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«A LITTLE No. 5 DIDN'T BLOW UP THAT MORNING».
ISRAELI FICTION IN THE TIME OF THE SECOND INTIFADA

The dawn of this century was marked by a tremendous wave of violence in Israel and the Palestinian territories, which resulted in a high number of casualties among both parties in the years from 2000 to 2005. The following pages provide an overview of how the effects of the uprising known as the Second Intifada have been depicted in two works of fiction written in Hebrew in those years.

Even though they are profoundly different from each other in their themes and their narrative modes, in both novels the string of terrorist attacks serves as the basis for the plot. The perception of terrorism as a constant threat, part of everyday life, and the detached, unemotional tone in the description of random attacks are other traits shared by both narrations. Nevertheless, as shown by a close reading of the texts, the development of characters takes different directions due to the different treatment of the other party, the enemy, with the inclusion, or lack thereof, of its point of view.

Invisible enemies

During a winter in the first decade of the 21st century, Israel is plagued by three calamities: an unprecedented cold spell with heavy precipitation, a string of terrorist attacks, and a new deadly influenza originating – unlikely a coincidence – from the Arab peninsula, soon named «the Saudi flu». This is the fantastic background upon which *Human parts*¹ by Orly Castel-Bloom is based.

Published in Hebrew in 2002, that is in the midst of the Second Intifada, the novel partly deals with contemporary events, since one of the three above-mentioned calamities, namely the long string of attacks, is far from being a fictive reality. Nevertheless, the narrator refrains from representing the real context, but rather includes terrorism in a reality that appears, at least on the surface, completely transfigured, despite being described through a news reporting voice. The background of the novel is built upon an effective premise: an unusually and inexplicably harsh winter looms over Israel, with heavy rainfalls and snowstorms bringing death and destruction all over the country. From the very first line («It was an exceptional winter»), the constantly gloomy and hostile weather embodies, in an extremely tangible way, a bleak social and political situation with no way out in sight. A somber depiction of Israeli reality is not unusual in Castel-Bloom's work: her previous novel *Dolly City* (1992), appeared during the First Intifada, offered «a hallucinatory trip through a hellish version of Tel Aviv».² Unlike in *Dolly City*, which dwelled on the question of violence and loss of awareness in Israel, in *Human parts* Israelis are cast as victims. A decade later, in the face of suicide bombings as the Palestinian weapon of choice, the new novel focuses on the effects of this unprecedented wave of death among Israeli civilians.

The string of suicide attacks aimed at civilian targets all over the country is presented in an original manner. It is deeply ironic that the historical phenomenon of suicide terrorism,

¹ O. CASTEL-BLOOM, *Human parts*, translated by Dalya Bilu, Godine, Boston (MA) 2003 (*Ḥalaqim 'enošiyim*, Kinneret, Tel Aviv 2002).

² A. ROVNER, *Forcing the end: Apocalyptic Israeli*

fiction, 1971-2009, in R.S. HARRIS & R. OMER-SHERMAN (eds.), *Narratives of dissent: War in contemporary Israeli arts and culture*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit (MI) 2012, pp. 205-220 (p. 212).

which was tragically topical at the time of writing and publication, is introduced as an item from a list of fictive calamities. Actual terrorism is mixed with the unlikely cold wave and the made-up «Saudi» epidemic, as if to underline its enormous absurdity. On the other hand, combining a murderous fury of human origin with two cataclysms that, even though fictive and uncommon, can be described as natural phenomena is effective in depicting the perception of terrorism as a commonplace, a natural phenomenon itself. It is perceived as a constant and almost inescapable threat with which one has to deal. Ubiquitous as much as precipitation (and symbolically identified with a hailstorm towards the end, as shown below), terrorism appears to be a natural yet inexplicable phenomenon, an integral part of everyday life for Israelis.

The lives of people moving on this background are taken by any of the calamities, without distinction. Deadly hailstorms, roofs collapsing from snow, a flu with a fatality rate of 25 per cent (which «also affected the inhabitants of the Palestinian Authority, and there, too, many people died»),³ suicide attacks and car bombs leave a powerless population at the mercy of events:

People who had wrapped themselves up well against the cold before leaving home, and felt more or less protected, were blown to pieces in nearby streets, shortly after meeting someone or other and asking him some perfectly ordinary question.⁴

The image of bodies ripped to pieces by bombings is a recurring motif, beginning from the «human parts» in the title, and is described «in a hyperrealistic mode».⁵ Pieces are all that is left after an attack, as explained by one of the characters to his children, while the relatives of the victims are shown on television:

«They have to identify their relative by pieces. Teeth, hands, shoes, rings. From blasts like that you don't come out in one piece. A person's torn to bits (...) Sometimes», Boaz Beit-Halahmi went on ex-

plaining to his children, «there's nothing left to bury, and they put in stones, or pieces of wood, so that the families will think they're burying something».⁶

The one constant is the ever-present shadow of death. It worms its way into everyday life, takes a tangible form under a permanently cloud-covered sky, and brings with it anxiety about «the demise of the State of Israel».⁷ In this doomsday scenario, a dystopic tragicomedy where a number of inexplicable elements show up in an ordinary world, people go on with their ordinary lives, between daily struggles and big dreams. It is the picture of a society slipping into despair and panic while individuals cannot emerge from indifference. On this background, it is no surprise that Reuven Tekoa, fictional president of the State of Israel mainly seen in his car with his chauffeur, spends «more than half of the time (...) rushing from one condolence call to another, and from there to visit the wounded at the hospital, and so on and so forth».⁸

Instead of a hero with his or her journey, the reader meets a cast of characters with their histories who alternate at the centre of the story, even though the plot revolves around two main groups: the Beit-Halahmi family and the siblings Dubnov-Bergson. The third-person omniscient narrative introduces individual characters, presenting their background and their relationships, and unfolds their stories in parallel, without one predominating over the others. All the characters, each in his or her own way, suffer the Israeli reality created by the novel, on whose background their stories touch each other for brief moments. Different narrative threads, although they do not intertwine, paint a picture of Israeli society in its many sections, which ultimately emerges as the true protagonist.

