

Others' Time, Time as the Other: Sami Berdugo and the Time of Immigration

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ABSTRACT: Sami Berdugo's poetics exposes a unique concept of time. It is a time that can be described as rhizomatic. Unlike space, time can be described as rhizomatic not merely in terms of its divergence into multiple paths but also in terms of being arrested, floating with no apparent progress in any direction. Berdugo's time is not the linear time we are accustomed to think in but rather, to borrow Bakhtin's term, a chronotope: it is more a fusion of spacetime or body-in-space than a linear progress. This essay describes immigrants' time as the Other, the time that cannot be properly measured, the time that refuses advancement. It is also the great Other threatening the immigrants themselves and their sense of freedom.

1

IN A COUNTRY FOUNDED UPON IMMIGRATION, like Israel or, for that matter, the United States, immigrants' concept of time is often perceived by the majority culture as Oriental, in Said's sense of the word—that is to say, “lazy,” “slow,” or even “primitive.” This attitude is, of course, reserved for immigrants who come from a culture considered “inferior” by the host society. Although it may be an object of fascination for persons born and raised in the cultural center of a country, it is still mostly perceived as something that should be changed and developed.¹ This

¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; New York: Vintage, 1994). Said reminds us: “In no people more than in the Oriental Semites was it possible to see the present and the origin together.... Renan had called the Semites an instance of arrested development” (234). Said thus sees the Orientalist as looking upon Oriental time as a case of frozen and “primitive” time.



conception of the other's time not as different but rather as underdeveloped seems to predominate in the thought of the Global North. It characterizes not only Ashkenazi Israelis' conception of Mizrahi Israelis' time² but also how Americans of English origin perceive how Americans of Latin American origin conceptualize time and even how North European nations perceive South European nations' time.³

Even in a distinctively hierarchical culture like the Israeli one, a culture that clearly prioritizes "rational," linear time, literature written by immigrants or, more often, their descendants, can reveal nonlinear time as richer than the linear one, more complex and intriguing. Sami Berdugo's poetics exposes a unique concept of time. It is a time which, as we shall see, can be described as rhizomatic.⁴ Unlike space, time can be described as rhizomatic not merely in terms of its divergence into multiple paths but also in terms of being arrested, floating with no apparent progress in any direction.

2

Berdugo was born in Israel, to parents who emigrated from Morocco. His novels and short stories are written in a unique language, are placed in marginal locations, feature marginal heroes and heroines, and tend to refuse a linear narrative as well as linear time sequences. Whereas nonlinear narration is almost the hallmark of both Modern and Postmodern fiction, nonlinear time is quite a different matter. A nonlinear narrative solicits its readers into reconstructing a linear timeline, and thus the linear narrative itself. Nonlinear time undermines readers' customary reading process by denying them the option of any clear reconstruction. Linear narratives may be deconstructed and diffused only to invite readers' reconstruction of narrative events. But the deconstruction and diffusion of time itself leave readers with nothing to reconstruct—when time is suspended, reconstruction becomes irrelevant.

Although it is clear from Berdugo's interviews and early stories that the writer is extremely eloquent in Hebrew, his characters, as well as most of his narrators, use a language quite distinct from the literary mainstream speech. The uniqueness lies not in the broken language most of us have been accustomed to expect from immigrants but in the choice of linguistic metonyms for the mainstream language. In the same manner, the locations of his fiction are not the Ma'abara (i.e., the temporary refugee absorption camps in Israel of the 1950s) or the poor neighborhoods of large cities but rather a little off-center, in Petah Tikva or in some undefined place not very far from the center. The characteristic I want to emphasize in this essay is the author's avoidance of a linear chain of events, not in the Modernist sense, of a broken puzzle that must be reassembled by the reader, but as an active denial of the reader's expectations for development. This feature is almost inseparably linked with a different concept of time: neither linear nor circular but independent of *any* directionality, spreading in all directions, with neither roots nor top, much like

² For a description of Israeli authorities' attitude toward the work ethic and time concept of Mizrahi Jews, see Batya Shimony, *Al saf ha-geula: Sipur ha-Ma'bara—Dor rishon ve-sheni* [On the verge of redemption: The Ma'abara's story—first and second generations] (Or Yehuda: Heksherim and Dvir, 2008). For an illuminating description of the expression of this attitude in Israeli literature, see Dror Mishani, *Bekhol ha-'inian ha-Mizrahi ha-ze yesh eize absurd* [There is an absurd in all this Mizrahi issue] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006).

