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Tragedy Contra Theory

> In the tragic, the idea as existing is revealed through annihilation; by sublating itself as existence, the idea is present as idea, and both are one and the same. The demise of the idea as existence is its revelation as idea.
> — Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger, *Vorlesungen über Aesthetik* (1829)

> It's this place that turns character to fate.
> — Ronit Matalon, *Sarah, Sarah* (2000)

WITH THE EXCEPTION of an occasional attempt by a social or a feminist critic, tragedy is typically held to be at odds with leftist critique (see Eagleton ix–xvii). Even if it isn't understood as reactionary, it is regarded, Timothy Reiss has noted, as simultaneously ideological and counter-ideological, and so inherently resistant to enlistment in the service of a specific politics (284). In what follows I argue that, particularly in politically and emotionally fraught terrains, an affective embodied critique can in fact emerge from *within* the mode of tragedy. As a structure that creates room for conflict, violence, and desire, tragedy has the capacity to be both truer to experience and less vulnerable to attack than most modes of political critique. As a dialectic and morally flexible form, tragedy is also better able to contain its own contradictions and therefore less prone to disintegration in the face of experience.

Let me begin by stating that for the purpose of my argument I draw not only on drama, but also on tragic poems, films, and novels.[1] I view broad links between classical tragedy and tragic novels and do not deem them antithetical. There are of course differences between plays and novels, the ancient and the modern world, and the ways in which the relationship between them has been understood. Here, I utilize a definition of the genre that emphasizes several key elements: the tragic hero, the experience of suffering and disorder, and the hero's particular response to suffering. It is in the hero's direct encounter with and response to disorder and violence—what Raymond Williams calls "its experience, its comprehension, and its resolution"—that I locate the potential of tragedy for serious political work.

In what follows, I consider the changing political, emotional, and aesthetic function of tragedy in a specific and highly politicized setting: early Zionist and

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[1] The relationship between tragedy and the novel has been debated at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, with György Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* crystallizing for many the distinction between the realist novel's a priori meaninglessness and tragedy's inherently coherent world view. More recent works, with which I concur, argue in support of an organic bond between tragedy and the novel. See King and especially the Introduction to Macpherson.

Israeli culture. In several representative tragic works from the inception of political Zionism in the late nineteenth century to the contemporary period, I reexamine the connection between tragedy and the state, arguing finally for tragedy's potential to represent and advance leftist political critique. More specifically, I focus on the shift in Hebrew literature from what I regard as male-centered Oedipal tragic works to feminist tragedy. While the former often serve as the ideological counterpart of the state, the latter may constitute a more effective political intervention than theoretical and polemic critiques of Zionism.

Tragedy and Jewish History

The connection between classical tragedy and Zionism is far from obvious. Indeed, Judaism in general often functions in theories of tragedy as an example of what tragedy is not. For Hegel, "the great tragedy of the Jewish people is no Greek tragedy: it can rouse neither terror nor pity . . . [but] horror alone" (*The Spirit of Christianity* 205). Kierkegaard pits the story of Agamemnon/Iphigenia against Abraham/Isaac to prove the former's tragic essence (76). More recently, George Steiner has maintained that the relationship between "the Judaic sense of the world" and tragedy is one of alienation (4). The basic claim is this: within the framework of the radically asymmetrical power relations between the Jewish God and man or, more specifically, between God and Abraham, there can be no tragic struggle, only the demonstration of blind obedience. Judaism is at once too autocratic and too communal to breed a tragic agent; it is too rational to stir up, or be stirred by, the tumultuous pull of tragedy, and too particular to evoke universal fear and pity. Thus, Jewish religion, Jewish fate, and Jewish suffering are non-tragic in the eyes of most major nineteenth-century theorists of tragedy (Skloot 51).

Nonetheless, tragedy became a significant literary and emotional category for late nineteenth-century Zionist writers, who were creating, whether consciously or not, a new, "national" structure of feeling for their community of readers. If they do not embrace the grandiose glamour of Greek, Shakespearean, or Baroque tragedy (as the turn of the century Hebrew writer Yosef Hayyim Brenner exclaims, "We are not aristocrats!"), their prose becomes infused with tragic *elements* such as fate, blindness, sacrifice, sin, and extreme suffering, all of which color their portrayal of the nation and of the modern individual's encounter with daily life. As I have argued elsewhere, it is this tragic hue and sensibility that distinguishes late nineteenth-century nationalist-oriented Hebrew works from their mid-nineteenth-century predecessors, as well as from Yiddish works and Jewish literatures written in non-Jewish languages (*Universal Jew* 133–236).

