said to the commander: 'There is a pink hole in her ass, until I get into it and I tear it, you know how I'll tear it? The pink will be red, like a mouth at the dentist's'".⁶⁶) to the 'intentional' level, the level of the memories, fantasies, desires, and intentions of the characters (see, for example, Rafi's hallucinations of cutting his eyes with a razor, that are reminiscent of the terrifying opening scene of the Luis Bunuel film, *Un Chien Andalou*;⁶⁷ or his plan of defense against the physical and sexual violence that could be directed against him in prison, a plan that includes cannibalistic motifs of biting off body parts, including genitals, and swallowing them;⁶⁸ and the violent sexual scene between the truck driver and Etti the cook at the restaurant, which includes both concrete and hallucinatory violence – the driver's thoughts about tearing off breasts and ripping a buttocks⁶⁹).

⁶⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁶ Ibid. 441.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 209

⁶⁸ Ibid., 243–244.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 276–277.

In general, the similarities between the three texts derive from the fact that all three perceive and shape the military base as a closed institution – what sociologist Erving Goffman calls in his popular book *Asylums* a "total institution."⁷⁰ According to Goffman, the foundational elements of the total institution are social alienation from the outside world, a breaking down of the barriers between the spheres of sleep, work, and leisure and their containment together in one space and under one authority, and the sharp, fundamental distinction between staff and inmates – the human material organized, operated, and transported by the staff. Goffman clearly and effectively enumerates and analyzes the variety of mechanisms, rituals, practices, and procedures that operate in closed institutions, such as, for example, the initiation ceremony in which the new inmate deposits his or her clothes, property and name and receives standard, non-personal uniform and coarse equipment; the necessity to adopt physically exhausting and embarrassing postures (such as standing at attention); verbal humiliation by the staff; the assignment of pointless jobs or tasks; intrusion into and the abuse of intimate personal information, and in general aggressive invasiveness into the intimate realm of the individual; all-embracing exposure as a result of shared living quarters and toilets; ethnic and racial mixing; the need to obtain approval for the tiniest actions; the tight supervision of dress, physical conduct, and manners; the need to perform one's actions in coordination with a mass of people; the proliferation of regulations and the strict enforcement thereof (along with the fact that every staff member is an authority vis à vis the inmate); the severe limitation put on those activities that, in civilian life, define autonomy, self-determination, and freedom of the individual; the denial of small places of refuge found in civilian life –

⁷⁰ Erving Goffman. *Asylums*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971 [1961]).

mechanisms and procedures that permeate the tiniest fibers that comprise the fabric of a person's life, create a constricting shell of judgment, supervision, and restriction, and constitute, in their accumulation, a focused, methodical, and massive attack on the 'I,' an attack that results in the erosion, undermining, destruction, and loss of the sense of self.

In his book, Goffman also examines the system of privileges customary in the total institution, a system by means of which the reorganization of the personality mainly occurs, and the individual patterns of adaptation in the face of an unprecedented attack on selfhood. Many of the features, practices, mechanisms, and effects of the total institution appear in the world of the military base as it is presented in the three novels under discussion.

In the context of the perception of the military camp as a total institution, in *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* new elements, not present in the other texts, appear. *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* devotes substantial textual space to the illumination of human and social dimensions of the total institution's system almost not mentioned at all in the two previous novels. For example, the tormented, distorted, pathological viewpoint of the officer or the senior commander is presented, as well as that of the female part of the inmates' human landscape. In addition, there appears in the novel the theme of a soldier's abuse of his commander. Laor aptly discerns that the rigid stratified structure of the total institution, a structure based on the constitutive hierarchical distinction between staff and inmates, allows, under certain conditions, the reversal of the 'normal' direction of abuse, simply through the systematic disregard of the codes of distance, obedience, and deference to which the total

institution is committed, as well as by the use of a rhetoric of contempt and ridicule (see the anonymous soldier's abuse of the commander, Castro, whom he calls Moishela Auschwitz, or Rachel's abuse of the NCO [non commissioned officer] Ruhama⁷¹).

