Still Life: Gardening in the Cemetery in Yehudit Hendel's *The Mountain of Losses*[1]

Michal Ben-Naftali

The Mountain of Losses,[2] which was published in 1991, takes place in the late summer of 1989, 16 years after the Yom Kippur War. The book describes a visit to the military cemetery of Kiryat Shaul, which spans several hours on the morning of Yom Kippur eve and the official memorial ceremonies. The narrator accompanies a couple, Ariel and Meira, who lost their son, and another friend, Shmulik Ron, whose wife, Amira, the narrator's old friend, does not come. She has lived withdrawn at her home for years. The bereaved parents spend their days in the cemetery engaging in random and broken conversations, immersed in private rituals of gardening and placing objects-relics that recreate a living environment of the dead on the grave plots. The narrator moves from one grave to another. Seemingly, nothing really happens, except for the tending of the graves and the conversations that evoke the narrator's memories. However, during these hours Amira is going to hang herself at home in her son's wardrobe.

Yehudit Hendel's corpus, starting with her first collection of stories *They are Different People* (1950), has always dealt with facing death, grief and bereavement. Hendel has always maintained a wholly melancholic dialogue with the dead, a dialogue embodying a desire to be submitted to an insurmountable grief and an incessant libidinal investment in the dead, without which she seems to suggest there is no selfhood worthy of its name. From Hendel's perspective, death – of a mother, a spouse, a son, a friend – is always untimely. Not only does it generate a radical change in the subject's perception of time, it entails a deconstruction of the very notions of life and death. Hendel's Derridean hauntological "revival literature", which always deals with guilt-ridden survival (whether it's survivors in the strict sense of the word or mourners who literally

[1] The following quotes are from the Hebrew version, in my own translation:
יהודית הנדל, *הר הטועים* (הקיבוץ המאוחד, 1991).

[2] The title refers to halachic literature on property losses. "A stone of losses was in Jerusalem. Anyone who has lost something will turn there." The private loss temporarily remains in the public space until they come to collect it from The Mountain of Losses, where people are reunited with their lost belongings. Thus, each of the military cemeteries is a kind of a mountain of losses, a concretization of the huge loss and the wish and hope to return the loss to its owners.

live-on/sur-vie), is a space of death in which it is not really clear who lives and who is dead. The guilt of survival, intensified in the *The Mountain of Losses* due to parents' implied complicity with the state in the death they may have prevented, leaves no room for the living children and thereby for the very ability to parent a living child. The living children have thus moved away forever from the landscape of their haunted parents' lives. Hendel gives countless expressions to this hauntology: "Basically, what you are waiting for is to come here, as soon as I leave here, I am already waiting." (90) "And we will meet here for the rest of our lives ... and this is how we will end our lives." (91) Real life takes place in the cemetery and life outside it is nothing but a vain effort to maintain a semblance of normality.

However, these expressions of the melancholic mood, which derive from the hauntological premise, are not only thematic but poetic. As we know, Hendel developed a kind of an "auto-bio-thanato-graphy", a radically melancholic poetics to embody the inseparable bond between mourner and object of mourning, a writing of חיימוות, life in the shadow of both external and internal death. This is an insistently irritating poetics that goes beyond any novelistic convention. In her memoir *The Other Power* from 1984, written following the death of her husband, the painter Zvi Mairovich, melancholic incorporation, which expresses the subject's clinging to the dead while excluding the world, is not only manifest in the relationship between the widow and her husband, but also between literature and painting. Literature incorporates painting. In *The Mountain of Losses*, incorporation takes on a distinct tone that has to do with writing the relation between human and vegetal. The parents' complete surrender to their fate nevertheless includes a silent, passive, intimate and at the same time political-existential rebellion, a silent but determined war for existence, a paradox from which the work grows in the full sense of the word. What releases life in its full force in the "The Mountain of Losses" is not art but the garden. The deep connection between *The Other Power* and *The Mountain of Losses* is highlighted by their covers, which wrap them in Mairovich's paintings, in the books' material expressionist descriptions of light and vegetation, in the meditative and analytical dimension of the texts, all of which rest on the fields of knowledge the narrator and Mairovich shared (67), mineralogy, chemistry, optics, color theory, and, perhaps above all – and we will get to that later – in the narrator's voice.