The link between tragedy and nation is not, of course, unique to Jewish nationhood. Tragedy has been associated with a host of modern nation-building projects, from Latin-America (Dove) to modern Japan (Sorgenfrei) to Russia (Ushakin). Yet each of these instances presents a singular historical and cultural picture. Zionist writers turn to tragedy not only to counter the special status of Judaism as the anti-tragic, but also to rebel against their own historic-religious tradition, which pits Judaism against Hellenism. If, as Raymond Williams argues (38), the rebirth of tragedy during the late nineteenth century reaffirmed a Greco-Christian tradition—a link between Greeks and Elizabethans, Hellenes and Christians—Zionism

inserts Judaism into this world historical narrative, but does so discreetly and indirectly, as such a link is all but explicitly forbidden and blasphemous.[2]

Late nineteenth-century Hebrew writers such as Micah Yosef Berdyczewski, Asher Ginzburg, Yosef Hayyim Brenner, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, and Leon Pinsker absorbed the aesthetics of tragedy to a large degree from their (direct or indirect) engagement with German tragic philosophy, particularly the works of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. In 1897, Berdyczewski, one of the key figures in fin-de-siècle Hebrew letters, published a detailed extrapolation of Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie* (*Birth of Tragedy*) — *Ueber den Zusammenhang zwischen Ethik und Aesthetik* (*On the Relationship Between Ethics and Aesthetics*) — followed by several essays on Nietzsche's philosophy written in Hebrew. His writings and the Hebrew language prose of many of his contemporaries are short bildungsromane that invariably end in the hero's doom and also bear the imprint of Nietzsche's tragic philosophy. To the degree that they produce a new liberal national consciousness, they do not offer an alternative vision of the painless life; rarely, in fact, does their fiction present Zionism as a solution to the challenges attending modern Jewish identity crisis or failed assimilation. Rather, their vision of national renewal is grounded in direct and explicit depictions of suffering national subjects who embody what Nietzsche in *Birth of Tragedy* calls the "pessimism of strength."[3]

Tragedy and Proto-Citizenship

Perhaps the most formative work of the early Zionist period is Hayyim Nachman Bialik's 1904 poem "Be-ir ha-hariga" ("In the City of Killing"), written in response to the 1903 Kishinev Pogrom. In the poem, God calls upon the poet to confront the horrors of the pogrom directly: "Rise and go to the town of the killings / . . . *and with your eyes and your own hand feel the fence / and on the trees and on the stones and plaster of the walls / the congealed blood and hardened brains of the dead*" (*Songs from Bialik* 1–9). Unlike the survivors of the pogrom who "did not lose their mind and did not pluck out their eyes," the poet must respond *tragically* and directly. One has only to compare "In the City of Killing" with another literary response to the Kishinev Pogrom published in the same year — "Tsvey Antisemitn" ("Two Anti-Semites") by the Yiddish master Sholem Aleichem — to understand the radically tragic nature of Bialik's poem. "Two Anti-Semites" depicts a travelling salesman who is bound by his work to pass through Kishinev but, because he fears encountering pogrom survivors, remains aboard the train, hidden behind an anti-Semitic newspaper. While Bialik's poet is called upon to become an Oedipus, to pluck his eyes out in response to his people's suffering, Sholem Aleichem's travelling salesman looks for a "way of escape":

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[2] Zionism's negotiation between its Jewish identity, which is tied to its religious history, and the demands of a secular nation-state remains unresolved. Tragedy, which as Vernant and Vidal-Naquet have argued vacillates between theology and democracy, is perhaps the most potently appropriate genre to represent this predicament.

[3] Many stories by Berdyczewski, Brenner, and others are what Raymond Williams calls "liberal tragedies": plots in which a quest for self-fulfillment clashes with social obstacles and destructive forces within the hero himself. For example, Berdyczewski's "Machanayim" ("Between Two Camps") tells the story of a young man's journey from shtetl to European city, and his subsequent social and erotic disaster. A similar trajectory can be found in Y.H. Brenner's "Bakhoref" ("In Winter").

> [He] knew he was bound to meet people in these parts eager to talk about the pogroms. He would have to listen to the wails and groans of those who had lost their near and dear, and he would also be forced to endure the righteous exhortations and malicious remarks of the Gentiles. So the closer they came to Bessarabia, the more he tried to find some way of escape, some way to hide from his own soul. (116–17)

In minor literature, as Deleuze and Guattari note, "everything leads to laughter" as it stakes out "the path of escape" (2), and, indeed, "Two Anti-Semites" is ironic and escapist. Furthermore, as *comedy*, it cannot contain news of death. In contrast, Bialik's poem constructs an image of a tragic poet-witness who—as opposed to the hyper-Jewish portrayal of Sholem Aleichem's passing salesman—is articulated through an abstract and highly modern sensibility and addressed only as "son of man." We read of the bankruptcy of his soul, the loss of his bearing, the failure of his language (in contrast with the wailing of survivors), and the silence imposed on him by God ("refrain and stifle in your throat the scream"; "do not shed a tear"). As such, he represents, in Walter Benjamin's formulation, "the inarticulacy of the tragic hero" (108), who descends to a place beyond language and social discourse, to "the desert" where his soul will "[lose] all of its holdings" (cf. Oedipus).