The novel opens with events involving the Beit-Halahmis, a family consisting of a mother, a father, and four children (to be exact, two twin boys and two twin girls). The Beit-Halahmis are so poor, they cannot afford to replace lightbulbs in their home or to buy gloves for their children. When their condition is reported about on tel-

³ CASTEL-BLOOM, *Human parts*, cit., p. 23.

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 6.

⁵ Which may be seen as a response to «an era that had increasingly embraced the irrational»

(ROVNER, *Forcing the end*, cit., p. 213).

⁶ CASTEL-BLOOM, *Human parts*, cit., p. 102.

⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 23-24.

⁸ *Ivi*, p. 68.

evision, the mother Kati suddenly becomes a celebrity, even though a short-lived one; she is even «invited [to TV shows] as the popular representative of poverty in Israel».⁹

Born Katun Barazani to a modest family of Aramaic-speaking Kurdish Jews, Kati is an undemanding woman with low standards: she is uneducated, she works at menial jobs, and her best clothes include a leopard-print shirt. Her discomfort deriving from the lack of education is mercilessly exposed in several passages: in addition to not knowing what the Internet is,¹⁰ when she walks through a rich neighbourhood whose streets bear the names of biblical prophets, she wonders who those people are and why they have no surnames. She «advanced in Micah Street and was very surprised. She herself lives in Micah Reiser Avenue, and here they called him only by his first name. It must be something to do with (...) protectzia, you know, a special treatment».¹¹ But after that brief contact with the comfortable world of television, she starts dreaming of a new life.

The origins of her husband, Boaz, are quite different: born to a wealthy family, he was disinherited for marrying beneath him. A former taxi driver, he lost his job following an accident that gave him a limp. He is presented as a man scarred by life, unable to move on, and constantly dwelling on the past and on the poultry farm he was supposed to inherit.¹² He is determined not to repeat his parents' mistake: «I'll never disinherit any of my children, not even if Adi marries an Arab»,¹³ he declares to his wife with unintended comicality, considering that he owns nothing. As seen below, the story of Boaz ends in highly symbolical circumstances, when his fate finds him driving around in the streets of Jerusalem, unable to find a way out.¹⁴

Liat Dubnov and her half-brother Adir Bergson, two years her junior, live from the properties inherited from their mother. Adir's partner, the fashion model Tazaro, is an Ethiopian Jewish woman who came to Israel with

Operation Solomon; his former partner, Iris, is a childhood friend of her sister and a mother of three. Although he was happy when he lived abroad, Adir is not willing to leave Israel: «I don't possess a pioneering spirit. I possess the spirit of an asthma sufferer (...) I don't feel like making any more changes in my life. I don't want to leave. I've finished with changes in my life».¹⁵ Asthma is the emblem of Adir, the symbol of an inner evil that keeps him stuck, convinces him not to take risks, and makes him think of the others as a burden. To Tazaro, who wants to get married, he explains why he does not want children: «I need my peace and quiet, not to produce another generation for catastrophe».¹⁶

A similar stepping away from humanity is experienced by his half-sister Liat, introduced as «a beautiful brunette with dark blue eyes, single on principle, thirty-nine years old»;¹⁷ set for life financially, she dedicates herself to the study of Aramaic. Her brother «admired her studying something that was becoming extinct, whereas he himself had studied the atmosphere, which was more eternal than any civilization».¹⁸

It is a cross-section of Israeli society, from the president to the humblest people. The Beit-Halahmis are on the bottom rung of the social ladder, yet less extreme social inequalities are also shown through the eyes of Iris, who experiences the barriers faced daily by the unprivileged. Her bank account gets frozen and she cannot afford a dentist; she used to do laundry on credit, which is now impossible in a laundromat; she enviously compares herself to the rich, who are always able to choose, and feels ashamed with her own children, who hold poverty against her.¹⁹ For a short while, the reader can almost forget that this society, in its whole and regardless of social stratum, is the target of terrorism; but the reality of terror abruptly bursts in and outweighs petty problems. Liat, as soon as she is introduced to the reader, catches the frightening Saudi flu and dies alone in the hospital, where «she felt like a second-class patient compared to

⁹ *Ivi*, p. 98.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 182.

¹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 149-150.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 190.

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 194.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 236-237.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 175.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 174.

¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 26.

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 44.

