

“I Am Civil War”: On Haim Gouri’s Poetics of Concealment

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ABSTRACT: Using Haim Gouri’s 1960 poem “I am Civil War” as its departure point, this essay aims to offer a historically anchored reading of Gouri’s “poetics of concealment”—a playful, purposeful use of *poiesis* as a means to disguise uncomfortable truths and as a mode of “aphasia,” blocking historical knowledge. The argument unfolds through several stages. After looking at Gouri’s early career and the unresolved tension between Gouri the “reporter” and Gouri the “witness,” the essay reassesses the transition we see in his poetry from an earlier collectivist “we” to a new, seemingly personal “I.” From there, it looks at the highly charged term *milhemet ezrahim* (civil war) in Hebrew and its uses before Gouri appropriated it. Lastly, it revisits a sensitive episode in Gouri’s early biography, connected to his role during the *Saison*, and his avoidance of “confession,” which sheds light on the way Gouri metaphorized and internalized the notion of civil war, turning it into an inner struggle and personal dilemma.

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1. PREAMBLE

I Am Civil War¹

I am civil war
and half of me fires its last
at the walls of the defeated.

A court-martial,
working in shifts,
where the lights never fade.

And there, those who are just fire on the rest who are just.

And later silence comes
composed of fatigue and the darkness of empty bullet casings.

I am nighttime in an unwall'd city
for anyone who is in need.

אני מלחמת אזרחים

אני מלחמת-אזרחים
ומחציתי יורה את אחרונה
אל קירות המנצחים.

בית-דין שדה,
העובד במשמרות,
ושם אורות לא-דועכים.

ושם הצודקים יורים בִּיתֵר הצודקים.

ואחר-כך בא שקט
מצרף מעיפות וחשכות של תרמילים ריקים.

אני לילה בעיר פרוזות
לכל דכפון.

AMONG THE SO-CALLED 1948 GENERATION of poets and novelists who shaped Hebrew literature in the first decades following Israeli independence and the Palestinian Nakba, Haim Gouri (1923–2018) occupied a leading and distinct role. An exceptionally prolific and versatile writer, his oeuvre includes numerous poetry books and several novels and other works in prose, not to mention dozens of journalistic articles and essays and even documentary films. Not less significant was the fluctuation in his political beliefs, from a socialist Zionist in his youth who turned into a vocal supporter of the settlements in the West Bank after 1967, only to later change his political positions following the first Lebanon war (1982) and become a vocal critic of the government. All these turn him into a fascinating barometer of Israeli history and the conjuncture of politics and belles lettres.

I won't be able to do justice to such an extensive body of writing within the parameters of the present essay. A humbler task I took upon myself is to offer a historically anchored reading of Gouri's poem "I am Civil War," which stands as this essay's preamble, and Gouri's employment of imagery of political stasis more generally. The basic coordinates needed to situate the poem historically are clear. Gouri wrote his poem circa 1960 and included it in his book *Shoshanat Ruhot* (Compass Rose).² In his autobiographical sketches, *Im Ha-Shirah V'eha-Zeman* (With the Poetry and Time), Gouri hinted that this was a midlife crisis poem, written when he was in his forties. (A quick back-of-the-envelope calculation shows that is not entirely accurate: he was forty

¹ The present translation was prepared by the author of this essay, and it differs considerably from the authorized translation of the poem prepared by Stanley F. Chyet for the anthology *Words in My Lovesick Blood: Poems by Haim Gouri* [*Milim Be-Dami Ha-Holeh Ahavah*] (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), 36. The Hebrew poem was first published in Haim Gouri, *Shoshanat Ruhot: Shirim* [Compass Rose: Poems] (Tel Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-Meuḥad, 1960), 65. I would like to thank Chana Kronfeld for her careful reading of the poem's translation and her insightful suggestions.

² Gouri, *Shoshanat Ruhot: Shirim*.

in 1963.³) The morbid image of violence accompanying a polis collapsing from within and the displacement of political angst into a subjective poetic expression no doubt provides the poem its power and central tenet.

Interestingly enough, Gouri repeatedly returned to this poem and referred to it in later years as his "literary identity document."⁴ Moreover, the recurring appearance of civil war(s) in Gouri's writings, either in reference to concrete historical events or as codes representing a particularly vicious internal conflict, also deserves our attention. In his 1994 collection *ha-Ba aḥarai* (The one who comes after me), written during the days of the Oslo Accords and against the backdrop of an exceptionally vicious civil war in former Yugoslavia, Gouri compared himself to the war-ravaged city of Beirut. The aged poet seized the opportunity given to him at a newspaper interview to clarify what he meant by the metaphor, stating, "Beirut is a metaphor for an internal civil war, for a harsh contradiction. This is not the first time I have used it [...] The contradiction system has accompanied me from the beginning of my childhood memory, all my life."⁵ In *'Eyval*, his 2009 poetry book, he reemployed this metaphor, comparing interior dilemmas to urban warfare once again.⁶ As I will show, Gouri also referred several times to an actual civil war—the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39—as a formative experience for him as a young poet, and he infused his newspaper articles with numerous veiled autobiographical hints of a similar kind. Predictably, the poem indeed turned into a kind of an ID: *Ani Milḥemet Ezraḥim* was chosen as the title of an ornamental 2004 anthology of Gouri's writings, accompanied by illustrations of some Israeli painters. This was the central axis for discussion in articles written by his fans, and this was also the title chosen for a 2008 documentary film about the poet.⁷

"I am Civil War," thus, poses a challenge. While it is anchored in a specific time and place, this poem resists narrow contextualism precisely because it transcended its date of composition and was elevated to function as the poet's artistic gospel. Derrida's famous statement on Paul Celan comes to mind here: "Despite the date, in spite of its memory rooted in the singularity of an event, the poem speaks."⁸ In what follows, I will use Gouri's 1960 poem as my departure point, acutely aware that dates quickly become fuzzy and defy both chronological and genre boundaries. In what may seem like an impossible tautology, the poem is anchored in a specific moment in Gouri's life and artistic career and transcends it.