Most importantly, Bialik's witness must assume what Jean Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet call "tragic responsibility": the ethical position of an autonomous individual who is nevertheless not free and bound to his people (4): "and you will know that it's time to bow like an ox tied to the altar—/ and I will toughen your heart and no sigh will come." The poem elevates the witness to the role of a moral agent who is at once autonomous and heteronomous. In doing so, "In the City of Killing" not only encouraged the creation of a majority consciousness and a turn to nationhood among its readers, but also provided a structure of tragic responsibility and proto-citizenship that was to dominate Zionist and Israeli culture for years to come.

Tragic Masculinity and Nation Building

In the 1940s, with the transition from "theoretical" proto-citizenship to citizenship in a nation/state, new images of tragic masculinity, linked directly to military sacrifice, begin to populate Israeli literature and remain at its center for roughly three decades. A prominent example can be found in Moshe Shamir's novel-turned-play *Hu halach ba-sadot* (*He Walked the Fields*), which is centered on the figure of Uri, a handsome inarticulate young soldier-farmer, the kibbutz's firstborn. The play begins with Uri's return to the kibbutz after a long absence, continues with his entanglement in his parents' sexual drama and ancestral sin, and ends in his perhaps heroic, perhaps suicidal, death in a paramilitary mission. Elsewhere I have argued that in portraying the hero's fate as a destiny, with which he has tacitly complied (as opposed to consciously deciding to die for the nation), the play gives expression to audiences' ambivalence towards self-sacrifice and constitutes in Uri an image of heteronomous citizenship. Hence the play's immense and immediate popularity—it was viewed by nearly a third of Israel's Jewish population—and the uncritical acceptance of Uri's death (Dekel, "Citi-

zenship" 197–211).[4] Within the world of the play, as well as for audiences in the new state, the hero is a "redeemer" who propels citizens to rise above narrow desire and unite under the signs of grief and guilt.

There are, to be fair, numerous and highly varied portrayals of sacrifice in the post-state era. Still, it is safe to say that, as Zionism moved from its "theoretical" passage of proto-national political subjectivity ("In the City of Killing") to actual citizenship, tragic works like *He Walked the Fields* complemented the nation-building project in ways that are both impressive and problematic. If these works create an image of a citizen and a tragically responsible agent, they also become complicit in the attendant consequences of the state's creation and the dispossession of Palestinians. In elevating the image of a heteronomous, inarticulate male hero who participates in a pattern of sacrifice that becomes (consciously or unconsciously) sanctioned with each additional portrayal of death, tragic plots mask not only the violence done to the hero, but the violence done *by* the hero as well, thus reifying and legitimizing the Israeli political status quo. In the past three decades, numerous literary and popular works have responded to the ethical blindness of early Zionist tragedies with plots that involve male self-awakening and the rejection of tragic fates. Gal Uchovsky's and Eitan Fox's *To Walk on Water* (2004) and Stephen Spielberg's *Munich* (2005) are only two of many popular works that voice an explicit critique of masculinist, tragic Zionism. These films also center on young handsome and inarticulate male heroes who become bound to the nation through encounters with (past or present) Jewish suffering; yet, unlike earlier works, they present the tragic themes of ancestral sin, destiny, heroism, and responsibility in such an exaggerated and self-aware manner that the sacrificial ritual involving the male hero is plainly exposed. Endowing their protagonists with growing agency, both plots feature heroes who, after much agonizing, reject their role and set themselves free from a sacrificial, violent structure. In fact, both *To Walk on Water* and *Munich* end in explicitly "domestic" scenes, with their heroes caring for a newborn child.[5]

Films like *Munich* and *To Walk on Water* thus expose the structure of tragedy as a device that services the violent and manipulative machinations of the state (even as they continue to glamorize the blinded tragic male hero in their cinematic appeal to audiences.) Yet such narratives ultimately offer a limited political alternative. By replacing "tragic responsibility" on behalf of the nation with an investment in a narrowly circumscribed "domestic life" in which the hero is ostensibly shielded from the long arm of the state, these films leave no room for imagining a political intervention that does not collude with the state.

In his introduction to *Sweet Violence*, Terry Eagleton rightly notes that we take the "reactionary" nature of tragedy almost for granted (ix). His own book, like

[4] Although contemporary scholars have tended to emphasize Uri's "soft," seemingly un-heroic personality and the subversive nature of a text that fashions heroic death as suicide (Gluzman 207), in my view, Uri's character is deliberately weakened by the screenplay in order to allow for the *structure* of sacrifice to emerge on stage.

[5] In the final shot of *To Walk on Water*, the muscular hero is rocking a crying baby to sleep in a room in a northern kibbutz, while in *Munich* the hero pushes a stroller in Brooklyn, New York, having sought refuge from the Israeli state altogether.