³ We can see this manifested in the German attitude toward the Greek way of life in the still-unresolved economic crisis in Greece. The Germans tend to describe the Greeks as lazy and unproductive and suggest that they sell a few of their islands to cover their debts to European (German) banks.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (1975; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor is a spatial one, but I want to apply it to time rather than space, thus developing it to describe not merely time spreading inextricably back and forth in all directions but time in suspension as well. In other words, where Deleuze and Guattari refer to different, intersecting plotlines, I refer to different, intersecting timelines, but also to the suspension of time, to existence independent of the movement of time.

I shall begin the description of Berdugo's refusal of linear development in the simpler and more prevalent terms of the plot before turning to those of time. His first novel, *Kakha ani medaberet im ha-ruah* (And say to the wind, 2002),⁵ is apparently the story of a woman on a trip to find her son, somewhere in "the valley of Jezreel."⁶ We can reconstruct the present plot, as distinct from that of the reconstructed past, in terms of the main character's trip. She travels to Afula, the center of the valley of Jezreel, and we follow her trip and thoughts to the central station of the small town. Once there, she tries calling her son from a public phone and gets no answer (as she might have known beforehand, since her mother had told her that no one ever answers this number). She finds a place to relieve herself behind the memorial statue to the soldiers killed in battle and begins walking in the presumed direction of the bus back home. Suddenly she realizes that she has left her purse behind the memorial statue and turns back. Halfway through her way back, the story ends. That is, the narrative just stops where we didn't expect it to—neither in a climax of a reunion with her son nor in an anticlimax of a failed reunion or unsatisfactory communication with him. We don't know if she got back home, if she plans another way of finding her son (probably not), not even if she has learned anything in her voyage or was supposed to. The story just stops, and we are left with no answers and, as a matter of fact, with no clear questions. It seems fair to say that the "story" is spatial rather than linear: instead of following an adventure or the progress of the main character, we become acquainted with her world and with her very sensual way of thinking. The story seems to stop rather than end, since the heroine's conception of time is unique. Her time is not the linear time we are accustomed to think in but rather, to borrow Bakhtin's term, a chronotope.⁷ But while Bakhtin emphasizes the inseparability of time and space, time being the fourth dimension of space, for Berdugo's heroine, time and space are sometimes more than inseparable: they are indistinguishable from each other. It is more a fusion of spacetime or body-in-space than a linear progress. Thus, for example, when she remembers her year in Paris, where her son was conceived, she does not recollect a timeline, the passing of seasons, or her gradual acquaintance with the city but rather the gardens, the language, her and her husband's relations with their landlady; it takes a second reading to realize that her son is probably not her husband's son but the consequence of haphazard sexual relations with a stranger in his shop. Paris is a spacetime: neither a special year which she spent out of her comfort zone, in which her son was conceived and born, nor a stable place one could possibly go back to—it was simultaneously a place and a time.

⁵ Sami Berdugo, *Kakha ani medaberet im ha-ruah* [And say to the wind] (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meuchad, 2002).

⁶ She uses the expression "the valley of Jezreel," which in Hebrew is a clear travesty of a basic building block in the Zionist narrative. Instead of "Emek Yizra'el" she keeps referring to "the Emek of Yizra'el," thus turning the mythological site of the beginning of Zionism into something unfamiliar and undefined. This is one of the apparently simple ways Berdugo uses the character's dialect to distance the mainstream narrative and defamiliarize it.