An obligatory prefatory remark: I approach this poem from the point of view of a historian, and I treat poetry first and foremost as a sociopolitical text. Doing so, I commit violence: I deprive poetry of its autonomy as a separate, self-standing field. It must therefore be taken into

³ Haim Gouri, *'Im Ha-Shirah Vēha-Zeman: Dapim Me-Oṭobiyografyah Sifrutit* [With poetry and time: Pages from a literary autobiography], vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: ha-Ḳibuts ha-me'uhad, 2008), 106–07.

⁴ Haim Gouri, "Haket'a" [The additional section], *Alpayim* 9 (1994): 191–203. The essay was reprinted in Gouri's *'Im Ha-Shirah Vēha-Zeman Hanosaf: Dapim Me-Oṭobiyografyah Sifrutit*, 92–107.

⁵ Miri Paz, "tzrudim mizedek vesigariyot [hoarse due to justice and cigarettes]," *Davar*, January 21, 1994, as reprinted in *'Im Ha-Shirah Vēha-Zeman*, vol. 2, 314.

⁶ Haim Gouri, *'eyval: Shirim* [Ebal: Poems] (Tel Aviv: ha-Ḳibuts ha-me'uhad, 2009), 31.

⁷ Haim Gouri, Benno Kalev, and Dani Horovits, *Ani Milḥemet Ezraḥim* [I am civil war] (Tel Aviv: Daniyelah Di-Nur, 2004); Rachel Elior, "Ani Milḥemet Ezraḥim [I am civil war]," *Mashiv HaRuach* 67 (2019): 44–64; "Ani Milḥemet Ezraḥim" [I am civil war], directed and produced by Omri Lior (in collaboration with the Heksherim Institute at the Ben-Gurion University), 2008.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," in *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*, ed. Outi Pasanen and Thomas Dutoit (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 7. I'd like to thank Uri S. Cohen for calling my attention to Derrida's essay.

account that this type of discussion involves the danger of stripping poetry of its literary aesthetic uniqueness in favor of an analytical-technical reading. This reading deliberately privileges a sterile analysis of the poem's cultural, political, and rhetorical content while sidelining—though not ignoring—its aesthetic elements. My central aim in this essay is to examine the two sides of the equation: Gouri's poetic "I" and how he employed the highly charged image of the *bellum civile*, the civil war. I attempt to evaluate the origins as well as the effects of what is, ultimately, an artistic act of conceptual blurring: an attempt to construct a poetic subject capable of overcoming a political division—which fragments the polity and threatens to tear it down—through an act of poetic subsumption of those opposites. Within the poetic "I," the distinction separating the political from the personal fades away and befuddles. Correspondingly, it is within the poetic "I" that civil war is dissociated from the concrete and the historical. The loaded phrase is metaphorized.

At the same time, although my "historicist" reading may seem like an act of abstracting the aesthetic dimension from creative works, this conscious act of defiance and rebellion against the poet's art of seduction is also a cry against an aestheticization of the political conflict, which domesticates it and turns it apolitical. At the end of the day, I argue, what Gouri bequeathed us is a form of aphasia: a language disorder, divorcing political concepts from their meaning. This purposeful disarray is intimately tied to Gouri's temperamental disinclination to speak of the past "factually" but to playfully blend "confession" with what is, in fact, a suppression of the historical and concrete. The poetic and purposely obscure recollection serves as its substitute.

2. THE GOURI BEYOND THE 1948 EPIC POETRY

Approaching a subject matter such as the one we have here, one cannot ignore the well-established public image of Gouri as the literary spokesman of the 1948 War generation. There are clear historical reasons for the appearance of that popular image, tightly connected to his early biography. Born Haim Gurfinkel in Tel Aviv in 1923 and educated in the Kedourie agricultural school—the breeding ground for the Labor Zionist leadership—Gouri joined the paramilitary Palmach force, commanded the Israeli army's first parachuting course, and began writing poetry while dressed in uniform. His first published poem, "Hineh Mutalot Gufoteinu" ("Here Lie Our Bodies"), written in memory of thirty-five fighters of a convoy that tried to break the siege on Jerusalem, was published in the magazine *'Itim* in March 1948 and was instantly canonized, providing a template and a vocabulary to the nascent Israeli culture of commemoration of fallen soldiers.⁹ As the literary scholar Hamutal Tsamir has noted, next to its usage of the image of the "living-dead" that appears in earlier poetry, Gouri's famous poem eroticizes the heroic death by making it synonymous with the act of making love with the soil (the dead warrior-speakers testify that they died with "our lips pressed to the hard, rocky ground," promising to "return as red flowers").¹⁰ As I argued elsewhere, the poem's rhetorical power that combined the collective first-person plural, the way it echoed the living-dead literary trope and turned it into a concrete, Israeli imagery, and the way the poet speaks on behalf of the dead, affirming the ideal of individual sacrifice for the collective good, help explain why it turned into an urtext of the Israeli

⁹ "Georry" [Haim Gouri], "Hineh Mutalot Gufoteinu" [Here our bodies lie], *'Itim: hadashot be-sifrut uve-amnut* (March 19, 1948), 1.