Raymond Williams's earlier *Modern Tragedy,* presents a bold if, at times, inconsistent attempt to recoup the tragic form and harness its potential for a leftist social agenda. Feminist critics have also enlisted *Antigone* as a feminine tragic heroine who undermines the social-political order (Butler) and/or elevates kinship over the impersonal state (Irigaray; see Söderbäck) . Like Oedipus, Antigone confronts disorder tragically; yet her actions, these critics claim, lead to the demise rather than the rehabilitation of the existing social order. Taking these readings as my launching pad, I now want to make a case for the political efficacy of contemporary Hebrew feminist tragedy and for its superiority both to theoretical critiques of Zionism and the male-centered criticisms embodied in films like *Munich* and *To Walk on Water.*

The Theoretical Critique of Zionism

Hannah Arendt famously voiced her critique of Zionist separatism as early as the 1940s in "Zionism Reconsidered" (1944) and "The Jewish State: Fifty Years After" (1946), in which she supported in principle the Zionist idea and commended the politicization of the Jews—"The mere will to action was something so startlingly new, so utterly revolutionary in Jewish life, that it spread with the speed of wildfire" (*Jew as Pariah* 166)—but ultimately became profoundly and vocally critical of what she saw as Theodor Herzl's legacy of isolationist, utopian politics. "Reading Herzl's *The State of the Jews* [1896] today," she wrote in 1942, "is a peculiar experience: One becomes aware that those things in it that Herzl's own contemporaries would have called Utopian now actually determine the ideology and policies of the Zionist movement; while those of Herzl's practical proposals for the building of the Jewish homeland which must have appeared quite realistic fifty years ago have had no influence whatsoever" (*Jew as Pariah* 375). In her essays, Arendt draws on universal principles of equality and a wariness toward nationalism rooted in the European experience to counter what she sees as Herzl's one-sided politics with a call for a federation of states, among whom Israel would be one (*Jew as Pariah* 343). However, her ideas had little effect on the political scene during and after Israel's inception.

In her recently published *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (2012) Judith Butler makes an attempt to forge a theoretical critique of Zionism using works by Jewish and Palestinian writers, which she privileges over a disembodied and a priorly contested language of abstract human rights or postcolonial theory, threading together Said's writings on the impure biblical site of the origin of Judaism, which entailed a mixing with others (31), Levinas's reflections on the ethical demand that the suffering of the other imposes on the suffering self (41), Buber's negotiations of the "I" and "thou" categories, Darwish's notion of the stranger as uncharted land (224), and various writings by Arendt and Primo Levi. Arguing that "there is no universal that is not finally negotiated at (or as) the conjuncture of discourses" (22), she locates in these works a shared vision (suggested either implicitly or explicitly) of "a polity that would not only shelter multiple frameworks but commit itself to a bi-nationalism . . . a new polity that would presuppose the end of settler colonialism and that would imply complex and antagonistic modes of living together, an amelioration of the wretched forms of bi-

nationalism that already exist" (4). Butler also emphasizes "Jewish values of co-habitation with the non-Jew" that exist outside and in direct opposition to "Israeli state violence" (1). Paraphrasing Arendt's words, she defines "co-habitation" as a principle which predates social contract politics ("we are already living on the earth with those we never chose and whose language is not the same as our own") and which is expressed in the deep humanistic impulses she finds in the writers she has chosen (23–40).

Butler's analysis is subtle, moving, and melancholic; yet its political influence on those whose co-habitation she is promoting has been limited due to her detachment from the very arena she purports to critique. The work does not genuinely engage with the red-hot intellectual and political arena of the contemporary Middle East. It also fails to account for the issue of desire (unlike most of Butler's other works)—in particular, the *desire for land* that motivates all sides of the conflict. Instead, Butler chooses texts that are deliberately exilic, that is, written by and for people outside Israel/Palestine, and, as a result, the shared conversation she imposes on what she calls Jewish and Palestinian texts is essentially risk-free. It is as if she has drawn a contract between parties who do not take sides in the conflict.

Both Arendt and Butler thus offer a pacifist, violence-free discourse as an alternative to Israeli state violence. For Arendt, violence is the "pre-political act of liberating oneself from necessity and entering the realm of freedom" (*Human Condition* 31). Similarly, Butler omits from her political speech-act the violent language of conflict. In this, ironically, Butler is not unlike Theodor Herzl, the founding father of political Zionism, whose 1902 vision of a "New Society" in Palestine includes no army and no detrimental enemies or contestations; enemies of Herzl's New Society are simply left outside the borders of its city-state, which is imagined as a society of cultured, inclusive, and peaceful Europeans. Herzl modeled his image of the prototypical Muslim member of his New Society after a Turkish official whom he had befriended and whom he describes as Westernized, friendly, and cooperative ("He studied in Berlin"; Altneuland 68). Butler likewise relies heavily on the works of assimilated humanist German-Jewish scholars.