⁷ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

The same applies to Berdugo's novella "Yetomim" (*Orphans*, 2006). Berdugo leads us into what seems to be a Modernist reconstruction of a plotline: Shmuel, the narrator, who, throughout the novella, sounds worried, at first about his wife's health and later about her whereabouts, gets a call from the hospital, where he finds his sick wife, diagnosed with a legionella infection. She sends him to call her parents to her bedside and go look after their sons. Actually, readers are unable reconstruct essential elements of the plot, such as the degree of Shmuel's responsibility for his wife's condition, what he had done to her two nights before, and whether he wants her to live. Moreover, the novella ends with his plan to go call his in-laws to his wife's bed, and then to go back home to the kids.

The end of Rothschild street, that's my direction. That's where my wife Rachel's parents live, the only grandfather and grandmother of our firstborn Dror and little David, who are waiting for me at home and don't know that I'm on my way to tell their grandparents about their mother. In the coming hour they will go to her and sit by her side, hold her if she wants to get up. They will be strong even at their advanced age, because there is something that preserves them and it is connected to the continent where they were born. Not the hot Africa where my parents grew up and on whose soil they died. Here the generations work differently. There's no chance that the little children will guess something. By the time Rachel comes home we three can do so much, maybe we'll even sing the Friday night Kiddush and together with childish merriment we'll bless the heavens and the earth.⁸

We are left puzzled not merely as to the questions of plot mentioned above, but as to the meaning and conception of time for Shmuel, through whose consciousness we read the entire text. Is he about to snatch his sons back into the spacetime of Africa? Is he succumbing to nostalgia, to mourning his crushed utopia? Is he on hold, until his wife's return home? What does the time he has until Rachel comes home mean to him?

3

Time in Berdugo's novels is as confusing or disorienting as the plotlines described above. Just as the plotlines seem to promise a closure that they eventually refuse to provide, time seems to provide an interpretive anchor just to refuse any definitive label. Thus, in *And Say to the Wind* the time in Paris seems, at first, to provide an explanation for the alienation between the mother and her son. Adherence to our accustomed reconstruction of plot and time would lead us to an attempt to read the details of the year in Paris as an exposition explanatory of the mental gap between mother and son in terms of an unspoken secret. It is, however, impossible not to notice the silence dominating the heroine's entire life and relationships: almost everything in her life and relations is unspoken. The year in Paris cannot actually be read as an explanation of the heroine's present. It turns into a lacuna in time: a chronotope isolated from everything else, existing as a separate spacetime of its own. The trip to Afula may be read in a similar manner: far from providing the heroine and the readers with an explanation for her relations with her son or the meaning of her life, it seems, in retrospect, to occupy the same position as that of the year in Paris. The trip is an isolated day in the life of the heroine, and although she thinks about her life and her past during this

⁸ Sami Berdugo, "Yetomim" [Orphans], in *Yetomim* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meuchad, 2006), 196. All translations from this novella are by Dalia Bilu. English translation rights © the Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature.

day, the day is a lacuna: it is preceded by her everyday life at work and with her partner and will presumably be followed by the same routine; nothing is about to be altered, nothing is about to be perceived in a different light, and no epiphany is forthcoming. It is a day in her life, nothing more.

Yet time does manifest progress in this novel, as well as in Berdugo's other novels. There is some kind of progress from the heroine's youth, when she lived with her mother, to her first marriage, to the death of her husband, and to her life with her second partner. Time is not suspended in a vacuum. I would like to suggest that the best way to describe Berdugo's time is to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's metaphor of the rhizome and to apply it to time rather than space. The rhizome is a botanical metaphor which can be contrasted with the prevalent tree metaphor. Instead of looking for origin in terms of a root, a trunk, and many branches, leaves, and flowers, stemming from one point of origin, Deleuze and Guattari suggest looking at literature and culture in terms of the spreading roots and offshoots of grass: not one point of origin with a clear directionality but, rather, many points of origin spreading in multiple directions, entailing widely divergent results. Time in *And Say to the Wind* as well as in "Orphans" and in Berdugo's latest novel, *Ki Guy* (Parce que Guy, 2017),⁹ has many points of origin, spreading in multiple directions, entailing divergent results or, more often, no results at all.