¹⁰ Hamutal Tsamir, "shirat natan zach vehasubeyekt haleumi-yisraeli hechadash [The poetry of Nathan Zach and the new national-Israeli subject]," chap. 2 in *Be-Shem Ha-Nof: Leumiot, Migdar V'subeyaktiviot B'shira Ha'israelit B'shanut Ha'hamishim V'hashishim* [In the name of the land: Nationalism, subjectivity, and gender in the Israeli poetry of the statehood generation] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006).

culture of commemoration, reproduced time and again in numerous *yizkor* booklet anthologies and recited in commemoration ceremonies.¹¹

These were major factors in kickstarting Gouri's literary career. His debut collection of poems, *Pirhe-esh* (*Flowers of Fire*), appeared in 1949, even before the war ended, and his second book, *'Ad 'Alot Ha-Shahar: Yoman Milhama* (*Until Dawn: A War Diary*), appeared immediately after the war, in 1950.¹² Subsequently, Gouri's name became tantamount to Palmach poetry and was firmly attached to the struggles of the 1940s, akin to the way names such as Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, and Siegfried Sassoon are securely fixed to World War I poetry. Acutely aware of this public image, the poetic persona Gouri devised was that of a poetic spokesperson of the young Israeli nation-in-arms, an image that did not dim as he grew older as much as transformed into that of an "intergenerational hero" who carries "a bonding memory," forever trapped between the personal memory and the collective narrative.¹³

This conventional image notwithstanding, we should not be over-fixated on it. In the context of our present discussion, it is worth noting that Gouri's long career included several apparent attempts to groom a poetic persona that transcended that of the soldier-poet. Shortly after his release from military service, the young veteran studied at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and won a scholarship that allowed him to spend one year at the Sorbonne in Paris, dedicated to studying contemporary French literature (1953). Gouri admitted in later years being influenced by French literature.¹⁴ His French hosts quickly recognized his talents, which fitted well with their postwar philo-Israeli sensibilities. In 1955, a translation of one of Gouri's early poems into French made it into a photo-text album dedicated to Israel, prepared by Izis (alias for Israël Bidermanas, a Lithuanian-born French-Jewish photographer) and accompanied by a programmatic essay by André Malraux, the illustrious Résistance writer and Gaullist.¹⁵ A few years later, the French translation of Gouri's reports from the Eichmann trial, accompanied by a preface by the philosopher Alain Finkielkraut, also received a warm welcome.¹⁶ From that moment on, he was acutely aware of his role as "representing" the young state abroad. More crucially, his personal experiences and literary exposures during his time abroad provide a slightly different context and essential background for the poem with which we opened this essay. The poem's unspecific and

¹¹ Arie M. Dubnov, "Reading Mosse in Jerusalem: Fallen Soldiers and Israel's Culture of Commemoration," chap. 9 in *Contemporary Europe in the Historical Imagination: George L. Mosse and Contemporary Europe*, ed. Darcy C. Buerkle and Skye Doney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023).

¹² Haim Gouri, *Pirhe-Esh: Shirim* [Flowers of fire: Poems] (Merhavia: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1949); Gouri, *'Ad 'Alot Ha-Shahar: Yoman Milhama* [Until dawn: A war diary] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz hameuhad, 1950).

¹³ This line of analysis was best developed in Efrat Ben-Ze'ev and Edna Lomsky-Feder, "The Intergenerational Hero: Carrier of a Bonding Memory," *Memory Studies* 12, no. 2 (2022): 213–29; and Ben-Ze'ev and Lomsky-Feder, "The Canonical Generation: Trapped between Personal and National Memories," *Sociology* 43, no. 6 (2009): 1047–65.

¹⁴ As, for example, in a 1972 interview: André Payette, "Entretien Avec Haïm Gouri," *Liberté* 14, no. 4–5 (1972): 82–83, 160–73. I would like to thank Moshe Sakal for bringing this to my attention.

¹⁵ André Malraux and Izis [Israël Bidermanas], *Israël* (Lausanne: Editions Clairefontaine, 1955). Gouri's poem "Frontière," translated by Nicolas Lazar, appears on p. 112, adjunct to Izis's photo of a warning sign next to a borderline in Israel. The album was also published in the United States in 1958. The philo-Israeli sentiment will be examined in detail in G. Daniel Cohen's forthcoming book, *Good Jews: Philosemitism in Europe since the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024). I would like to thank him for providing me with a copy of his book manuscript.

¹⁶ Haïm Gouri, *Face à La Cage De Verre: Le Procès Eichmann, Jérusalem, 1961*, trans. Raphaël Cidor (Paris: Albin Michel, 1963). The English translation of Gouri's influential book came out many years later: Gouri, *Facing the Glass Booth: The Jerusalem Trial of Adolf Eichmann*, trans. Michael Swirsky (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

alien urban setting, a “European” background that is strikingly different from the landscapes of the battlefields of 1948, a “conventional war” set in ancestral sunlit land, also speaks to that reorientation. Concurrently, using a first-person singular instead of a collectivist national “we,” the speaker in “I am Civil War” is strikingly different from the living-dead soldier poet who speaks on behalf of the fallen soldiers of 1948. He is far more intimate and reflective. This is the voice of a civilian, almost melancholic Gouri, who emerged after the war clouds had dissipated. In what follows, I will return to this point to further scrutinize it.

Furthermore, as far as Hebrew readers are concerned, Gouri was not only a poet. Part of what explains his ability to loom large over the Israeli cultural scene is that from the mid-1950s to the early 1990s, Gouri was an active and highly industrious journalist. He published extensively, first in *La-merhav*, an almost entirely forgotten party newspaper in which he published his well-known coverage of the Eichmann trial, and later in *Davar* and numerous other Israeli newspapers.¹⁷ Also worth mentioning in the context of our present discussion is that one of the earliest prizes the young Gouri was awarded was the Sokolow Prize (1962)—considered the most prestigious prize in journalism in Israel—which serves as a good indication of the public and institutional recognition he earned at the time.¹⁸ Thus, Gouri had one foot rooted in journalism and the other anchored in the literary world. As I will try to show here, it is not only that these parallel careers infused Gouri’s writing with much of their unique flavor but that they also present before us the possibility that, to some extent, Gouri’s “journalistic reportage” coextended his poetry and vice versa.