The architecture and construction of military cemeteries in Israel were influenced both by military cemeteries in Europe and by the tradition of Jewish cemeteries. They are characterized by a restrained combination of vegetation and stone: a continuous and uniform row of modest and simple stone cushions rising horizontally from the ground (as opposed to the vertical headstones in civilian cemeteries) bordered by a flowerbed, marking where the deceased was buried.[3] Hendel writes: "The fiery colored lace precisely divided into equal squares of flowers, names and dates and the exact inscription: when, the rank, and here and there marking a decoration of valor"; "At first we wanted them to inscribe the date of birth ... but they said there is a wording, it is impossible to change the wording." (77, 93) *The Mountain of Losses*, however, strays very far from the wording and does not convey the inscriptions on the tombstones at all, not even the names of the dead soldiers.[4]

In fact, the cemetery is called "the garden" throughout the story. The garden demands endless care, and the parents seem to have returned to an early stage of parenting, an infantile stage of watering/breastfeeding, a total parenting that cannot bear the price of individuation that Israeli socialization exacts. Dan Miron's discussion of the novel in his book on Hendel's prose writing emphasized the pathological dimension of what he calls "a nihilistic bereavement": the conversations between the parents are trivial, the care of the plants is compulsive, and due to the disconnection between people and their pain there are few specific memories of the sons.[5] Hendel writes: "She didn't talk about the son, she just arranged and gardened and moved and watered and changed pots and bought vases." (58) Miron believes that Amira commits suicide because she continues to live soberly, lucidly, unlike others who live, as-it-were, in a two-dimensional, mechanistic, soul-less existence: in other words, the tending of flowers involves vitality and freshness but is disconnected from reality, dressing and even hiding an always-open wound. The low growing plant surfaces, uninterrupted, are, observes Miron, "one big camouflage net," "a

[3] מעוז עזריהו, *במותם ציוו: אדריכלות בתי הקברות בישראל: השנים הראשונות* (היחידה להנצחת החיים, משרד הביטחון, 2012). עמנואל סיון, *דור תש"ח: מיתוס, דיוקן וזיכרון* (תל אביב: מערכות, 1991).
See also George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press 1990).

[4] Inspired by the book, the High Court of Justice later allowed bereaved families to memorialize the soldiers on their tombstones with a personal inscription, and not adhere to the national institutional egalitarian template/model of the Ministry of Defense.

[5] דן מירון, *הכוח החלש: עיונים בסיפורת של יהודית הנדל* (הקיבוץ המאוחד, 2002).

pathetic human attempt, touching but also foolish, to stop time. The garden is a kind of philosophical trick of man in his war with time and ephemerality."[6]

Dana Amir, a psychoanalyst and theoretician , in her discussion of what she calls "white mourning" describes "rituals with a fetishistic and addictive quality that replace the work of mourning"; rituals of this kind, "like clichés, do not mediate between mourning and the lost object, but rather hold it in a compulsive grip that separates the mourner and the pain of loss."[7] From this perspective, even if the barren repetitiveness (both the language and the relentlessly uniform action of the characters) in the *The Mountain of Losses* does not adopt the collective language of mourning, the text's stubborn adherence to a fixed obsessive ritual refuses transformation. In the language of Hannah Naveh, the denial of the passage of time, and in fact, the neutralized presence of death in the pastoral garden, allows the protagonists to walk "a tightrope between a normal existence and falling into despair, depression and madness.[8] Naveh, who tries to describe Hendel's uniquely "secular religion of bereavement," emphasizes the metaphysical experience provided by the cemetery's shelter. And indeed, since the 19th century, the cemetery has been located on the outer perimeter of the city. If for urbanites the removal of the dead from the space and sphere of the living and everyday life helps to deny death, except at certain occasions, the bereaved families here refuse to acknowledge the dead's exclusion from physical presence and nurture the garden like a green suburb. "Planting the garden and cultivating it are substitute pursuits," writes Naveh: "Instead of caring for the son, one cares for an object which is a metaphor for life and can be invested in instead of and in return for investing in the thing itself."[9] This is the rationale behind what she calls the "hermetic sect" that resides in "the condominium," "The garden caretakers' commune." "These members are busy building a new house and a new society in the cemetery."[10] The garden in the cemetery is more important than the home to which the bereaved return at the end of their day of gardening: "They have been talking for years about the need to paint the apartment and freshen it up a bit, and in the summer the walls are really peeling, and the humidity in the winter and the dust and the neglect, but they can't do it because of the garden, because you have to come and water the garden." (Hendel, 137)

---

[6] שם, עמ' 187, 193.