¹⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 50-57, 138-139.

the victims of terror attacks».²⁰ Kati lives «the period of her fame and decline»²¹ within one week, at the end of which she is no more than «a media has-been»:²²

On that Monday, the presenter of the morning show to which Kati had been invited (...) announced that poverty was no longer the hot news it had been the week before, and that the most important item on the agenda was now the frequency of the terror attacks and the question of Israel's response to them. This being the case, he informed his colleagues, he wasn't going to give the lady from Lod more than a minute and half's interview, and in fact he cut her short and went on to ask the viewers to call in their replies to the question: What, in your opinion, should be Israel's response to Palestinian aggression?²³

The normalisation of terror attacks, so obvious in its association with natural disasters, is a key element:

In the hilly regions it snowed heavily, with roofs caving in and trees falling down from the weight. There were many casualties due to the cold. In addition, the routine terror attacks continued, at a rate of two or three a day.²⁴

The president of the State ties in his own daily routine with the routine of terror attacks, appearing as little more than an official robot employed full-time in attending funerals. A widely respected figure, yet of questionable utility, Reuven Tekoa continues his pointless mission until he eventually collapses and is forced to take a few days off.²⁵

Looking at the origins of the unending trail of terror attacks, that is bombers and instigators behind them, the narration is highly ironic in describing terrorism as an acceptable and common job. The terror industry is even more advanced than others in the Arab and Muslim world since it advocates a long-awaited and elsewhere neglected gender equality: «during this period women, too, were given religious author-

ization to carry out suicide bombings».²⁶ It is a prosperous and flourishing industry, as can be seen from the grotesque list of organisations duelling for the right to lead.²⁷

The way the media adjust to the routine, by applying standardised procedures for the coverage, is no less suggestive of the normalisation of terror attacks:

In the past, the not very distant past, when there was a terrorist strike, the tone of the broadcasters would change, to something slower and sadder, and the song they played were quieter, and usually in Hebrew. But when bombs and death became a matter of routine, a kind of convention came into being where, after up to five deaths, the broadcast would continue as usual, and only from five and up would they go into a lower gear and play quiet songs, in English too, preferably about human destiny, such as "Dust in the Wind".

From ten dead and up, the radio networks switched to a far more serious mode, confined to Hebrew songs only, such as Corin Alal's "I Have No Other Country", or a new song, grim and realistic, composed in those terrible days and sung by Yehuda Poliker, "Who's Next in Line?"

From twenty dead and up, they changed the format to Plan B, like hospitals on high alert, and broadcast frequent news flashes interspersed with "Friendship" performed by the IDF Nahal Troupe or Esther Ofarim, "For a Man Is Like a Tree in the Field" sung by Shalom Hanoach and "When Angels Cry" sung by Yehudit Ravitz or Mati Caspi.

Now, with only one man dead and one wounded woman fighting for her life, the radio stations went on broadcasting ordinary songs.²⁸

A full association of terrorism with natural disasters is accomplished towards the end, in the description of the attack in which Boaz Beit-Halahmi gets involved while driving in Jerusalem:

Precisely at the moment the radio began to play David Bowie's song about the man who got lost in the space, Boaz Beit-Halahmi suddenly heard hailstones hitting his car, very loudly and decisively, and he automatically turned on the windshield wipers.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 30.

²¹ *Ivi*, p. 106.

²² *Ivi*, p. 99.

²³ *Ivi*, pp. 98-99.

²⁴ *Ivi*, p. 218.

²⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 100-101.

²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 218.

²⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 221-222.

²⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 242-243. «Such journalistic banalities are central to Castel-Bloom's novel and aesthetic»

But it wasn't hail. It was a terrorist ambush. The gunmen had hidden behind a snowdrift and fired forty bullets at him.²⁹

The association therefore culminates in a grotesque confusion between rounds of gunfire and «hailstones hitting his car, very loudly and decisively». The victim has supposedly no time to identify which of the calamities hit him; the omniscient narrator only reports on his last action, an instinctive response to the sudden storm that interrupted a classic rock song. While Bowie's Major Tom gets lost in the space, the driver gets shot down by something that, even though far from being accidental, appears as such in the eyes of the victim.

The feeling of normalisation of terror is effectively conveyed by the tone as well, imbued with Castel-Bloom's customary irony, which spares no one. It does not spare terrorism, a surreal implementation of gender equality as well as a flourishing industry whose leadership is disputed by many organisations, as seen above.³⁰ Nor the cynicism of the media, that flood an increasingly desensitised public with the coverage of attacks, only to turn away from the subject and switch to weather forecast when the army enters the territories of the Palestinian Authority.³¹ It does not spare military euphemisms, one of which is «the War for Peace in Galilee»,³² nor the *topoi* of Jewish tradition, such as the *yidische mame*, that Liat sees in her mother and that later will manifest in herself, who is childless, or the «tasteless Jewish food (...) Very traditional» requested by Adir.³³

A world where violence and death are ubiquitous is narrated in a very unemotional and detached tone, to the point that terrorism is linked to an overload of work. «In the cemeteries they begun to bury the corpses one on top of the other, and the undertakers worked day and night digging graves in the ground or building them above it. The volunteers who collected the body parts at the sites of the bomb explosions

did not lack work either».³⁴ The unemotional narration of shocking events, as a device conceived to underline the absurd, reaches a peak in the depiction of the funeral of Liat, whose coffin is lowered into a grave filled with water by a rainstorm, while Iris, a few steps away, is mistaken for a terrorist.³⁵ Even more absurd and unemotional is the way a nurse from the hospital informs a worried Adir about his sister's condition: «Her life's not in danger (...) She's dead».³⁶

Throughout the entire novel, the enemy remains invisible: whether it be a storm, a disease, or a terror attack, the characters and the reader never meet the source of destruction. The enemies may be unexplained phenomena in the atmosphere, an unknown virus, or faceless Palestinians, who «appear in the novel almost exclusively as terrorists who turn human lives into "human parts" with the push of a button».³⁷ But the narrator chooses to focus on the effects of the events, which may be collectively seen as the actions of a god of randomness.