Berdugo's special formation of time stands out even when compared with the way time is treated in other works that can be seen as presenting immigrants' time. Thus, for example, in a description of Ronit Matalon's work, Gil Hochberg characterizes time in her novel *Zeh im ha-panim eleinu* (The one facing us)¹⁰ in terms of a conflict between the past and the present: "The conflict between past and present is experienced by Esther [the novel's heroine] as a conflict between, on the one hand, her desire to revive her familial past and locate herself in relation to it, and, on the other hand, her sense of the historical discontinuity that makes her attempt impossible."¹¹ In Matalon's novel, the past is clearly distinguished, even disconnected, from the present. In Berdugo's novels, however, time is not a severed line but rather a multidirectional, rhizome-like entity, suspended rather than disconnected.

Time in *And Say to the Wind* has a point of origin in the beginning of the day of the trip to Afula, in the year in Paris, when Avi, the son, was born, in Avi's leaving his mother's house, in the heroine's childhood at her mother's apartment, and in the mother's emigration from North Africa to Israel. Each of these points of origin is important and relevant to the present time of the novel. Each has consequences we might wish to consider, and none of them leads to a clear and definite end. Taking the excursion to Afula as a point of origin would foreground the relations between the heroine and her son, the secret of his birth, and the consequent alienation between them. It would, however, push to the background her general alienation, her lack of roots in the Zionist narrative, and her preference for the body over words and "soul." Taking the heroine's relations with her mother and the latter's emigration as a point of origin would foreground a few of these central themes—the alienation and lack of relation to the Zionist narrative—but push to the background her relations with her son and her first husband and her choice to trust her body over anyone's words. In other words, if we follow Berdugo's rhizome and insist on including all these

⁹ Sami Berdugo, *Ki Guy* [Parce que Guy] (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meuchad, 2017).

¹⁰ Ronit Matalon, *Zeh im ha-panim eleinu* [The one facing us], trans. Marsha Weinstein (1995; New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998).

¹¹ Gil Hochberg, "'Permanent Immigration': Jacqueline Kahanoff, Ronit Matalon, and the Impetus of Levantinism," *Boundary 2* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 227–28.

points of departure and their concomitant timelines, we shall be reading a richer text, spreading in many directions, committing itself to none of them exclusively. We shall be reading minor literature. Deleuze and Guattari say: “How many people today live in a language that is not their own? Or no longer, or not yet, even know their own and know poorly the major language that they are forced to serve? This is the problem of immigrants and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of minor literature, but also a problem for all of us.”¹² Berdugo seems to say: how many of us, immigrants and their children, live and think in disoriented time, in a time where different timelines are intertwined, mixed together, leading nowhere, indescribable by any way we have for describing time?

Time in Berdugo’s texts is neither linear nor circular. It seems to be sensual time, a time of the body rather than a time of the mind. When the narrator of *And Say to the Wind* says, “Now it is as if Albert [her second partner] was always here,” the feeling she describes is physical rather than mental, since she goes on to specify “always moved around in the rooms, ate in the kitchen, took a shower while I cooked, slept on his side in the double bed, and watched television near the large window of the living room.”¹³ This description of partnership in terms of space and the body’s presence in it should not surprise us, since she explicitly trusts her body rather than her mind: “I love the health of my body, and I don’t think about the words [*diburim*] of the soul in it.”¹⁴ When the third-person narrator describes her trip to Afula, the perception of time in terms of space or as a permanent present is reinforced: “Time is short in these moments, and it is never measured, only promises her that soon everything will be over, and that she’d better take as much as possible from this time.”¹⁵ Suspension in spacetime is clear and relevant on the way to Afula, as well as during the year in Paris.