[7] Dana Amir, "The Bereaved Survivor: Trauma Survivors and Blank Mourning", *Psychoanalytic Perspectives* 17 (2020), 74–83, 78.

[8] חנה נוה, *כשבי האבל* (הקיבוץ המאוחד, 1993), עמ' 154.

[9] שם, עמ' 16.

[10] שם, עמ' 159, 158.

And yet, Hendel's garden does not only feminize grief, a feminization the fathers share through their comprehensive supervision of the materials that seep into the soil. What looks like regression and perhaps parental infantilization opens up another existential possibility that goes beyond the logic of desire, lack, substitute and filling. In *The Mountain of Losses* there is no ownership and no desire for ownership. Of course, the parents do not retrieve their concrete loss. They breathe in energy, vital for their survival, by breaking the boundaries of identity. They process the garden, which in turn processes them, to the point of metamorphic assimilation into its environment. The plants are described in terms of new body parts, while human gestures merge with vegetal logic: "plants that the sun has driven out of their minds" (85); "I told myself again that the earth was always something so alive that people spoke of the bones and teeth of the earth... and I felt the movement within the earth." (86) The trees "grew ... expanded, as if they had received new limbs" (93); "His face was black in the shadow of the tree and his slender body appeared to be part of the tree, and the voice was also heard coming from within the tree." (131) Unlike consciousness, which is distinct from its products and from reality, plants only need the world to survive and live with it in absolute intimacy, neither parasitically nor cannibalistically. Becoming-a-plant in Hendel therefore preserves the autonomy of neither plant nor human. Between parents and plants, the same link prevails as that of the radically inseparable bond between plant and world. The cemetery or garden is indeed Beit Olam ("Eternal home").

The becoming-plant in *The Mountain of Losses* almost completely removes the historical-symbolic foundation of the novel. Amira asks at her son's funeral, "Does anyone know why the war broke out ... but no one answered." (82) Meira for her part cannot hear about history. Meira's husband, Ariel, teaches medieval history, but Meira can no longer bear his or her former self. The narrator diverts readers' attention to states of becoming in a space that dissolves stable identities into fluid states; becoming, in Deleuzian terminology, is not a transformation into something else. Becoming- an-insect, for example, is not the release or manifestation of an animal dimension but something the human is capable of, though not by way of imitation or adaptation or representation of a model. Becoming brings together two heterogeneous terms that de-territorialize one another. In the alienation created in *The Mountain of Losses*, the bereaved parents, brought together by a random fate, retire from urban life and civic activity (they stop working in the conventional sense; Shmulik Ron absents himself from his shifts, Meira discontinues her job for

the Society for the Protection of Nature) – they retire into a free, non-hierarchic interaction, where no one takes the role of either teacher or master.

Detaching themselves from the crowd, from politics, and from national memorial days, they share an imagined social contract based on a common language and ex-territory. Friendship is not the motive for their gathering but a result of it, friendship in the ancient ethical sense, which is rooted here in solidary neighborliness. Hendel's garden is granted an epicurean quality, one which is not, of course, equal to happiness achieved, but here denotes a search for harmony with a cosmic order that offers hospitality no longer existent in the urban home. The flight from the city is not a flight from other people. On the contrary. The garden is a meeting place, based on a renunciation of the Cartesian, anthropocentric position, and as such it presents a thoughtless state of consciousness (144).[11] Not only is the book's preoccupation with plants no less than its preoccupation with humanity, the vegetal is a force of becoming that works against the humanistic telos. Vegetal rationality is a paradigmatic form of being and reality. Man is not the measure of everything. "It's heaven here, how everything blooms here" (124); "Because of the constant watering, there was a kind of eternal freshness here, washed and always new, as if at this moment everything here was perpetually entering a stage of blossoming." (46)