Listening to the enemy

The invisible enemy is unveiled, introduced, and lengthily listened to in *Almost dead*³⁸ (also published as *Croc attack*) by Assaf Gavron, appeared in Hebrew in 2006. Two parallel first-person narratives give voice, in turn, to two protagonists: the young Israeli Eitan, called Tanin ("crocodile", as in the original Hebrew title), who tells his story in the odd-numbered chapters, and the young Palestinian Fahmi, a sort of reluctant terrorist whose point of view is recorded in the even-numbered chapters. The story unfolds through a parallel reading, while the reader reconstructs the chain of events leading such distant characters to cross their paths.

Besides representing different characters-narrators and distant stories, the two alternating voices are profoundly different in tone

(ROVNER, *Forcing the end*, cit., p. 213).

²⁹ CASTEL-BLOOM, *Human parts*, cit., p. 237.

³⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 218, 221-222.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 134.

³² *Ivi*, p. 70.

³³ *Ivi*, pp. 90-91.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 24.

³⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 80-85.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 38.

³⁷ ROVNER, *Forcing the end*, cit., p. 213.

³⁸ A. GAVRON, *Almost dead*, translated by Assaf Gavron and James Lever, HarperCollins, New York

and narrating mode. Eitan tells his story linearly starting from the initial event: he narrowly escaped a suicide bombing on the Little No. 5, a «minibus-sized cab which follows the route of the No. 5 bus»³⁹ and which he took daily to get to work. His tone, constantly ironic and detached, oscillates between indifference and dark humour. On the other hand, the narration of Fahmi – who lies in a semi-conscious state in an Israeli hospital following the final terror attack – consists of a lengthy, nostalgic inner monologue that goes back and forth in time. The actual events of recent months get mixed with fantasy, memories, and digressions about the history of his family since the *Nakba*.

The two voices are different, each strongly typified and fitting the character, as much as the perspectives on the same events and, more broadly, on the conflict that is both the background and the theme of the novel. The double parallel narrative serves therefore the objective of a more balanced representation of the events, offering a view from the inside on two worlds in conflict with little chance of mutual understanding.⁴⁰ It is a view that does not leave out the roots of the phenomenon, since it is not limited to the outcome of terrorism but also reconstructs with credibility its context of origin.

Most noteworthy is the co-leading role assigned to the other, i.e. the terrorist, the enemy. The Arab question has always been central to Israeli fiction, generally expression of voices that

are distant from nationalistic policies.⁴¹ Yet the characterisation of the Arab used to suffer from a widespread orientalist attitude oscillating between a romantic idealisation of purity and a colonialist charge of backwardness; in any case a stereotyped trivialisation.⁴² The fiction from the New Wave⁴³ offers several figures of Arabs as projections or metaphors of the unconscious of other non-Arab characters, who are the protagonists. An abstract Arab acted therefore as an externalisation of someone else's inner conflict, which is the case, for example, of *Nomads and viper* (1963) and *My Michael* (1967) by Amos Oz or *Facing the forests* (1968) by A. B. Yehoshua.⁴⁴ The Arab boy in *Almost dead* by Assaf Gavron has a whole different substance: flesh and blood, with a personal and a family history, in the grip of desire and guilt. Basically, a round character with a conflict, which makes him more than interesting in his co-leading role.

The conflict experienced by Fahmi has deep roots, being the private reenactment of a public struggle between conflicting aspirations, embodied in his family and, more broadly, in the Palestinian society. His paternal grandfather, whom he is named after, fought in the 1948 war and used to argue that his people should remain in refugee camps, holding to the claim of return and giving up the stability of life elsewhere.⁴⁵ The views of his maternal grandfather, shared by his parents, were radically different: «My mother and father didn't care. Nor did my

(NY) 2010 (*Tanin pigua*', Kinneret, Tel Aviv 2006).

³⁹ Ivi, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Cfr. M. PERRY, *The Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a metaphor in recent Israeli fiction*, «Poetics Today» 7/4 (1986), pp. 603-619. It is not too big a leap to suggest that we find in Gavron what Perry observed two decades back in A.B. Yehoshua and others: while they firmly support a compromise solution with an independent Palestinian state, their literary work reveals a discouraging absence of solutions. «The lack of a positive alternative characterizes recent Hebrew literature that touches upon the conflict (...) In spite of the fact that in political articles Israeli authors usually suggest a solution of an independent Palestinian state, their literary works seem to suggest that there is no tangible solution» (ivi, pp. 615, 619).

⁴¹ «Whenever the Arab problem is the issue, He-

brew literature has acted as an opposition to the conservative national consensus» (ivi., p. 604).

⁴² Ivi, pp. 604-605.

⁴³ The phrase (*Gal ĥadaš*, in Hebrew), coined by the prominent literary critic and historian of Hebrew literature Gershon Shaked, describes a new tendency appeared in Israeli fiction towards the end of the 1950s. Authors from the New Wave challenged, through forms and themes, the realist fiction serving the process of building a national identity, which dominated in the previous decades. G. SHAKED, *Gal ĥadaš ba-siporet ha-ivrit*, Sifriyat Poalim, Tel Aviv 1971.