As mentioned, it is possible to discern a basic similarity in the essential nature of the military experience as it is perceived and shaped in the three novels. But while the two previous novels discussed here do not break through the modernist shell (*Hitganvut Yehidim* is inextricably linked to the tradition of the classic pre-modernist novel, and *Lochdey Arikim*, despite its threatening and fragmented appearance, is nothing but an extreme execution of a legitimate and familiar option in the framework of the modernist matrix, the expressionist one), *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* asks to be read as a postmodernist text, a text that challenges, subverts, undermines, and inverts, while parodizing and ironizing, the norms, conventions, and ethos of the modernist project. Indeed, the book's problematic nature stems largely from the flagrant desire to be postmodern at all costs, to squeeze itself with all its might to that coveted position – the position of aloof disdain towards the careful, 'naive' labor of constructing a coherent world.

The problematic nature of *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* stems from the fact that Laor is not an authentic postmodernist. He is simply a member of a different generation. The modernist heritage is an integral component of his literary blood, is in his genes as a creator of artistic-literary texts (prose, poetry, and plays). *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* is a postmodern novel, but the postmodern architecture of the text is underpinned by a thin but stubborn foundation of a modernist frame expressed both in

⁷¹ Yitzhak Laor, *Am, Ma'achal Melachim*, 344–350 and 294–297, respectively.

a scenery of bases, roads, and army camps that is realized in a life-like, 'full' (and sometimes 'poetic'⁷²) way, and in an entire thematic formation that focuses on the naturalistic illumination of interpersonal relationships (especially in the context of the military hierarchy: the relationship between male commanders and male soldiers, between male commanders and female soldiers, between male soldiers, between male and female soldiers, between female soldiers, and so on), an illumination that emphasizes elements of humiliation, cruelty, alienation, the inability to be close to another person, the sweeping failure at translating desire into an authentic, egalitarian, and productive verbal and sexual dialogue, the mechanisms that turn a wish for closeness into hatred and into a wish to humiliate, coarse and violent sex, profanity, and so on.⁷³ Moreover, the modernistic frame is expressed in the fact that the text is charged with a message that has a more or less clear political, social, and existential bent. This bent is materialized in a sarcastic satirical-critical attack against social institutions and procedures (particularly against the institution of the army and the military system in general, as well as against the ethos of rough male aggression), an attack resting on a solid ideological ethical-normative system. Charging the narrative text with a pointed message against social institutions, procedures, and ideologies is a classic modernist move. This move is a feature in one way or another not only of realistic-mimetic works but also of non-realistic works, works that can be grouped

⁷² See, for example, the description of the eucalyptus trees on the base (p. 22) or the description of the partridges spreading a blanket of darkness (p. 28), descriptions backed by expressive and precise use of figurative language.

⁷³ At this thematic level, which constitutes a blatant caricature of the relationships between human beings, and includes a violent and fairly effective attack on the conception of sexual contact as the peak and consummation of human closeness and intimacy, Laor's special flair – already evident in his first book, the story collection *Mehutz Lagader* (Outside the Fence) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1981) – for a convincing, valid shaping of the naturalistic, sexual, low, brutal, and humiliating side of human life, comes into play.

together under the label of 'the Absurd.' The Absurd breaks through (or stretches) the boundaries of the realistic in various ways, and constructs a world that is clearly unrealistic, devoid of any appearance of plausibility, a world that is merely possible, that, while maintaining certain connections and analogies with the world of reality, is clearly not meant to faithfully reflect it or duplicate it, to create a replica of it. At the same time, the world of the absurd is driven by a strict logic.⁷⁴ Each and every detail in it is part of a carefully laid out plan, a plan that wields a rigorous mechanism of sifting and sorting, and thus the 'absurd' is charged with positive meaning. This 'foreign' regularity is what allows the absurd to be perceived as carrying a coherent message, even when this message is not simplistic, direct, nakedly exposed, but rather subject to different interpretations and different readings.