To be precise, what is unique about Gouri is not merely that many of his poems can be read as political commentary or rhymed op-eds, following the footsteps of his much-admired poet Nathan Alterman and his famous *Seventh Column* (*Ha-Tur Ha-Shvi’i*). The crux of the matter is that this duality introduced an unresolved though permanent tension between two Gouris: the “reporter” and the “witness” on the one hand and, on the other hand, the “poet” and the fabulist who is free to use imagination and go beyond facts. As I will argue below, approaching personal and national history as the raw ingredients from which he should steam a legend, he often preferred the creative fiction, the aesthetic lie, over the historical account that must be sustained by fact and evidence.

With these coordinates started, we can reassess Gouri’s images of himself and the civil war and revisit the above-mentioned metamorphosis from the realm of politics to lyrical aestheticized subjectivism. The conflictual relationship with questions concerning historical truth versus concealment provides a backdrop against which this poem was written. For who is the “I” in “I am Civil War”?

¹⁷ *La-merhav* was the official newspaper of the Ahadut Ha’Avoda-Poalei Zion Party, which is affiliated with the united kibbutz movement. The party’s socialist agenda (considered more radical than that of Ben-Gurion’s ruling party, Mapai) was combined with an activist-security approach, with its leaders promoting the idea of a Greater Land of Israel and opposing any proposal to divide the land or to establish a bi-national state. Gouri endorsed that general schema, and he continued writing for *La-merhav* after 1971, when it merged into *Davar*, representing the Labor Party. Later columns and fragments appeared in “non-affiliated” newspapers such as *Haaretz*, *Ma’ariv*, *Yediot Aharonot*, and *Moznaim*, the literary magazine of the Association of Hebrew Writers in Israel. Most of Gouri’s later columns and fragments, which appeared between 1976 and 1991, were collected and reprinted under the title *Reshimot mibeit ha-yain* [Records from the wine house] in 1991, later incorporated into *Be-Shurot Arukot: Sipurim U-Reshamim* [In lines un-scanned: Tales and sketches], vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2013), 189–386. His earlier newspaper writings still await their anthologizing and proper scientific edition.

¹⁸ Haim Gouri, *Mul Ta Ha-Zekhukhit: Mishpat Aikhman Bi-Yerushalayim* [Facing the glass cage: The Eichmann trial in Jerusalem] (Tel Aviv: ha-Kibbutz ha-me’uhad: La-merhav, 1962). The many awards Gouri won for his activities as a poet came later, the most important of which was the Israel Prize (1988), considered the highest honor bestowed by the state.

3. IN SEARCH OF THE "I" IN "I AM CIVIL WAR"

An accepted claim among literary scholars is that *Shoshanat Ruḥot*, the poetry cycle in which "I am Civil War" was included, was written in response to Nathan Zach's harsh criticism of Gouri's previous collection, *Shirei Ḥotam* (1954), which pushed Gouri to consider using a new language that would go beyond the nationalist epic poetry of his earlier work and engage in a conversation with the new, more individualistic voices of the poets of the 1950s.¹⁹ According to that interpretation, Gouri of the early 1960s, triggered by Zach's harsh critique, tried to write in a lowered linguistic register, with freer rhythm and with metaphors taken from the materials of everyday reality, narrowing the literary distance separating him from poets such as David Avidan or Yehuda Amichai. According to this line of interpretation, the allegorical imagery of biblical chevaliers that wrapped a mythological blanket over the ghastly realities of the 1948 War, which we find in Gouri's earlier poetry, was replaced here with a new symbolism, casting the poet as a melancholic speaker. As literary critic Ariel Hirschfeld put it, the voice in these later poems is that of a prophet who can still see beyond the apparent reality yet is acutely aware of the unbridgeable breach separating him from the indifferent world.²⁰

Gouri himself, so it seems, pushed his interpreters in that direction. He described *Shoshanat Ruḥot* as his "more mature book" written in light of Zach's venomous criticism, which pushed him to free himself from the conventions of the Zionist nationalistic-epic poetry.²¹ Such comments, made by Gouri to ensure future critics and historians would not miss the "correct meaning" of his poems, pushes one to read Gouri's 1960 poem as a conscious effort to replace the nationalistic-collectivist pathos with individual perspective and irony. According to this line of interpretation, the "I" (אני) who opens the poem in its Hebrew original stands proud and tall, as an exclamation mark, contrasted with the prototypical Gouriyesque "we" ("here our bodies lie") declaring to the reader: I am no longer speaking in the first-person plural but in the singular, as an individual. Moreover, the very title of the book, meaning a wind rose or a compass star in Hebrew, brings to mind a nautical metaphor as if the poet were a mighty ship changing its course, navigating for new land.

Compared to Gouri's earlier poetry, it is indeed a radically different environment. The speaker in this poetry cycle is no longer the collective voice of a choir of the dead but a solemn individual. Even if one envisages the speaker wearing an imaginary military uniform, he's no longer a typical soldier in the military company but a lonesome, forlorn speaker who speaks in the first person singular to compare himself to "a guardian of the walls of a city/ that died a long time ago," i.e., a quixotic custodian of bygone values²² or a walker who lost his strength and fell down a ditch on the side of the road, in contrast to the energetic marcher (*helech*) of Alterman's poetry ("He keeps walking / and I fall down").²³ As hinted above, even the landscape has changed radically. While a few of the early poems in the cycle allude to an unnamed sea and beach that suggest a Mediterranean setting and mention local flora such as cypresses and date trees, this panorama dissolves quickly as readers are taken away into foreign metropolises. The transition

¹⁹ Nathan Zach's criticism was originally published in *Mevo'ot* 15 (November 8, 1954) and was reprinted in Zach, *Ha-Shirah She-Me'ever La-Milim: Te'oryah U-Vikoret, 1954–1973* [Poetry beyond words: Critical essays 1954–1973] (Bene Berak, Israel: ha-Ḳibuts ha-me'uḥad, 2011), 38–42.

²⁰ Ariel Hirschfeld, "Haim Gouri—Haba Aharav," *Moznaim* 72, no. 11 (1998): 12–13.

