Ofer Nordheimer Nur
Eros and Tragedy: Jewish Male Fantasies and the Masculine Revolution of Zionism

I n the Preface to *Eros and Tragedy*, Ofer Nordheimer Nur describes Zionism as a project of national rehabilitation, a 'manly' response to a modern antisemitism[1] and its 'venomous view of the Jewish body as ugly, abject, deformed, repulsive' (VII). This statement conveys the gendered framework employed to his analysis of one of the Zionist movements, Hashomer Hatzair, which inspired Jewish youth in Palestine and that living in the Diaspora, that is outside of Palestine, in the first decades of the twentieth century. Hashomer Hatzair was established in 1916 in Vienna with the merging of two separate youth organisations, Hashomer and Tse'irei Tsiyon, founded before the war in the provinces of eastern Galicia. It was an independent and idealistic youth movement, imbued with Zionist and socialist ideas that gave birth to a powerful myth of a "new man", which would overcome the negative image of the diasporic Jew. A small group of Hashomer Hatzair's members, who between 1920 and 1922 came from the territories of the disintegrating Habsburg Empire to Palestine, formed a community called Bitania Ilit. Even though Bitania existed only for eight months, from August 1920 to April 1921, it laid foundations for Israel's first kibbutz movement – *kibbutz* meaning a 'group' in Hebrew – and created a mental map and set of rules by which the community tried to live by after settling down in

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[1] In this review, I respected Ofer Nur's spelling of the word 'antisemitism' without the hyphen.

Palestine. Bitania promoted a new way of life and it was to lay the foundations for a new society, which would oppose the unhealthy, degrading and repressed life in the Diaspora.

Although Hashomer Hatzair was a coeducational organization accepting women into its ranks, the majority of the group's members were young men. The type of discourse and practices promoted by Bitania's leaders were expressions of the male fantasy, as Nur describes it, evident in their almost obsessive determination to reinvent a Jewish man as a "real man"; a hyper-virile man who would embody strength, both physical and psychological: 'the presence of women in this orbit of fantasy was irrelevant and even detrimental' (101). As Nur's book demonstrates, the quest for a "new man" and the emphasis on male bonding within Bitania's community, betrayed a desire of empowerment that resulted from a deep crisis of manliness experienced by the young generation of East and Central European Jews. The new historical circumstances, the lack of sovereign territory and military power, resulted in vulnerable and dependent Jewish communities and stemming from it a sense of powerlessness. Zionist thinkers and intellectuals, including Hashomer Hatzair, rejected the life in the Diaspora as 'ill', 'miserable', morally and spiritually degrading; through this approach, ironically, they, in a sense, emulated the antisemitic stereotypes (23). Cited by Nur Daniel Boyarin, the author of anti-Zionist pamphlet "Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man", suggests that the condition of living in exile (Diaspora) made a particular mark on Jewish masculinity, which, in order to rehabilitate itself, had to somehow negate this experience of powerlessness. Bitana was a manifestation of that sense of crisis, and, at the same time, an attempt to create a new radical way of living and a new "invigorated man", without any mental or physical restraints (22). The latter, according to Nur, was very much an expression of the Central European age with its 'assertion of youth as a force with its own consciousness' (21).

The book sets out to explore the historical context which made the myth of a "new man" vital and appealing among young members of

Hashomer Hatzair by recreating the 'mental world of a group of teenagers' who belonged to the Bitania community in the early 1920s (Introduction, XIV). In order to disclose the imagery of the new man and the new society they wanted to form, Nur reaches for the original material, such as the collection of confessions (*Kehiliatenu*), diaries and letters of Hashomer Hatzair intellectual leaders, who worked together as a part of the labour community, the material which reveals also their cultural and ideological affiliations. As the author stresses on many occasions, the new vision of society they sought to create in Palestine expressed not only Zionist influences but also Central European sensibilities apparent in the use of the most influential cultural conceptual framework of the time. The two defining concepts of Hashomer Hatzair's new man and new society were based on the trope of Eros and Tragedy, betraying exposure to the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and the German philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose influence in the Jewish world and on Zionism are discussed in the Chapter IV.

Chapter I provides the historical context of eastern Galicia and Vienna at the beginning of the twentieth century and the status of the Jewish Diaspora in both regions. The author introduces a particular historical trajectory, which he describes as 'Galicia-Vienna-Galicia-Palestine', where all the places are of equal significance in forming Hashomer Hatzair's mental outlook (2). Since Nur's narrative is densely woven and rich in factual detail, the general overview of the book in the preface and introduction sections, as well as the introductory Chapter I prove indispensable in facilitating the reading of this highly ambitious work. The events introduced in the first chapter, that is a period between 1914-1919, which saw the decline of the Habsburg Empire followed by the civil war between Polish and Ukrainian ethnic minorities in Galicia, were crucial factors in determining Hashomer Hatzair's ideological direction. The outbreak of the World War I forced many Jews to leave eastern Galicia and travel to Vienna, at the time, a multinational, cultural and intellectual centre of the Habsburg Monarchy. Although at the end of the war some families decided to settle in Vienna, many returned to

Galicia to their abandoned properties and businesses. Yet, at the end of the war, Polish and Ukrainian nationalistic tendencies led to a violent conflict in Galicia in the years 1918-19 over influence in the region. Jewish communities trapped between the two national entities became the target of antisemitism and abuse. The author notices that the Polish national rebirth and the pogroms resulting from it, in particular, proved 'a bitter disappointment for many Polonized Jews', who had a strong sense of belonging with the Polish culture, being themselves immersed in the Polish language and literature (5). It was the rejection of the Jewish Diaspora by other nationalities that in return provoked enthusiastic responses to the Zionist visions. Zionism, whose popularity grew in those years of conflict, offered fantasies about political sovereignty in Palestine and a new independent society. It was the political chaos and brutality in Galicia that drove many young Hashomer Hatzair members to immigrate to Palestine in 1920.