The postmodernist effect, or ambience, is constructed in *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* by means of two main strategies. The first involves accentuating the fictionality of the fictional world, underlining the textuality of the text, an almost wanton smashing of the illusion of realism, the illusion that the text is transparent, neutral, and that behind it stands a 'real' world with 'real' characters – an illusion deeply embedded in traditional reading experience. Activating this strategy means encouraging the reader to abandon the naive approach of "suspension of disbelief" recommended by Coleridge as the appropriate approach to adopt when arriving at the gates of the fictional text. This strategy of accentuated fictionality finds expression in *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* in several ways:

⁷⁴ This is apparent, for example, in the works of Hanoach Levin. His cruel satire is an important influence on *Am, Ma'achal Melachim*.

(1) The first means for establishing it is by drawing attention to the way in which the text is produced and highlighting its essence as an artifact, an object that stands at the end of a conscious and planned process that involves various manipulations, all of this by means of referring to the fact that the narrator is the creator of the fictional world ("If there is no narrator, there is no such base"⁷⁵) as well as to entities that are external to the novel, such as the publisher with its constraints and temptations,⁷⁶ various editorial factors, and so on.

(2) Another means, which many times is entwined and integrated with the first, is the introduction of a modal aspect into the text. Thus, for example, various options are offered for the end of the first and second chapters of the novel.⁷⁷ The modal aspect is also expressed in the widespread use of different types of modal operators, such as "let's assume," "perhaps," "apparently," "let's say," and so on, operators that point to the fact that the fictional world was created through a process of arbitrary, random decision making that lacks any element of internal necessity.

(3) An additional mechanism by means of which the strategy in question is expressed, often bluntly, is the naming system operating in the text. This system is pockmarked by intentional carelessness meant to point to its arbitrary, random nature, subject to the whims of the author or the textual creator. This nominal neglect, or even scorn, is revealed in two ways: (a) the use of impersonal, standardized names, vaguely descriptive and demeaning sobriquets that constitute a kind of referential default, such as "Hayaliko," "Afsaniko," "Betoniko," "Tarashiko," or "Tayasiko" (roughly translatable to "soldier-boy," "quartermaster-boy," "concrete-boy," "private-

⁷⁵ Yitzhak Laor, *Am, Ma'achal Melachim*, 29.

⁷⁶ See, for example, *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, *ibid.*; 56.

first-class-boy", and "pilot-boy"); and (b) a deliberate lack of strictness regarding the stability of the name-giving act. Thus, for example, the character known as "Avrikam" (who first appears on page 72) is alternately and unsystematically called either "Avrikam" or "Avikam." The woman soldier who enters the base in the first chapter is called "Ofra," "Ora," or, in another place, "Ayala."⁷⁸ This instability reaches its peak toward the end of the novel, as a character called "Moshe Cohen" (similar to John Doe) is called immediately afterwards, in succession: "Haim Cohen," "Yoseph Cohen," "Yitzhak Cohen," "Yaakov Cohen," and "Yisrael Cohen."⁷⁹

The second strategy, more substantive and central, that creates the postmodern effect in the novel is the use of the category of the nonsensical. By this is meant the use of narrative sequences, that, although not logically or physically impossible, stretch and break down – one might say, perhaps, abuse – the limits of the probable. Almost everything in this book touches upon the nonsensical or is tainted by it. From the ambition of the base commander Ephraim Kishon(!) (who Hebraized his name from Ferenc Kirschner)⁸⁰ to dismantle the base and leave not even one hut until the signing of the peace treaty in Tashkent, and in the vacated area to build a fruit and vegetable and fish and textile fair,⁸¹ to Akabia ben Mahalalel's⁸² (!) zigzag run on the way to the base, to company commander Castro fantasizing about making the soldiers in his company hairier, to the murky affair of the missing soldiers and skeletons handled by the officer in charge of missing soldiers who owns a Roquefort and bacon

⁷⁸ See *ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁹ See *ibid.*, 509–511.