Paradoxically, then, Butler—and Arendt before her—share to an extent the very flaw in Zionist thinking that they criticize. As such, Jürgen Habermas's critique of Arendt's call for a sterilized, violence-free "public sphere" in *The Human Condition* is applicable to Butler as well. In his view, Arendt

dissociated power from the teleological model, to project the consensus-building communication as a coercive-free force. At the same time, Arendt narrowed the political to the practical on the basis of an outmoded Aristotelian notion of praxis, thus reducing politics to a pristine, violence free realm. For this Arendt pays the price of screening all strategic elements out of politics as violence, severing politics from its ties to the economic and social environment in which it is embedded in the administrative system, and being incapable of coming to grips with appearances of structural violence. (174)

Arendt's and Butler's critiques of Zionist politics, and their respective models of coexistence, binationalism, or cohabitation both screen out, as Habermas suggests, all violence that is inherent to the social environment of the Israeli-Palestinian world and the land itself.

Does Zionism, itself a utopian ideology, benefit from a critique founded in another form of utopian thought? I would argue that a more effective political

critique of Zionism can emerge from *within* the mode of tragedy, and particularly from feminist tragedy. Because tragedy makes room for conflict (Schelling) and self-division (Hegel), and because it is inherently dialectic (Hegel), it has the potential to engender a less utopian, more politically engaged critique than theoretical arguments such as those provided by Arendt and Butler, however attractive those arguments may be. As an elastic mode of criticism that registers the nuances of desire and violence, tragedy is truer to the common experience. As a form that allows for emotions and trauma, it can speak more directly to the wounded. And, as a less morally rigid form, it is perhaps also less prone to sudden change, as was the case with Arendt's position in the wake of the 1967 war between Israel and Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. Described by a friend as acting like a "war bride," Arendt apparently rejoiced in the swift Israeli military victory and wrote to Karl Jaspers praising Moshe Dayan (the Israeli Minister of Defense) and suggesting that Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, should be hung (Pitterberg).

Feminist Tragedy as Critique

Sarah, Sarah, a modern tragic novel by the contemporary Israeli writer Ronit Matalon, provides an especially instructive example of the critical potential of tragedy. It is difficult, of course, to balance a single tragic novel, largely unknown to English-speaking readers, against the well-known arguments of both Arendt and Butler. Nonetheless, I view this work as paradigmatic of the ways the tragic mode can engage in and affect political critique in registers that are inaccessible to theory. The daughter of Egyptian-born Marxist parents, Matalon is one of Israel's most critically respected authors and is known for the political engagement of her writing. *Sarah, Sarah*, which takes place during the first *Intifada* in the early 1990s and ends with the murder of then prime minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995, is her most explicitly political work and one of a handful of Hebrew novels that directly explore political activism. At the novel's center is a heroine who fights passionately and aggressively against Israeli injustices towards the Palestinians. Like the earlier tragic heroes of Hebrew letters, she confronts and comprehends the suffering of others and bears responsibility for them; yet, unlike these heroes, she exchanges the bonds of kinship with her Zionist parents and the "Jewish people" for ones with Palestinians. Unlike the silent and inarticulate tragic figures of early Zionist literature, Sarah is extremely vocal and conscious of her actions, if no less destructive to herself and others. Thus, Matalon creates an Antigone who contrasts markedly the many figurations of Oedipus in Hebrew culture—a chain-smoking, urbane, comedic, and at times pathetic Antigone who is nonetheless a tragic heroine.

Sarah is in her early thirties; she is a daughter of the moneyed elite of Israel's founding generation, an intense and eccentric news photographer, a mother, and a radical political activist. Around her the novel's more conventional characters revolve: her passive husband Udi, her elusive Palestinian lover Marwan, her crude parents Nava and Shmulik, and her intimate childhood friend Ofri. Ofri, who is also the narrator, is sober, morose, and compliant, an Ismene to Sarah's Antigone. She describes young Sarah's inability to develop a "thick skin" against injustice

and cruelty metonymically as a form of "skinlessness": "She wandered the world without skin, no skin at all! Random bumps into furniture left on her arms and legs red and blue patches that wouldn't heal for weeks . . . her period resembled a bout of malaria" (33; my translation here and throughout).

In a series of retrospective scenes, the narrator relates how Sarah's early, naïve passion for justice and political activism (she reports on children who torture street cats) morphs, in adulthood, into an unequivocal rejection of her parents—"they're just boring and damaging petit bourgeois . . . the silent majority, the 'people', the basis of which the occupation, the stink and the rest of the injustices rest" (108)—and an equally unequivocal support of the *Intifada*: "We need to support their violent struggle now, not wait. At the end we too will be dragged after those bleeding hearts from *Peace Now* [a Zionist peace movement]" (91). Contrary to Ofri, who attempts to dampen her passion—"You cannot measure everything solely through the prism of the occupation and the injustices. It's limited and it's sick" (108)—and Sarah's husband Udi, who is habitually in denial—"What violent struggle? What violent struggle are you talking about?" (91)—Sarah has a singular and unbending attitude towards justice, morality, and political commitment: "Even in all this complexity, everyone should have a bottom-line. Either you take part in this abomination or you don't" (62). "She had no sense of proportion or boundaries," the narrator tells us, "no sense at all" (76).