⁴⁴ PERRY, *The Israeli-Palestinian conflict*, cit., pp. 605-609. An Arab as a round character, the young Naim, was later introduced by Yehoshua in his first novel, *The lover* (1977).

⁴⁵ GAVRON, *Almost dead*, cit., p. 25.

mother's father. Dignity wasn't all that important. Life was more important». ⁴⁶ Torn between conflicting aspirations and expectations, Fahmi struggles to find his own path in life:

My older brother Bilahl thinks like Grandfather Fahmi. My younger sister Lulu loves life more than an idea of dignity, like Father. I'm not quite sure whose genes I got. ⁴⁷

A tragic event, brought to light in his stream of consciousness, represents a turning point in the life of young Fahmi, driving him, even though very half-heartedly, to armed rebellion and self-destruction. One year earlier, following a blockade imposed by the Israeli army, the water tankers could not get into the village for several days; Fahmi's mother got an infection from dirty water and died, after many requests for help were ignored. ⁴⁸ The grief is not accompanied by a desire for revenge, or at least the incident is not explicitly linked to subsequent choices, even though it may enlighten them. In this way, the author spares us the trivialisation of a conditioned response; instead, he stages the steps taken by a boy who already was under the spell of a fundamentalist brother and a semi-mythical grandfather. If vengeance is there, it is not for the mother, whose death acts as a catalyst for an ongoing crisis. What emerges and eventually prevails – notwithstanding the warnings from the father, the sister Lulu, and the beloved Rana – is the anger built over the years, coming from a sense of honour trampled for generations.

Exposing the abuse against Palestinians is nothing new in Israeli fiction, which has got us used to denunciation since the early years of the State, even though voices of dissent became less and less isolated since the 1970s. ⁴⁹ What is new, and noteworthy, is the co-leading role assigned to a terrorist and the use of his narrating voice for a parallel – and alternative – reconstruction

of the story, as well as of the history. *Almost dead* forces the reader into an upsetting experience: confronting the enemy in order to confront oneself; knowing the others and looking at oneself through their eyes.

As seen thus far, the character of Fahmi is shown in his formative years and listened to in his inner conflict; as a result, it elicits an empathetic response from the reader. A striking contrast is created with the other protagonist-narrator: a young adult Israeli working for a high-tech company, Eitan appears as emotionally detached, uncommitted, and basically apathetic. Born and raised in Jerusalem, he is the son of American Jews and holds a US citizenship. Unlike his siblings, he turns down the invitation from his rich grandmother to leave Israel and settle in Maryland. More than a Zionist conviction, it looks like the force of habit is keeping him in the country, as well as in a stale relationship with Duchi, his anxious girlfriend.

Eitan's life takes an unexpected turn when he finds himself directly involved in the string of terror attacks that is steeping the country in blood. The daily threat, which appeared at first as a looming shadow, hits Eitan and drags him into a spiral where, attack after attack, he has a brush with death. «I climbed aboard the Little No. 5 as I did every morning on my way to work» ⁵⁰ is the opening line, matching the beginning of the narration from the point of view of Eitan. On the Little No. 5, along its route in the centre of Tel Aviv, an elderly lady communicates her suspicion about «a dark guy at the front». ⁵¹ Eitan reassures her, certain that she is just paranoid, and goes back to distracting himself with advertisements and vague plans to move to New Zealand; yet the minibus blows up while Eitan is already in the lift to his office. The newspapers report the names and ages of the victims as well as of the bomber, the nineteen-year-old Shafiq; we later learn, from Fahmi's parallel narration, about the last steps of Shafiq «a moment away

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 24.

⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 25.

⁴⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 26-28.

⁴⁹ Cf. PERRY, *The Israeli-Palestinian conflict*, cit., p. 604: «Hebrew fiction has persistently exposed the immoral actions of Jews against Arabs, has protested

against repression and eviction, has questioned – in recent years – the legitimacy of war and has raised doubts about Zionist ideology and its future».

⁵⁰ GAVRON, *Almost dead*, cit., p. 1.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 2.

⁵² *Ivi*, p. 13.

from heaven».⁵² In the following days, Eitan survives two more attacks, thus becoming a celebrity and a national symbol, enough for being targeted by a terrorist cell. It is Fahmi, who is a member of that same cell, who is put in charge of killing «the Crocodile», with whom he slowly comes into contact. In the meanwhile, Eitan, completely unaware of being a target, becomes immersed in an investigation about a certain Giora Guetta, a mysterious young man killed in the minibus bombing.

The normalisation of terror, conveyed in *Human parts* through the association with natural phenomena, is expressed in *Almost dead* by the detached tone of the narrator, who is a direct witness and nearly a victim. His first thought following the bombing that he narrowly escaped is: «fuck, how will I get to work from now on?».⁵³ And the following day, after he gave in to his girlfriend's worried request and took a taxi, he feels the need to point out that all precautions are useless, given the unpredictability of the phenomenon:

A Little No. 5 didn't blow up that morning. But so what? A real No. 5 didn't blow up either, the whole time I worked for Time's Arrow, miraculously. On none of the days I took Little No. 5s to the Dizengoff Centre did a real No. 5 get bombed. So: what?⁵⁴

A detached awareness allows Eitan to observe in a clear-headed way the manifestation of mass hysteria and the automatic responses to the attacks. He can thus describe, in a mocking scientific tone, the attitude of the crowd following the second attack that he has survived, a shooting against a bus and cars on Highway No. 1: «Many people were on the phone, in the talking-on-the-mobile-after-a-terrorist-attack posture».⁵⁵ Emotional detachment combined with a feeling of inescapability produces a cynical response to the incident, retold with dark humour:

People always wonder what the last thing going through a person's mind before he died was.