The events in Galicia contributed also to intergenerational conflict between the youth who retained a sense of a separate Jewish identity and wished for a "Jewish renaissance", and their orthodox parents who became assimilated; that is, in the eyes of their children, they willingly accepted an unhealthy and humiliated life in the Diaspora. The members of Hashomer Hatzar, which stands for "The Young Watchman", strived to promote a Jewish national consciousness and create a new society for Jewish people, which would oppose that of the Diaspora. In that, Hashomer Hatzair's mentality expressed Central European ideas and values, brought about by the political awakening of the national consciousness at the end of the nineteenth century. Nur set the stage for the Jewish national revival in the disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy which put the status and identity of the Jewish Diaspora into question and, paradoxically, gave rise to Zionism. Most importantly, the author provides evidence of the extent to which other European national revivals, their symbols and heroes became part of Zionist theorisation and practices. Chapter III discusses the aesthetics of Hashomer Hatzair's tragic man, which expressed the human condition at the end of World War I. Hashomer Hatzair's tragic man was a product of being entrapped

in a tragic history, combining the elements of ancient Greek tragedy, a romantic revolutionary hero and Nietzchean *Übermensch*, a 'Promethean personality, who *dares to freely shape human history*' (69, original emphasis). The members of Hashomer Hatzair found the embodiment of the ideal tragic man in the book *Flames* written by the Polish writer Stanisław Brzozowski; a book, which, according to Nur, had a 'tremendous role' in forming the movement's ideal of the "new man" (69). Nur's research on the influences and significance of the tragic man within the movement's conceptions of new masculinity is the subject previously overlooked and thus constitutes one of the most original contributions to his book.

The second pillar of Bitania's new man and new society, was the quest for Eros, introduced in Chapters II and IV. In 1922, the most popular weekly among Palestine's workers, *Hapoel Hatzair*, presented the concept of Eros as one of the most fundamental elements in the ideal community of Hashomer Hatzair (58). In its conceptualization Eros did not express merely a sexual experience but was based on the framework of Karl Marks' socialist ideas of work, and Freud's psychoanalytical discourse on libido. In his depiction of an erotic, and also a tragic man, Nur draws heavily on the writing of Meir Yaari, one of the movement's leaders and its most influential thinker and theoretician. Yaari saw work as a remedy for the distorted life of Jews in the Diaspora and as a mean to overcome the sense of uselessness and passivity. Therefore, in the new ideal society in Palestine, productive labour became essential for regeneration of the Jew as an individual, a vehicle to change the whole society. Unlike Freud's repressed libido, manifested in dreams, Hashomer Hatzair's Eros was to be turned into a creative force: 'sublimation of libido through work' (63). Hashomer Hatzair therefore, sought to use Eros as a medium for personal and social change, to create an ideal, erotic community. Yaari's approach exposes his concern about the negative image of a Diaspora Jew as neurotic and sexually repressed and his fantasies of a new man, who would embrace hard physical work as well as his naked body, were attempts to overcome this stereotype.

Chapters V, VI and VII trace the development of Hashomer Hatzair's ideal erotic community, *Eda*, from a Hebrew word for 'community', which wanted to practice and live by the ideas Hashomer Hatzair's educated, middle-class members, encountered and adopted while living in the intellectual circles in Vienna, before arriving in Palestine. *Eda*, the community inspired mostly by the non-Jewish German thinkers, Gustav Landauer and Martin Buber and their concept of spiritual community, was imagined as the fusion of all its members into one whole. The most profound manifestation of Bitania's *eda* was through working, dancing and confessing together at nightly gatherings, which was to 'reveal their deepest and most personal secrets' (140). One of the most surprising conclusions from the reading of Nur's book is the extent to which the often racist discourses informed the new vision of a man, coined by Hashomer Hatzair's thinkers, with a desire to override the image of the effeminate man of the Diaspora.

Eros and Tragedy is an original and interesting addition to the subject of Jewish masculinity and Zionism, which, as the author himself remarks, is a growing body of research. In his depiction of the complex history of Hashomer Hatzair and their intellectual legacy, Ofer Nordheimer Nur stressed that Bitania was a unique variant of Labour Zionism, which offered more complex fantasies of a man than merely a muscular Judaism. In the last chapter, Nur tries to argue that the quest to create a heroic tragic man within the Bitania community, resulted in the creation of a new type of masculinity, a sensitive man, conscious of his "innermost feelings", a claim which is however not supported by a convincing argument (191). In its dealing with Zionism as a male fantasy for creating white male dominance in Palestine, something that was denied Jewish men living scattered in Europe, Nur conveys not only gendered but also a post-colonial perspective. It is worth mentioning that Nur's teacher, and one of the main inspirations for his books, was Saul Freidländer, author of a recently published study of Kafka's letters and diaries, *Franz Kafka: The Poet of Shame and Guilt* (2013), which reveals how the discourses of racial, ethnic and class shame resurface in issues of the body and sexuality. Nur's book conveys a somewhat similar

message when presenting the fantasies of a new man as rooted in the tragic historical events, which saw Jewish people abused and humiliated. In that sense, *Eros and Tragedy*, although based on the early twentieth century events, can provide a new perspective on Israel's aggressive military politics namely, as a continuation of the Zionist myth of empowerment in response to antisemitism.

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