In the second half of the novel, Sarah, who alternates between long disappearances into Gaza followed by bouts of depression, becomes obsessed with Boseina Khijo, a young Palestinian girl who was shot near her Gazan home. The narrator recalls how Sarah would sit for months with Boseina's father and a human-rights lawyer, determined to bring those responsible to justice. "It's your obsession, this girl," Ofri warns her, while Sarah's husband questions the effectiveness of her fanatical focus on the girl:

—"What's important in political action is its effectiveness. You cannot worry only about cleansing your own moral face. It's selfish, and at the end less moral," Udi said cautiously.
—"We heard you, we heard you. I couldn't care less for effectiveness," [Sarah] barked at him. (91)

And yet when she learns that Boseina was killed when her father sent her out to buy cigarettes during military curfew, Sarah immediately loses interest: "You can tell him to go fuck himself," she tells a mutual acquaintance; "he should have known when he sent her out and he did know. He just pretended for a moment not to know" (148). "It's an uprising of civilians," Ofri tries to explain, "not of soldiers; the children are part of it" (149). Yet, as the novel makes clear, Sarah's morality draws its energies from a source other than rational politics; hence its intensity and power, and hence its destructiveness.

Sarah's downfall—the beating she endures, the collapse of her marriage, and her break with Ofri—comes in the wake of her affair with Marwan, a young Palestinian activist and frequent houseguest at Sarah and Udi's home. What begins as unrelenting desire—"either I die, Ofri, or I have this love" (38)—and continues as a short-lived affair in the course of which Sarah is impregnated, ends with a violent separation, a beating (perhaps by Marwan, perhaps by Udi), an abortion, an arrest, and a divorce. A year later, Ofri leaves for France, while Sarah remains in Tel-Aviv, weakened yet undefeated. "It's this place that turns character to fate," she tells Ofri, handing her another petition to sign as they part at the airport.

Antigone versus Oedipus

Sarah is not the first subversive female character in the Hebrew literary tradition; such characters exist even *within* the plots of early statehood tragedies such as *He Walked the Fields*, in which the hero's girlfriend opposes his call to duty.[6] Eventually, however, these dissenting characters are brought into the nationalist fold through their identification with, and acceptance of, the husband's/lover's tragic sacrifice. Female dissent is replaced by grieving as the women, now positioned as guilty spectators, are inducted into the national cause precisely at the moment when the male bodies of their lovers are injured.

It is also possible to find predecessors to Matalon's Sarah in earlier Hebrew novels: the sarcastic, depressive Hannah Gonen of Amos Oz's *Michael sheli* (*My Michael*) or the radical Mira Guttman of Ruth Almog's *Shorashei avir* (*Dangling Roots*).[7] These are heroines who do not get entirely absorbed into the tragic logic of male-centered plots, nor do they relinquish their ironic stance. Yet, although such characters challenge the Oedipal center of the Israeli novel, they nonetheless remain both trapped in it and highly conversant with it. (Almog, for example, ends her novel with her protagonist's long angry letter to her father.) As such, these novels primarily offer psychological interrogations of their heroines' interiority and the neurosis at the core of their radicalism.

Matalon, by contrast, does not explicate Sarah's neurosis or interiority. Instead, she explores the desire that informs Sarah's words and actions, which are completely externalized in the plot. Whereas Oz's Hannah Gonen is beset by dreams of Halil and Aziz, the "Arab twins" who were her childhood playmates and whose images now threaten the stable blandness of her marriage, Matalon's heroine leaves her Jewish husband for her Palestinian lover without hesitation. *Sarah, Sarah* is thus perhaps the first unapologetic depiction of one-directional, non-ambivalent female desire and action that, as in Sophocles' *Antigone*, does not question its own motives or legitimacy. For Matalon, such desire may be the only solvent for rigid national definitions and so the ultimate basis for ethical action.

Indeed, one might claim that Sarah is the first Hebrew literary heroine who can be deemed tragic and that *Sarah, Sarah* is the first feminist alternative to Zionist tragedies. Matalon's novel both draws on and veers away from earlier depictions of the tragic hero. In its confrontation with violence, destruction, and suffering, *Sarah, Sarah* recalls Bialik's "In the City of Killing." Yet contrary to this proto-national work, whose outcome is a turn toward Jewish nationhood and the construction of a heteronomous national subject, *Sarah, Sarah*'s revolutionary potential is directed *against* the state. And, while the tragic hero of post-state tragedies like *He Walked the Fields* serves to create, secure, and stabilize a national identity rooted in that figure's function as the community's noblest representative and its scapegoat, Sarah's character dismantles this identity, offering instead a path involving cross-ethnic identification and desire. The tragic hero becomes "nationalized" through a process that makes him tragically responsible for his Jewish kin,

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[6] Female characters play a similar role in *Munich* and *To Walk on Water*. In *The Bubble*, a later film by the latter's directors, female characters are explicitly cast as leftist peace activists whose rationality and lack of sentimentality is juxtaposed to a tragic love story between a Jewish soldier and a would-be Palestinian suicide bomber.