Disorientation in time is central to understanding Berdugo’s fiction and his characters. When the heroine of *And Say to the Wind* thinks about life and death, she feels that her Arab colleague, Sawsan, has a clearer conception of time, a secret which she envies: “she [Sawsan] and the ones she knows have the power to choose moments and times of life and death, as if she tells me a secret doctrine, that only her people know and keep it to themselves without giving any explanations.”¹⁶ When the heroine tries to cope with her late husband’s death, she clings to a fixed ceremony, once a year, in which she derives comfort and some strength from the everyday memorial actions her mother dictates. Unlike Sawsan, she doesn’t feel she has control over time or knowledge of its secrets. Ceremonial time, like memorial days, be they public or private, seems to be conceived by the heroine as chronotopes—not as marking the flow of time but rather as an isolated spacetime which can provide some rest and comfort. This is her attitude toward her husband’s memorial day, as well as toward ceremonial commemorations of fallen soldiers or Holocaust victims: “the gentle music of the end leaves a good taste on my lips and reminds me of our days in this country that recur every year, making a well-ordered and clean grief.”¹⁷

This flexible and fluid movement from what seems to be the linear routine of everyday life to chronotopes, which may be described as islands floating in time with no anchor, is the foundation

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 19.

¹³ Berdugo, *Kakha ani medaberet im ha-ruah*, 10. Translations from this novel are mine.

¹⁴ Ibid., 134.

¹⁵ Ibid., 91.

¹⁶ Ibid., 168.

¹⁷ Ibid., 143.

of Berdugo's rhizomatic time. It enables us, with his characters, to conceive of time in a different manner. Thus, when the heroine of the novel thinks about her son's future, she doesn't think about his growth or his proximity to the age of mandatory draft into the army, but about "the army approaching his [Avi's] age."¹⁸ Time and space are one and the same here and require us to reconsider or restructure our habitual concepts of time. Just as Berdugo's heroine thinks about time in terms of space, the army approaching her son's age, she can make us think with her about space in terms of time: "I have a few more places like this one, places I don't come back to, and therefore they are strongly kept in my memory, and I know them by heart by the hour and light of the day."¹⁹ Time is here released from the limitation of any kind of sequence: it is neither linear nor circular; it spreads in divergent directions, letting readers as well as the heroine be held in its floating bubble.

This decentralization of our perception of time is not unique to Berdugo's first novel. In the novella "Orphans" Shmuel seems to follow the linear time we all do, moving from work to home, to his small family, and from bachelorhood to being a proud husband and father. Still, we must remember, as Edmund Leach wrote, that the regularity of time is not an intrinsic part of nature but rather a man-made notion which we project on to our environment for our own particular purposes, in this case, for the purposes of "development" considered "natural" in modern culture.²⁰ As Émile Durkheim has pointed out, "a calendar expresses the rhythms of the collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity."²¹ Following their lead and applying their conception of time as a social function, Kinneret Lahad points out that time regularizes our lives into what is socially acceptable—marriage and parenthood.²²

Having obediently followed this socially dictated timeline, Shmuel, the narrator-protagonist of "Orphans," looks nostalgically back at his childhood's chronotope, the "white ghetto." The white ghetto was a place where time was undefined, and the resources at men's disposal were different: "If I wasn't living in this present time, perhaps I would have a way of approaching Rachel and starting to help her. But what exists here doesn't allow me to find a formula that would bring relief to her and to me and influence the children too,"²³ Shmuel tells us. Time and place are inseparable ("this present time" and "here" are one and the same), and help seems to be out of reach, far away in the early chronotope of the ghetto. His memories from Morocco follow no clear timeline, and his matriarchal grandmother, who ran the house, the family, and her husband, seems to understand that "there was no change in time," even in death. Shmuel recollects that

there my grandmother spoke to me about the end of her life too.... I knew that she was with me in those young years when my legs were short and smooth, standing in the tall house and showing me long, lonely days that seemed to never end.... Perhaps she understood that there was no change in time, even though she knew that the end was close.²⁴

¹⁸ Ibid., 177.