⁸⁰ Unlike the real Ephraim Kishon – the famous Israeli right-wing satirist – who Hebraized his name from the Hungarian name 'Kishhunt,' which was itself a Magyarization of his original German-Jewish sounding name 'Hoffmann.'

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 19–25.

⁸² Like the name of the ancient sage.

delicatessen in central Tel Aviv,⁸³ up to the story of the release of soldier Rachel from jail by Rami and the Brigade Commander Dan⁸⁴ (to mention just few of the many possible examples), the entire novel is drenched in the nonsensical. In this framework we should also note the systematic reference to instances of absurd indecision or hesitancy occurring at the tiniest, most trivial, and most inconsequential level, such as Chayaliko's indecision over whether to answer the phone or the pendulum-like movement, back and forth, of First Lieutenant Castro toward the crushed beetle.⁸⁵ The trivial, endlessly repeating itself, becomes a source of inflammation that spreads over the textual space, a textual irritation point from which verbal suppuration oozes.

The nonsensical is one of the most typical postmodern categories. The stories of Etgar Keret and (especially) Orly Castel-Bloom often exhibit deftly strung chains of the nonsensical. The problem in Laor's work is that it lacks the lightness and humor that mark the younger writers, who rely much more than he does on purely linguistic games, on the brilliant use of various linguistic registers, and on the virtuoso juggling between them. In Laor's work everything is heavy, strained, forced, extremely verbose, and exhausting.

In the novel, a particularly revolting anthology of the nonsensical is created, events and subplots that manage to be completely nonsensical and yet are uninteresting, barren, devoid of any spark of invention, any humor or vitality. In Laor, the nonsensical is nothing but convoluted baroqueness wound around the skeleton of the sarcastic misanthropy, the militant, though somewhat predictable and threadbare, satire against the ethos of macho male aggression. The reader wanders in the

⁸³ Ibid., 350–354.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 413–427.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 12–20 and 329–330, respectively.

wasteland of the endless swamps of the nonsensical, spotted with satirical jibes and 'naturalistic' scenes of rough and violent sex.

In *Am, Ma'achal Melachim* the postmodernist growth takes over the underlying modernist frame, a frame based on setting up a fictional world using naturalistic, conventional means. In other words, this is a parasitic postmodern text, a text whose postmodernism does not originate from some authentic spiritual fountain. The postmodern effect in the novel does not amount, therefore, to much more than drowning the modernist-satirical-critical layer – which, as mentioned, also suffers from superficiality and cliché – in dull and repellent verbal swamps of the nonsensical, the bizarre, accompanied by an incessant flaunting of the text's own inherent meaninglessness and artificiality.

The three novels examined in this article address the military way of being after the echoes of the battles died away or before they started. They penetrate, each in its own manner and with its own tools, this particular mode of existence, and investigate its ins and outs, its nuts and bolts, after "the sound of cannons has subsided." They deviate from the King's Highway, if one can call it that, of war and battle fiction, which clings to the shoulder of the combat soldier, hangs onto the galloping jeep or the charging tank, chanting uplifting war hymns in the spirit of "Vaheb in Suphah"⁸⁶ (or alternatively tears the aura of heroism from the storm of war and reveals its chaotic, human-crushing face). They carve out for themselves another path. On this path, they expose ugliness, disease, decay, humiliation, the dreariness,

⁸⁶ "[W]herefore it is said in the book of the Wars of the LORD: Vaheb in Suphah, and the valleys of Arnon" (Numbers 21:14). The verse precedes the description of the wars of the Israelites against Sihon, King of the Amorites, in which the Israelites smote Sihon "with the edge of the sword, and possessed his land from the Arnon unto the Jabbok" (Numbers 21: 24). Vaheb is presumably the name of a place in Moab.

cruelty, and pain of everyday life, the bodily fluids – semen, urine, sweat, blood, the raw negative image of the Zionist dream. They reveal the (diseased) roots of Israeliness.