²¹ Gouri, *Im Ha-Shirah Vēha-Zeman*, vol. 2, 314.

²² Gouri, "***" [untitled poem], *Shoshanat Ruḥot*, 20.

²³ Gouri, "im'um leorech" [Dimming along], *Shoshanat Ruḥot*, 58.

away from the familiar pastoral landscapes that served as backgrounds for the battlefields of 1948 to the distorted urban settings of the later poems in the cycle is a painful interruption.

As if to prepare the readers for it, “I am Civil War” is preceded by a poem entitled “Fracture” (*Shever*) in which Gouri speaks of “the Syrian African Rift that runs through my back,” a break in place and physique, a throbbing disruption, an agonizing transport from the fracture zone that shaped Palestine’s geology. Foreshadowing a central constituent of “I am Civil War,” where the speaker embodies the city ravaged with war, in this poem, the body of the speaker in “Fracture” is synonymous with the land, or, more precisely, with the greater land of Israel, that imagined vast territory that includes Palestine and Transjordan, with the River Jordan (which runs along the famous rift) symbolizing its spine.²⁴ From that point on, readers are thrown into a gloomy and unrecognizable urban setting. There is something patently forbidding, even menacing, in these foreign landscapes. They set the tone for “I am Civil War,” where the fear-stricken atmosphere of urban warfare comes to the forefront. One feels the angst of furious street fights: death by sniper fire in dark alleys, speedy executions against stained concrete walls.

A vital contextual component: Gouri was sent in 1947 to Hungary to help Jewish youth prepare for immigration to Palestine, where he reportedly met for the first time with Holocaust survivors. There are good reasons to believe that Gouri’s travels through war-stricken European cities and the year he spent in Paris as a student helped shape this morbid imagery. At least one poem in *Shoshanat Ruḥot*—“Chapter Outlines for a Diary”—reads as an impressionistic autobiographical sketch made in preparation for a more comprehensive reworking of these haunting European experiences. We accompany the young Gouri in an unnamed, alien, snow-covered European city, baffled by his encounters with the half-drunk African American soldiers he saw dancing with blonde girls wearing silk dresses that survived from long ago in smoky bars, the black markets, the cigarette packs sold in exchange for sex.²⁵ A few years later, Gouri’s first prose novel, *The Chocolate Deal* (1965), revisited the same places and further developed the chilling effects of this early “eyewitness account.”²⁶ In other words, in *Shoshanat Ruḥot* we already encounter the Gourieysque dyad of “Gouri-the-poet” who is instantaneously also the “witness-Gouri,” an observer telling what he has seen in distant, strange, bloodcurdling foreign lands. Comparing himself to Odysseus, the penultimate poem in *Shoshanat Ruḥot* speaks of a poet who returns home to discover that all has changed, to walk among “people who spoke different Greek.”²⁷

Furthermore, next to replacing the collectivist “we” with the personal “I” and the transition from the sunny Mediterranean to a dark, urban European setting, we can venture to suggest a possible affinity or an indirect dialogue with Yehuda Amichai in this poem. We know that the two poets knew each other personally since the time they first met at the Palmach barracks and regarded each other with a mix of admiration and disapproval. At the time Gouri wrote “I am Civil War,” Amichai was already a recognized name in literary circles, and his poetry was a source of prolonged dispute in artistic circles due to his refusal to adopt the heroic and nationalistic

²⁴ Gouri, “shever” [Rift], *Shoshanat Ruḥot*, 64.

²⁵ Gouri, “Rashei prakim leyoman” [Chapter outlines for a diary], *Shoshanat Ruḥot*, 59.

²⁶ Haim Gouri, *‘isḳat Ha-Shoḳolad*” [Chocolate deal] (Tel Aviv: ha-Ḳibuts ha-me’uḥad, 1965). The book stands out as one of the earliest attempts of Sabra (native-born) authors to come to terms with the annihilation of European Jewry and as the only one of the five prose books Gouri published that does not deal directly with Jewish life in Palestine-Israel.

²⁷ Gouri, “Odises” [Odysseus], *Shoshanat Ruḥot*, 115.

pathos typical of Gouri and his peers.²⁸ The stanza "And there the just fire on the rest / who are just" in Gouri's poem is particularly interesting in that respect: Gouri's choice of words reads as a paraphrase of, or a veiled reference to, Amichai's famous poem warning us that "From the place where we are right," no flowers will ever grow in the spring.²⁹ Whether Amichai wrote his line first and Gouri second or vice versa is hard to determine. What is clear, nonetheless, is a like-mindedness and correspondence in feeling and a comparable attempt to examine abstract notions of "justice" through poetry. Gouri, in other words, was trying to fit into the melancholic zeitgeist of post-independence Israeli poetry.

This parallelism is striking, given that in later years Gouri would write critically about Amichai on several occasions, taunting Amichai's preference to express what Gouri considered to be an individualistic, petit bourgeois sensibility of the 1950s. Though they were close in age and shared many experiences, Gouri had a hard time imagining Amichai and himself as members of the same "generation"—a term that was used in the standard chronicles of Hebrew literature as a marker of a similar aesthetic standard or common vision. Thus, the Haim Gouri of "I am Civil War" is strikingly different: like Amichai, he no longer toes the line but opens the door for a dangerous pondering. Still sorrowful, even tragic, he nonetheless looks inward. Left alone, isolated in his private life, he tries to resolve a personal predicament. It is as if here the two poets, who are habitually classified as belonging to different schools, suddenly reappear as belonging to the same generation in the sense that Stuart Hall defined generations: symbolic markers for people "thinking about the same 'problem space.'"³⁰

The drawback of this line of interpretation is, of course, that it misses the way in which Gouri, despite his usage of the personal "I," still casts himself as an embodiment of a collective. What changed is that the self-confidence, undoubting belief, and assurance in the rightness of the cause that characterized Gouri's early war poetry were now replaced with debate, doubt, and struggle for hegemony. Here, the post-independence gloominess, though revealing a voice that is no longer that of a member of a collective identifying with the group's values, is nonetheless not indicative of a passage into an era of individualism, plural opinions, and open debate.