Who did they think about – their kids, their parents, their partner, their first love? Did they ever think about love in general? Did their whole life replay itself like a movie? In the case of the soldier who rode with me that night from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, I'm pretty sure I know the answer. The last thought running through his mind before dying, which he expressed with great conviction, was: 'My finger! Fucking cunt, I can't feel it!'⁵⁶

Shortly thereafter, the sight of the dead body of the hitchhiking soldier on the asphalt generates unexpected associations:

He didn't look too good. His left hand held a palmful of blood and as far as I could see the middle finger – the finger that gestures 'fuck you' – wasn't there. No wonder he couldn't feel it.⁵⁷

The response of Eitan, far from looking upset by the death of the soldier, is understandable in the light of their conversation before the attack. «Menachem something, nicknamed Humi by his family and friends»,⁵⁸ is a conscript soldier whose brief appearance provides an insight into conflicting views; the conflict, this time, is internal to the Jewish majority in Israel. Humi – who shows unpleasant manners, poor taste in music, and a tendency to both religious phrases and military slang – is a dull-witted nationalist, willing to praise the injustice perpetrated by his unit in Bethlehem. Eitan reacts to his boastful tales in a wittily provocative way; yet the soldier, who is not the brightest, misses the sarcasm.⁵⁹ Eitan holds different views, but he does not engage in a debate with him: «I didn't have the energy for that stuff».⁶⁰ His lack of empathy shortly thereafter, and the reader's as well, can be seen as a lack of connection with the right-wing sector of Israeli society. «No wonder he couldn't feel [his middle finger]» has an ironic subtext: «this violent, nationalist soldier is foolish enough to complain about not being able to feel a finger that is actually missing».

Eitan himself had served in the Palestinian territories during his military service, but

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, p. 22.

⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 75.

⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 71.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 72.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 59-64.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 62. Later, as a guest on a television

his memories are less than pleasant. While on guard duty, he had been attacked by a group of local boys; one of them had been killed by a rubber bullet shot by a fellow soldier who had come to the rescue of Eitan. At the same moment, his childhood friend Danny had fallen in Lebanon.

At 11 a.m., when I was sitting in the burning tower waiting for my end, his jeep arrived at a puddle that may possibly have been deeper than it looked, and stopped in front of it. I've relived this moment many times: me, on my own, in a burning watchtower in a West Bank village. Danny Lam and his friends, in a jeep in Lebanon, on the edge of a big puddle. And up above, God choosing which button to hit.⁶¹

The same pattern emerges in each of the attacks that he survives, three times in the same week: he has a brush with death, but a god of randomness chooses another victim in his place. The substitute victim may be Giora along with the other passengers in the Little No. 5, from which Eitan got off just a few moments before the terrorist blew himself up.⁶² It may be Humi, hit by the same bullets that grazed Eitan.⁶³ And it may be Shuli, Giora's girlfriend whom Eitan met in Jerusalem, who swapped seats with him in a café just before the place was destroyed by a blast.⁶⁴ Notwithstanding «the feeling that (...) somebody else (...) was making the decisions»,⁶⁵

show, Eitan cannot avoid a debate with a recently discharged female soldier who equally hates both Palestinians and Israeli «bleeding hearts». She feels quite annoyed when Eitan says: «I try not to hate anyone» (*ivi*, pp. 166-168).

⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 231.

⁶² «Why had he waited until I got off? What kept me alive? Why had God stretched out one of his long fingers and miraculously tapped my forehead? (...) If I'd told Ziona and she'd talked to him, he would have blown himself up. If I'd shouted to everybody to be careful, he would have blown himself up. If I'd phoned the police, or told the security guards at the mall, nobody would have had time to do anything (...) All I could have done was what I did – save myself. And even that I'd done unintentionally» (*ivi*, p. 17).

⁶³ He feels responsible «for his death – because it was me who had brought him to the point in time and space where it happened, and the speed at which I drove, the cars I overtook or didn't, the

Eitan cannot avoid feeling guilty: every time, even though unintentionally, he changes the course of events and someone else dies the death apparently intended for him.

It was my fault that Danny Lam died. We were together in basic training, which was a stroke of luck: we were mobilised on the same day (...) At the end of it they asked who wanted to volunteer for the reconnaissance unit. I raised my hand. Danny didn't. I persuaded him to accompany me to the tests. I pleaded with him: I said that as a friend it was his duty to support me in the tests. So he came. And passed. I failed. I stayed in the regular unit and was posted to the West Bank. He was in the reconnaissance unit and got sent to Lebanon. He died. I didn't. But I am convinced God meant to select my button. There was some mistake there.⁶⁶

The guilt experienced by Eitan, who survived random violence without reason or merit, whereas others died, is close to survivor guilt, a condition commonly found among Holocaust survivors. It is no coincidence that the ever-present collective trauma is mentioned in the first pages of the novel and in the last ones respectively. In the first chapter, the only person who raises suspicion about a bomber on the Little No. 5 is an old lady who was probably «paranoid since the Holocaust».⁶⁷ The mystery man at the centre of Eitan's investigation into

lane I chose, the moment I hit the brake were all my decisions» (*ivi*, p. 73).