[7] I thank Dr. Tamar Hess of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem for pointing me to these works.

but Sarah rejects and even mocks this subject-position—embodied by her husband Udi—severing instead all ties to her parents and the "people" and extending responsibility and loyalty to the Palestinians. She cuts across even the most generously inclusive boundaries of kinship imagined by the Zionist left, forging an alternative—albeit fraught—world of political, emotional, and erotic bonds between same-sex friends, Arabs and Jews, sons and mothers—all of them forged by the force of desire.

What Kind of Political Alternative Can Feminist Tragedy Represent?

Although *Sarah, Sarah* plays out the possibility of co-habitation, Matalon refuses to idealize—de-historicize and de-politicize—co-habitation and the attempt to remove ethnic or national boundaries. She acknowledges the violence at the base of any system of kinship and identity, including any "post-national" or "bi-national" identity; she portrays both the casual ways in which Jews and Arabs co-exist already in the land and the depth of their rift. Most profoundly, she refuses to write *desire* out of Jewish-Arab relations to the land. Many of Antigone's feminist admirers read desire and the death drive out of her tragedy, thereby deeming it a straightforward conflict between kinship and natural love, on the one hand, and an impersonal state, on the other. Arendt and Butler likewise read desire and the death drive out of Israel/ Palestine, but Matalon places it squarely at the center of her novel.

Yet *Sarah, Sarah* can hardly be said to portray an ideal model of love that rivals the impersonal, exclusionary politics of the state. Although Sarah replaces her Ashkenazi-elite family with Ofri (her Mizrahi friend) and Marwan (the Palestinian), her relationship with them is excessive and destructive given her demand for absolute identification and twinship. The trajectory of Sarah's passion for Marwan, moreover, including her desire to give birth to a Jewish-Palestinian child, winds its way toward what Raymond Williams calls a "tragic stalemate" (160): a dialectic in which each potential political and emotional option is foreclosed by the plot.

Nonetheless, *Sarah, Sarah* makes a formidable, if paradoxical, political intervention because its plot, driven by the force of Sarah's desire, proceeds to a nihilistic realm previously unvisited by Hebrew literature. Only an excessive desire such as Sarah's, Matalon suggests, can penetrate the myths, idealizations, and defenses on which everyday life in the region rests—to arrive at what Jacques Lacan calls "the truth of the subject" (Sjöholm 107, 109). The truth Matalon reveals in *Sarah, Sarah* is both the self's blindness to the life of the Other and the unknowability of the Other, particularly in the presence of extreme desire (for a lover, for justice, for a land, for national liberation, for revenge, for a specific piece of land). Sarah's desire—her common thread with Antigone—thus enables the novel, and the novel's readers, to gain access to an unblemished, non-utopian reality. Only from such recognition, Matalon suggests, can a tentative new reality emerge.

Indeed, it is Sarah's recognition of the Other's unknowability that propels her unrelenting attempt to overcome that barrier:

Sometimes I ask myself if I really know you [Sarah says to Ofri].
—There is no 'really.'
—You see, there is and there isn't. You become a shitty person if you act as if there isn't and an idiot if you act as if there is.

Sarah's desire for the unmediated knowledge of and connection with the Other is expressed most profoundly in the novel through the description of her work as a portrait (as opposed to news) photographer. Refusing to use her "abundant" and "effortless" "power of seduction"—"If she had only wanted, she could have made her subjects enter a dishwasher with a watermelon on their heads without even blinking; but she didn't want to"—Sarah, we are told, circles around her subjects for "hours" and "often days" (81) trying to capture their essence:

> The portrait fascinated her as a kind of presence, not absence. That is why she despised so much the idea of "capturing" a subject, the momentary absence of consciousness in the course of which the photographer captures someone who doesn't really see. Or its opposite: the illusion of cooperation between photographer and photographed, via which the subject transforms into a third thing, an object.
>
> She wanted more, much more. In moments of fatigue and ineptitude she said that the gods would punish her for her hubris; then she would think for a moment and say: "they're already punishing me, the shits." (82)

She wanted more, much more: Sarah's struggle against the temptation to totalize or objectify her subject's face is reminiscent of Levinas, for whom the face of the Other contains within it the possibility of transcendence. "For Levinas," Hagi Kenaan writes, "ethics is optics" (24). The visual encounter with the Other's face makes possible the contact with the Other's non-visual elements—its absolute alterity and its infinity—from which the gazer's moral imperative towards the Other is derived (10–42).

Because of her absolute recognition of the Other's unknowability, Sarah's eye attempts to avoid the objectification and idealization of the Other, to cut through projections and defenses. For this "hubris" she is punished by the gods ("the shits"). She is punished because, unlike Levinas, for whom the optical image appears in an ethical field that lies beyond the political and the historical, *Sarah, Sarah* portrays a reality in which the political and the historical cannot be severed from the ethical. For Levinas, the truly seeing gaze can only exist in a utopian, transcendent realm, which is a necessary precondition for "the possibility of peace" (Kenaan 13). In contrast, Matalon inserts Sarah's quest for an unmediated connection with the Other directly into the combustive historical and political conditions of Israel/ Palestine.