But what is Hendel's witness-narrator – in her later prose Hendel writes in the first person and is identified with the autobiographical author – what is her witness-narrator looking for, and perhaps finding – in *The Mountain of Losses*? What drives her addiction to making these pilgrimages? Why does she, who is not a bereaved parent herself at that time,[12] retire from her routine life and devote herself to documenting this "warm civilization"[13] of the garden, and to an involvement that actually goes beyond listening and watching?[14] And what experimental, innovative style does the writer use to express and activate – without deciphering – the becoming-plant in garden life?

---

[11] Foucault in *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias* (trans. by Lieven de Cauter, Routeledge, 1984), discussing heterotopias, points to a radical change in the relationship between the dead and the living in the 18th century. In fact, the cult of the dead begins when death is secularized and society becomes atheistic. The body is no longer a remnant that must be disposed of, since the soul is immortal, but a singular trace that must be invested in and preserved. The corpses, which were once insignificant, gain status precisely because there no one believes in the resurrection of the dead.
[12] She is about to lose her eldest daughter in 2007.
[13] A warm civilization which does not change in the terminology of Levi Strauss (See: *Entretiens avec Claude Lévi-Strauss* par Georges Charbonnier, Plon et Julliard, 1961).
[14] Already at the beginning of the book it is clear to us that the drive to the cemetery takes place all the time in her presence. "Not long ago you traveled with us," Meira tells the narrator.

At the level of plot, Pessia, the narrator's aunt, lost her son in the ambush of the Yechiam convoy in the 1948 war (the War of Independence), and the book in a way is written from a sense of debt to her. Amira, as mentioned, is a childhood friend of the narrator, and the relationship between them is based on identification to the point of substitution, so that Shmulik Ron, Amira's husband, is also accompanied by a partner. Still, all this does not explain what the narrator, who during these hours recreates decisive stages in her life, is looking for, and why she takes it upon herself to serve as a ferrywoman. Naveh, who insists on the cohesive nature of the group and the mutual understanding among its members, notices a split between the delusional perspective of the parents and that of the narrator – and the reader – who observe what is happening in the cemetery. But the narrator does not go beyond the language of the characters who talk among themselves and with her in their tongue without buffer. If in Hendel's *The Other Power*, literature incorporated painting, then here the narrator, although not taking part in the gardening herself, incorporates the language of the garden. The effectiveness of her prose lies in absorbing the idiom of the garden without interlingual or intralingual translation attempting to make it communicative to the outside world. The narrator repeats the formulas and figures of speech and stories like an anthropologist documenting "a dictionary from another place or from a foreign language" (42-43), "as if they have some abbreviations and formulas of their own." (46) The text reproduces a fragmented language, riddled with lacunae and encrypted, which accompanies the speaker's circular movement in space. Only under conditions of repetition can the conversation be conducted and subsequently remembered in the narrator's memory, since in the garden, unlike at home and on the road, everything has already happened. Contrary to Miron's claim, the parents' language does not merely amount to an echo of their feeling of emptiness. The opaque semiotic recitation is a lament that goes beyond the routine of language and semantic meaning. This is speech devoid of rhetoric, with no attempt to argue or convince. The elements of being whose boundaries are blurred, within which the self is unstable and undefined, are adapted to an un-signifying use of language and to Hendel's intentionally crushed and grating prose syntax, a style that has always been rhizomatic and ambiguous in the unfolding of thought, memory and writing.

If in *The Other Power* Hendel criticized the political urgency of Israeli writing in the name of melancholic withdrawal – the melancholic freedom that prevails in the garden has a clear political dimension. Indeed, if in most of Hendel's writings, through the routines of urban language, on the street, the boulevard, in the urban garden, people speak in "Hendelian" language to

themselves, in the cemetery garden turning-back to reality becomes the common linguistic code of a democratic extra-urban community: “I am bound to you for life, simply, our children are neighbors” (64).