²⁸ Though Gouri and others referred to Amichai as belonging to a different poetic "generation," Amichai was not only close to Gouri in age (he was merely one year younger than Gouri) but also someone Gouri crossed paths with several times, starting with service together in the Palmach's 7th Regiment, next as students at Hebrew University (alongside the literary critic Dan Miron), and later as teachers of Hebrew language and literature at the Haim Greenberg teacher training seminar (1958-59). In 1961, Gouri also attended a famous meeting summoned by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, where several prominent writers were present and where a central agenda item was to determine whether Amichai's poetry should be considered "nihilist" and "dangerous." For discussion see Rafi Mann, "'amiḥay hu meshorer mecuyan, aval mesukan 'ad meod" [Amichai is an excellent poet, but extremely dangerous], *Haaretz*, October 22, 2010 [in Hebrew]; Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 31-37, 314, 124-25nn.; Michael Gluzman, *Shirat Ha-Tevu'im* [Poetry of the drowned: Sovereignty and melancholia in Hebrew poetry after 1948], chap. 1 and 3 (Rishon le-Tsion: Yedi'ot aharonot, 2018); Ido Bassok, *Sefekot Va-Ahavot: Yehudah 'Amiḥai—Ḥayim* [Doubts and loves: Yehuda Amichai—a life] (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2019), 125-127, 142, 168, 182, 213. It is beyond the scope of the present discussion to examine the question that occupied several literary critics and researchers—whether Amichai's inclusion in the famous anthology *Dor Ba'aretz*, meant to showcase the spirit of new Hebrew poetry, was justified or not—nor will we be able to examine here the relationship between the two poets, which requires its own independent research.

²⁹ The poem was included in the second part of Yehuda Amichai's book *Shirim, 1948-1962* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), and was probably written in the late 1950s or early 1960s, although the precise time of composition is unclear.

³⁰ Stuart Hall, *Familiar Stranger: A Life between Two Islands*, ed. Bill Schwarz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 44.

Instead, we have alarming disquiet, reaching levels of suffocating panic, about a possible loss of national unity. This angst does not turn the poet into a reflective, introspective individual free from ideological commitment. On the contrary, it pushes him to step up and become one with the increasingly fractured nation. Equating himself with the collective, the poet transforms “external” ideological debates about the future and charged political disputes about the recent past into an internal, personal predicament. Put otherwise, while it is true he is no longer the pioneer or the soldier of pre-1948 Zionist hymns, neither is he a “private” civilian, one among many. The “I” Gouri erects here is of a poet-Leviathan, to use a Hobbesian image: a poet whose body and the body of the polity are one. The “I” still yearns to speak for the “we.” He is flustered when he realizes that he can no longer speak for the group’s unyielding and irrefutable values when “dangerous” doubts surface. The disagreement and uncertainty are too threatening. He looks “inward” to conquer his “inner demons.” As this idiomatic English expression suggests, a considerable degree of violence is involved in it. Let us turn now from the “I” to the second side of the equation and ask: Why did Gouri choose “civil war” as a metaphor? Or, more precisely, where did it come from?

4. BETWEEN “CIVIL WAR” AND BRUDERKRIEG

“Civil war” is an explosive term. It brings to mind a violent conflict within a country, a failing, weak state, and even more: exceptional savagery, blurring the separation lines between regular military units and militias. It’s a term suggesting a polity suffering from an autoimmune disease. This “political paradigm,” in the words of Giorgio Agamben, takes us back to Classical Greek ponderings regarding the troublesome relationship between the *oikos* (family, home) and the *polis* (the city, the state).³¹

The term’s connotations are horrible, but as experts of international law and political science will be quick to note, it is a term that is notoriously difficult to define. There’s a reason why the Geneva Conventions do not specifically define the term “civil war.” The Latin origins of the concept can be traced back to Cicero’s *Catilinarian orations* (delivered 63 BC), a foundational text where notions of *bellum intestinum* (internal war) and *bellum civile ac domesticum* (domestic, from *domus*, home) were proposed and developed against those who sought to overthrow the Roman senate.³² Thanks to the fact that classics were considered a vital constituent of education, the rhetoric and terminology developed when the Roman republic confronted its challenges were kept alive and could be relatively easily awakened in the context of modern European internal conflicts. However, in the context of our present discussion, the problem with conventional “West-Civ.” histories of ideas, leaping from the first century BC to the English and American civil wars and from there even to the Russian *Гражданская война* (*grazhdanskaya voyna*) and the Spanish *guerra civil* of the twentieth century, is that they are notoriously oblivious of the linguistic baggage of the term in Hebrew.³³

There is no reason to believe that Gouri was familiar with that intricate conceptual genealogy. Moreover, Gouri was a Hebrew poet. However, whether or not there is such a thing as a

³¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm*, trans. Nicholas Heron (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

³² Marcus Tullius Cicero, *In Catilinam*, trans. C. Macdonald, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), Oratio 2, 97–98; Oratio 3, 122–23.

³³ David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); Carsten Hjort Lange, “Bellum Civile in Cicero: Terminology and Self-Fashioning,” in *The Historiography of Late Republican Civil War*, vol. 5, ed. Carsten Hjort Lange and Frederik Juliaan Vervaet (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 111–36; Kurt Raaflaub, “Bellum Civile,” in *A Companion to Julius Caesar*, ed. Miriam Griffin (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 175–91.

coherent Jewish political tradition, it would be hard to locate in it a theory of “civil war.” Notably, though the Hebrew Bible contains numerous references to wars and violent conflicts and even begins with an ominous tale of a rivalry between Jacob and Esau, it contains no real reference to civil war precisely because it lacks a modern concept of citizenship. The Hebrew phrase *milhemet ezrahim* does not appear in ancient sources because it requires the existence of a modern concept of citizenship. The biblical *ezrach*, however, is not a *citoyen*, a citizen in the sense we understand the term today, denoting a legal status and an allegiance of a private person to a state. Instead, *ezrach* in the biblical sense is a native, as opposed to the “ger,” the non-Jewish “resident alien” or “gentile” living in the Land of Israel among the Jews. See, for example:

בַּסֶּכֶת תֵּשְׁבוּ, שִׁבְעַת יָמִים; כָּל-הָאֶזְרָח, בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל,
יֵשְׁבוּ, בַּסֶּכֶת.