⁶⁴ «I don't know where I'd be today, or who, if we'd played tennis or gone to the centre of town, or if the day hadn't dawned so clear that Shuli had had the urge for an Ice Europa, or if such a thing as an Ice Europa had never been invented or if we'd left half an hour earlier or ten minutes later, or if – the biggest if of them all – she hadn't asked to change places. An infinity of ifs. We stand at a crossroads a hundred times a day and we have to make our choices or we can never progress, and our choices determine who we are. That's the way it is, and that's the way it was that cold, metallic morning. And yet I can't get rid of the feeling that, for the third time, it wasn't me but somebody else who was making the decisions» (*ivi*, p. 144).

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 243.

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 5.

Giora Guetta is revealed in the last chapter as a «Hitler-reading Polish Jew».⁶⁸ In that light, the perception of constant threat from terrorism can be traced back to a sort of eternal curse: the continual struggle of Israel for its survival in an irrationally hostile world.

The text is far from acquitting Israel, as a political entity, of its responsibilities. The investigation carried out by Eitan can be read as a metaphor: looking into the life of a victim, the narrator, and the reader with him, uncovers a plot where the victim himself is the executioner. When he digs deep beneath the appearances, he is forced to confront the vicious face of his own society; and this face has a name: «Guetta was a killer, in Gaza».⁶⁹

In the army, Croc. He was in the Border Police. They called him «The Killer». He scratched two «X's on his barrel during the intifada, possibly three. There's an argument about the third one, with some other killer in his company.⁷⁰

It is Fahmi – the other, the enemy – the one who unravels the mystery and figures out the role of Giora Guetta in the plot. While Eitan and his friend Bar are fishing in the dark, despite having all the information, Fahmi is the first one to put the pieces together. Picturing an Israeli in a murderous plan is natural to him, since Giora Guetta is the only face of Israel he came to know.

The viewpoint of Fahmi, besides stemming from the injustices that he endured, is the natural outcome of the education that he received in a society sworn to the demonisation and the destruction of Israel and the Jews. On the Ara-

bic television channel *Al-Manar*, even an ordinary game show features questions about the so-called «martyrs»;⁷¹ the following programme is called «Terrorists», an epithet directed to Israel.⁷² Fahmi is a product of such education, which is described from the inside and therefore is not perceived as indoctrination; nevertheless, his narration unintentionally exposes the flaws and the limits of his worlds, as well as the effects of propaganda. He uses classic arguments against Israel, such as «Every Jew was in the army, or will be, (...) *they're all soldiers*»,⁷³ and therefore rightful targets, or «Killing children is part of their *policy*».⁷⁴ He plans «operations»⁷⁵ and he does not see the bombing of the Little No. 5 as a massacre of innocents; it was the operation that sent his friend Shafiq to heaven, as well as on the posters celebrating bombers throughout the West Bank.⁷⁶ At last, when he meets Eitan and Bar, he is incapable of accepting friendliness from Israelis, feeling his pride wounded by their benevolent attitude and selfless generosity.⁷⁷

Even though it creates empathy for Fahmi, the novel avoids a naive idealisation of his world, which is shown instead in its limits through a narration from the inside. The picture that arises is one of a society that is far from being undivided, whose tensions and contradictions, as said above, are embodied by Fahmi. There is a place for the peaceful father («Who put these things into the heads of my sons?»),⁷⁸ belittled and ignored by his sons, and a place for the grandfather, whom they never met yet they idealise for his alleged heroism. It is a society that may follow the fundamentalism of Bilahl or the

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, p. 325.

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 259.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, p. 53. It is the term of choice for suicide bombers: cfr. R. ESPOSITO, *Lexical wars: Hebrew euphemisms and dysphemisms in phrases relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict*, in «Materia Giudaica» 19 (2014), pp. 537-547 (pp. 545-546).

⁷² GAVRON, *Almost dead*, cit., pp. 53-54. But Fahmi «zapped to a rerun of Ya Leil Ya Ein – music and pretty girls on Future TV» (*Ibidem*).

⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 95. Italics in the text.

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*. Italics in the text.

⁷⁵ Cfr. ESPOSITO, *Lexical wars* on the terminology used by the two sides in the conflict, cit.

⁷⁶ GAVRON, *Almost dead*, cit., p. 117.

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 297. Cfr. S. FERRARI, *Il volto crudele del nemico. Figure di terroristi nella letteratura israeliana*, in «Altre modernità» 8 (2012), pp. 52-64 on the relationship between Eitan and Fahmi. They «meet in an office in Rosh ha-Ayin, where the former moved from Tel Aviv and the latter works as a cleaner. They hang out together, go to bars in Tel Aviv, drink beer on the beach, yet their relationship cannot be clear, sincere, at least from the point of view of Fahmi, who cannot stop thinking about his role and the mission he has to carry out» (*ivi*, p. 62. Translation mine).