The result is . . . tragedy. For by the end of the novel Sarah has lost nearly everything: her family, her lover, her marriage, her journalistic assignments, her friendship with Ofri. The novel does not locate Sarah's tragic essence only in the "tragic split" between desire for an unmediated link to the Other and a blinding, divisive reality; such a split is in fact represented by many Israeli works (Amos Oz's *My Michael* is a prime example) and even by other characters in *Sarah, Sarah*. For Matalon, as for Lacan, the mere existence of a split within the self results in neurosis (Ofri's depression, Udi's anxiety) and a ratification of the existing political order. For Lacan—and I would add, for Matalon—"the essence of tragedy"

> lies in the fact that the tragic hero or heroine is precisely someone who (willingly or not) embarks on the path of abolishing the split in question. This is where the tragedy springs from: from what one has to do (experience or "pay") in order to gain access to the Real that the subject as such is by definition separated from. (Zupančič 177)

Sarah's singularity as a tragic heroine is thus rooted in what she is willing to pay for her desire, in her indifference to loss, gain, practicality, and reciprocity.

This latter point is crucial for understanding the ethical imperative implied by this tragic novel. Matalon, like Levinas, ties ethics to optics. While for Levinas the human gaze operates in an a priori realm of reciprocity from which the demand for responsibility is derived[8] ("the face of the Other attests to the existence of such a turning towards me, commanding me, calling upon me for a response and thus making me responsible"; Kenaan 34–35), for Matalon Sarah's gaze does not hinge on reciprocity. The responsibility for the Other implied by the novel is not propelled by the Other "turning toward me" but is instead dictated by the half-blinded, half-willed logic of tragic responsibility that, as with Antigone, is not dependent on (a priori or belated) mutuality or return. For this reason, Sarah never relinquishes her own sense of responsibility, not even in the face of the rejecting or dead gaze of the Other. "I ruined everything," she says at the end of the novel, imposing on herself what Sandra MacPherson calls "a logic of strict liability" (10).[9] The persistence of her rigid position of tragic responsibility, even after she had been driven to "look the negative in the face and tarry with it" (Hegel, *Phenomenology* 19) signals, finally, the ethical imperative of this tragic novel.[10]

It cannot be denied that Sarah's ability to assume such tragic responsibility while explicitly rejecting the existing structure of Zionist kinship is linked by the novel to her subject-position as a daughter of Zionism's elite. As the novel makes clear—particularly in its juxtaposition of Sarah's character with others—it is precisely Sarah's place as a majority subject and her natural sense of belonging that allows for a character such as hers to emerge. Sarah, moreover, never repudiates the power of the state or inhabits the pure space of an apolitical human rights activist. In fact, she turns to the institutions of the state—the police, the court, even the army—over and against other characters' cynical defeatism.

Matalon as well ties the power of her own art to her ability to inhabit a place and a language:

The fact that I am the daughter of immigrants but not an immigrant myself must not be obscured—that is to say: I am already someone who acts by force of a sense of place and of Hebrew, someone who is already a native inhabitant—or at least partly one. At this spot—that of a certain ownership vis-à-vis the language and the place—the domain of literature, too, occurs: the ability to tell, and in Hebrew; literature, especially prose, requires a home." (*Kero u-khetov* 48–49)

Because she refuses to idealize exile and forgo the importance of "home" while exposing—indeed undoing—the Zionist idea of a Jewish national home, Matalon's position in the world of post-Zionist critique is, as Naama Tsal writes, "not so evident" (307). Yet her novel, like a classical tragedy, unabashedly takes as its premise the heroine's or hero's belonging in a locatable "home," while simultaneously playing out the impossibility of such a stable, bounded definition of home. And this, in turn, may well be the most suitable description of the emotional and political experience of many, Jews and Palestinians, living in the land.

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[8] The Hebrew word for "face"—*panim*—shares its root with the verb *pneh* (address) and *pniya* (an address).

[9] MacPherson ties this idea to what she calls a "tragic mode of liberalism" (23) that she associates with the novel form. *Sarah, Sarah* can be said to display a similar vision of liberalism.

[10] As is suggested by the Solger epigraph at the beginning of this essay (qtd. in Szondi 23), the idea remains as an idea even after it is demolished by the tragic plot.

Matalon cannot, of course, rival the reputation, prestige, and influence of Arendt and Butler. Yet her tragic novel may affect those for whom Arendt's or Butler's more abstract critique of Zionism may fail. It does not moralize, nor is it distant from the experience of the reader. The idea of co-habitation remains present as an idea even as it evaporates from the plot. Most importantly, the novel presents the possibility of a tragically responsible individual who will emerge from *within* national culture yet will extend the bonds of responsibility beyond it. To the degree that political change in Israel is possible, it may emerge precisely from such an individual and such a place.

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