“Ye shall dwell in booths seven days; all that are **home-born** in Israel shall dwell in booths.”

ויקרא כ"ג, מ"ב

Leviticus 23:42

תּוֹרָה אַחַת יְהִיָּה לְאֶזְרָח וְלִגֵּר הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם

“The same law [Torah] applies both to the **native-born** and to the foreigner residing among you.”

שמות י"ב, מ"ט

Exodus 12:49

Put otherwise, citizenship as membership in a political community, in a polity we would call a state, is a modern conception foreign to the biblical Hebrew. The Bible tells us much of *fratricidal conflicts* during which people slaughter members of their own community or a neighboring tribe, but these are not civil wars. The highly disturbing story of Pilegish, Levite’s concubine (Judges 19–20), is conspicuous in that respect, opening with a horrific rape story followed by a gruesome murder and ending in a bloody feud between the Israelite tribes. Preceded by the biblical trigger warning, “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 17:6), Pilegish’s story is meant to illustrate the total chaos and immorality that preceded the establishment of ancient Israelite monarchic rule, not the collapse of an ancient state. This “text of terror,” as the feminist biblical scholar Phyllis Trible called it, was a political forewarning: without a functional political apparatus, even members of the same ethnoreligious community could start slaughtering each other.³⁴

More than the Latin concept of *bellum civile* and the English “civil war,” the German term *Bruderkrieg* (brotherly war) alludes much better to these biblical fears. While German-speaking authors, including Marx and Engels, used the word *Bürgerkrieg* to describe the American Civil War of 1861–65, the Austro-Prussian War that broke out a year later in 1866, due to the inability of the two major German-speaking states to continue working together, was quickly given the name the *deutscher Bruderkrieg*, “the German brothers’ war.” The *Bruderkrieg* of 1866 marked the dissolution of the weak post-Napoleonic German confederation and the ascendancy of a “blood and iron” Prussia under Bismarck, leaving a significant imprint on German history.³⁵ Though we

³⁴ Phyllis Trible, “An Unnamed Woman: The Extravagance of Violence,” chap. 3 in *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

³⁵ Some English-speaking historians use the term “civil war” to describe the 1866 war. See, for example, James J. Sheehan, *German History, 1770–1866* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 853–911. I would like to thank Yair Mintzker for pointing this out to me.

cannot ascertain the first appearances of the Yiddish term ברידער-קריג (*brider-krig*), it is a literal translation of the German, commonly used to describe internal strife of a similar kind.

And yet, even though there is no scarcity of entries in the lexicon of Jewish anxieties, there is almost no use of the term *milhemet ahim* (brotherly war) in internal Jewish contexts in modern times until the twentieth century. The two discursive sites where we do find frequent usage of the term *milhemet ahim* are, first, in the Hebrew translation of Flavius Josephus's *De bello judaico* (*The Jewish War*), published in Warsaw in 1923 and soon thereafter in mandatory Palestine, in the context of an intensified intra-Zionist dispute between socialist and Revisionist Zionists. The analogous imperial setting—the Roman Empire at the first instance, the British on the other—was picked up by contemporaneous writers. It is telling and is indicative of what we may define as *Zionist chronopolitics*: a politically motivated effort to control historical time and derive the ideological value needed to construct future regimes from composing similarities in temporal conditions between present, past, and future. The reappearance of *milhemet ahim*, in other words, goes beyond the history of Hebrew rhetoric or flowery political oratory. More than an expression or an idiomatic phrase, it is a signifier of a time of plasticity and transition, tied to conscious efforts to design political futures based on a rediscovery of the past.

The spiritual world in which Palestine's Hebrew poets operated cannot be divorced from this chronopolitics. Whether knowingly or not, J. N. H. Simhoni (1884–1926), the Russian-Jewish scholar who translated *De bello judaico* from the original Greek, provided a solid foundation for the political debates of the 1930s and 1940s. Josephus's deep ambivalence, if not an internal psychological rift, provided the subtext to his famous book. On the one hand, he described with considerable admiration the heroism of the Jewish rebels. More than daring warriors venerated for their physical strength and courage, for him, these were also brave freedom fighters who dared to rebel against a mighty superpower like Rome. On the other hand, Josephus was the first to portray the rebellion as an act of folly and a scourge. He claimed that it broke out due to corruption and internal strife, and he did not hesitate to describe some of the rebels' leaders as licentious, despicable villains, and leaders of robbers' gangs. Tellingly, Simhoni made use of the phrase *milhemet ahim* in chapters denouncing the quarrels and mischiefs of the zealots, such as in the story of John of Gischala (Yohanan of Gush Halav, leader of the Galilee during the rebellion) and when describing the acts of savagery performed by the Sicarii, the splinter group of extremists who were known for the daggers (*sica*) they were carrying to assassinate their coreligionist rivals, catalyzing Jerusalem's destruction.³⁶

Uri Zvi Greenberg, the radical Revisionist poet, was attuned to texts of this sort and was fascinated by the story of Jerusalem's destruction by the Romans. He turned the book's political message on its head, however. As early as the late 1920s, the political poetry Greenberg produced denounced Josephus in the harshest terms possible, often refusing to call him by name and referring to him as “the traitor of Yodfat.” The Sicarii, on the other hand, were praised by him and turned into a symbol and role model for a new breed of militant Zionists who were unwilling to compromise or negotiate with the British Empire and at the same time rejected with disgust the socialist ideas of the Labor Zionist movement for being symptoms of rotten slave morality.³⁷

³⁶ Flavius Josephus, *Toldot Milhemet Ha-Yehudim 'im Ha-Roma'im* [History of the Jewish War against the Romans], trans. Jakob Naftali Herz Simhoni (Warsaw: Shtibel, 1923). See book 2, chap. 21, 7; book 3, chap. 10, 4; book 4, chap. 3, 2, and chap. 6, 1–2; and passim.