⁷⁸ GAVRON, *Almost dead*, cit., p. 95.

rationality of Rana, who desperately tries to save her beloved and lost Fahmi: «she wanted to say more. To tell me that these people who called themselves my brothers were only fools. That they wanted to take us all back to the dark ages».⁷⁹

Fahmi will always exhibit an oscillating attitude: «I wasn't a shahid. I didn't have that fearlessness, that certainty of will (...) This was a real problem. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to be a shahid. And I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in prison».⁸⁰ Only during «a week on the road on donkey-back, without a map»,⁸¹ he feels close to himself. It is a slow journey through places and time (is it the 21st-century young Fahmi or his grandfather in 1948 who rides that donkey?), far away from everyone and closer than ever to his roots and his land, at peace with his own identity. Not without reason, the journey is brought back in the final monologue, which marks the end of his murderous terrorist career and the climax of the character's development:

So what is going through your head when you are sitting in a green Polo on a clear night, a hand grenade inside an imitation leather pouch on your lap? Your finger in its ring, like the wedding ring you never had, like the wedding ring he never had, bringing you together in holy matrimony, you and the grenade – the pomegranate, the apple of knowledge. What is going through your head? Beer is bubbling through it, and all the pretty girls of Tel Aviv are dancing through it demanding orgasms, the waves are whispering through it, and all the people who told you what to do, where to go, what to believe in, who to hate, who to be. Grandfather Fahmi, who taught you what a hero was and wanted you to be fierce, and Mother, who taught you that sometimes there is no reason for things, and Bilahl, who taught you hatred, and wanted you to believe, and Rana, who taught you tenderness and how to be vulnerable, and Father, who taught you patience and wanted you in Bir Zeit, and Lulu, who taught you happiness, and only wanted to be near you... What would be left of you after you took away what everyone told you you were? Who were you, eventually, when

you were only you, when the donkey carried you back into yourself? And who were you not, eventually, because your past was stronger than you were and came to you, demanding to be paid? And who do you want to be now, with the ring around your finger and the Croc by your side in his little green car? Do you even care? Is it important for you? You wanted your life to have a purpose.⁸²

It is noteworthy that the grenade in the hands of Fahmi has the acronym «Tzahal» stencilled on it:⁸³ the weapon was taken from the enemy, to whom he is inextricably connected. The safety ring, explicitly associated with a wedding ring, serves as a reminder of the bond. The questions he asks himself remain unanswered, but his very last decision is an answer in itself. As an old adage goes, characters are not what they say they are, but what they do; in this case, the character is what he does not do, choosing not to hurt the person he was taught to look at as the enemy.

In his final monologue, Fahmi also dreams about escaping to Australia,⁸⁴ which recalls the plan of Eitan, in the first chapter, to move to New Zealand.⁸⁵ Fleeing to the Antipodes is the core desire they have in common. Hardly surprising for two characters who are driven by a higher power and are part of a larger tragedy.

The choice to assign the co-leading role to the other *par excellence* – the enemy, the terrorist, in a novel intended for a readership that recently suffered the scourge of terrorism – not only serves narrative purposes. The character of the young Fahmi, with his tragic complexity, his lively and contradictory humanity, his repressed – and sometimes overflowing – emotionalism, is an interesting figure *per se*. Moreover, he embodies the experience of his people, telling their condition and contradictions without taking on a didactic tone.

On the other hand, Eitan – described as «a rather dull and insignificant character»⁸⁶ – gains complexity at the end of the story, when his constant apathy and his seeming numbness give way

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p. 97.

⁸⁰ *Ivi*, p. 297, 299.

⁸¹ *Ivi*, p. 236.

⁸² *Ivi*, pp. 316-317.

⁸³ «IDF» in the English version. *Ivi*, p. 299.

⁸⁴ *Ivi*, p. 317.

⁸⁵ *Ivi*, p. 5.

⁸⁶ FERRARI, *Il volto crudele del nemico*, cit., p. 63. Translation mine.

to a cathartic cry. Until the second last chapter, his character is not unlike that of Adir from *Human parts*. In both novels, an unemotional narration of shocking events is the expression of narrators who are used to ghastly visions, who live under constant threat, and attribute the events to a god of randomness. Yet the character of Eitan develops following the contact with Fahmi; he had already survived three attacks, but only after having met the other closely he seems able to open his eyes to the world around.

The key turning point in this double formative story is the encounter with the other as a person, an encounter that gives a human shape to an abstract enemy. The paths of Eitan and Fahmi, apparently different, are very simi-

lar. Both feel estranged from their world, both struggle to define their own identity, and neither of them will find clear answers along the way. Such as the characters of *Human parts*, both get caught up in events beyond their control. Eventually, Eitan and Fahmi find themselves changed by knowledge of the other, whereas the characters of *Human parts* remain unchanged, powerless, and lost in an apocalyptic world, the victims of enemies whom they never meet. It is hard not to read it as a forthright political stance of the authors.

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SUMMARY

Two novels published in Hebrew during the Second Intifada and immediately after deal with the effects of the unprecedented string of terrorist attacks against Israeli civilian population. *Human parts* by Orly Castel-Bloom creates a doomsday scenario where terrorism is associated with fictive calamities, thus emphasizing both the absurdity of suicide bombings and the perception of terrorism as a natural phenomenon. *Almost dead* by Assaf Gavron offers a double first-person narrative from the point of view of a young Israeli man and a Palestinian boy, the latter being a terrorist. Both novels emphasize the normalisation of terrorism through the tone of the narrators, an unemotional narration of shocking events, yet in Gavron's work the reader witnesses a development of characters following the knowledge of the enemy.

KEYWORDS: Orly Castel-Bloom; Assaf Gavron; Arab-Israeli conflict.