¹⁹ Ibid., 201.

²⁰ Edmund Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London: Athlone Press, 1971).

²¹ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Dover, 2008), 10–11.

²² Kinneret Lahad, "Singlehood, Waiting and the Sociology of Time," *Sociological Forum* 27, no. 1 (2012): 163–86.

²³ Berdugo, "Yetomim," 115.

²⁴ Ibid., 129–30.

The ghetto time invades the present, disrupting the flow of the socially accepted timeline:

Time is out of joint in my head. The days in the ghetto keep on coming back. What kind of a child was I once? Almost anything could crush me and break me to pieces. I was weak and broken just like the night before last, when I pressed my hands to Rachel's mouth.²⁵

Thus, rhizomatic time may be rich, bringing back history, religious Kiddush, and childish merriment, but it can be murderous and destructive as well. Time in Berdugo's fiction cannot be defined, neither through its direction nor through the lack thereof, nor by its ethical or moral value. In the same manner, Berdugo takes the protagonist of his latest novel, *Parce que Guy*, back to the village where he was born and raised only to undermine every possible expectation from a return of the prodigal son. The direct and inexplicable consequence of the return to the spacetime of childhood is an unprovoked and meaningless murder. The visit to the village doesn't throw any light upon the past or the protagonist's childhood; it doesn't clarify the ways and attitudes of the village members; neither does the visit make any future development clearer. Time seems to be at a permanent standstill, moving neither forward nor back. It diverges and curves around in many different directions, but it mainly is there, in the village spacetime which seems unchanged, engraved in memory, much like Paris or Afula in *And Say to the Wind*.

4

In a lecture delivered at a symposium on Israeli identity and immigration, Berdugo said: "This is why there shouldn't be any mix or melting pot, but a full acceptance of many channels, paths, directions, liberal passages where the mouth is active and can talk freely, like a light stream in the river changing its route and tempting me to jump in and swim smoothly."²⁶

This rhizomatic description of divergent ways of expression refers mainly to language. In other passages of this lecture, however, Berdugo refers in the same manner to space and time or, rather, to spacetime. In a reference to the impossibility of an integration project which doesn't erase identity, Berdugo fuses time and space in the same sentence: "Can the advance and the retreat conduct a dialogue, and can the one who is in the center and the one from the side, the periphery, live in the same neighborhood?"²⁷

Immigrants' time is presented in this lecture as different but, in a way, as the Other as well. Majority time is presented as shallow, unidirectional, unsatisfactory: "Growing up as a child during the seventies through the eighties meant growing in a very conservative society, with a one-track view of past and present."²⁸ The whole integration project results in the writer's severance from time and ancestry. This is how he describes his artificial severance from his parents' culture: "How can anyone ignore their full human existence that contains in it so much, a life with powerful language, an education and *a system of their own to observe time and to decide how to grow into it, if ever?*"²⁹ Thus, the consequence is denial or severance: "I am disappearing from the image of the 'Eretz-Israel' motives and searching to create my own territory by killing all my

²⁵ Ibid., 185.

²⁶ Sami Berdugo, "I Am an Immigration-Integration Product, or Am I?", paper presented at "Symposium on Israeli Identity: Behind All This a Great Longing Is Hiding? Multiplicity and Fragmentation in Israeli Society," Oxford Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, Yarnton, December 4–5, 2008.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

ancestors, the biological and the spiritual.”³⁰ A place of his own, says Berdugo, means the assassination of time—of all his ancestors.

Immigrants’ time is the Other, the time that cannot be properly measured, the time that refuses linear advancement. It is also the great Other threatening the immigrants themselves and their sense of freedom. In the words of the heroine of *And Say to the Wind*, “Now I need to go back to it [the purse she left behind], to start walking back in its direction and not to be afraid of time running out on me.”³¹ [A]

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Berdugo, *Kakha ani medaberet im ha-ruah*, 211.