³⁷ The key texts in that respect are Greenberg's poem “Sikarikin” [Hebrew: Sicarii], *Davar*, July 8, 1928: 3, and his highly controversial and influential poetry book *Sefer Ha-ḲItrug V'eha-Emunah* [The Book of Denunciation and Faith] (Jerusalem: Bet ha-sefarim ha-leumi v'eha-universitai, 1937).

This violent imagery emerged during the 1930s, first sporadically, during the deliberations surrounding the Arlosoroff assassination trial (1933–34).³⁸ Far more frequently, the loaded phrase *milḥemet aḥim* became a common currency in the second half of the decade. It was often thrown around in debates between the supporters of the official *havlaga* (self-restraint) policy and the hawkish Revisionist Zionists, who called for retaliation, revenge, and forceful response to Palestinian rebellion (aka the Great Arab Revolt of 1936–39), as well as in debates surrounding the 1937 partition plan.³⁹ Speaking in Warsaw in the summer of 1938, the Revisionist Zionist leader Vladimir Jabotinsky explained, in Yiddish, that there was no bridge connecting his New Zionist Organization to the “old Zionist dust,” that the dispute between the supporters of restraint and retaliation could quickly escalate, and warned, “If the Jewish nation [*volk*] is destined to bear the shame of a brotherly war [*Bruderkrieg*], then know that it will not be limited to the Land of Israel alone.”⁴⁰ Jabotinsky’s followers did not relinquish the evocative and polemical term, either. It was used frequently in right-wing newspapers such as *Hayarden* and *Hazit Ha’am*, accusing the Labor Zionist leadership of fueling intra-Jewish feuds and mocking Marxist notions of class war (*milḥemet ma’amadot*). Crucially, in the pre-1948 context, it was always used to refer to intra-Jewish rivalries, never in reference to disputes or violent clashes between Jews and Arabs.⁴¹

³⁸ E.g., “Milḥemet aḥim,” *Hazit Ha’am*, January 24, 1934; Aharon Spivak, “Milḥemet aḥim-lo!” *Hazit Ha’am*, February 9, 1934; Aba Ahimeir, “Bno Shel Lindberg” [Lindberg’s son], *Hazit Ha’am*, July 7, 1933, 3; Uri Zvi Greenberg, “Hasheker Hagadol Hagibor Vehanora” [The mighty and terrible big lie], *Hazit Ha’am*, February 14, 1934, 2. Notably, Greenberg references the biblical story of Pilegash in this article. Another author warned that only the British policeman’s baton would save the Yishuv from declining into “milḥemet aḥim.” See A.H., “Herpa [Shame],” *Doar Hayom*, July 10, 1934, 1.

³⁹ E.g., A. Paran, “Milḥemet aḥim,” *Hayarden*, November 26, 1937: 3–4; Uriel Halperin [Yonathan Ratosh], “Eynenu Nesuot El Hashilton [part 2],” *Hayarden*, November 19, 1937: 3. Ratosh’s series of articles was reprinted as a booklet accompanied by an introduction by Joseph Klausner: *Eynenu Nesuot El Hashilton: Hazit Hamachar Shel Tnuat Hshikhrur* [Our eyes are set on the government—Tomorrow’s liberation movement front, before its time?] (Tel Aviv: Z. Shiff, 1938). Noteworthy in the context of our discussion, Ratosh’s programmatic text had a major influence on the ideology of the paramilitary group Etzel. See Yehoshua Porath, *Shelah Ve-et Be-Yado: Sipur H’Ayay Shel Uri’el Shelah* (*Yonatan Ratosh*) [Weapon and pen in his hand: The life of Uriel Shelah] (Tel Aviv: Maḥberot le-sifrut, 1989); Orna Miller, “‘Habatalion hechatukh’ vehantiyot hakna’aniyot’ baetzul uvitenu’at hacherut—me’hawa’ad ha’ivri’ ‘ad ‘LaMerchav’ [‘The divided battalion,’ and ‘Canaanite’ tendencies in the Irgun and Herut movement: From the ‘Hebrew Committee’ to ‘La-merḥav’],” *Iyunim Bitkumat Israel* 14 (2004): 153–89.

⁴⁰ In the Yiddish original: “אז אויב דעם יידישן פאלק איז באשיערט צו האבן אויף זיך די שאנד פון א ברידער-קריג טאזייט וויסן, אז ער וועט זיך נישט באגרענעצן בלויז אויף ארץ ישראל איך shtemplen als nidertrekhtike farreter fun der yidisher geshikhte: nishto keyn brik tsvishn unz un di altsiyenistishe shtoyb-ideologn [Yiddish: For the restraint will be degraded traitors; There is no bridge between us and the old [Zionists]],” *Unzer Welt* (Warsaw), August 12, 1938: 4. Tellingly, when the speech was translated into Hebrew, the Yiddish reference to a “brother’s war” turned into “milḥemet aḥim” [civil war]: “אם תפרוץ, מלחמת אזרחים—הרי היא לא תצמצם בגבולות ארץ ישראל.” See Jabotinsky Archive, A I 57/8, Tel Aviv.

⁴¹ As I show elsewhere, the phrase “civil war” is sometimes used by historians to describe the first stages of the 1948 War. I prefer not to use the term and analyze the war as following the logic of a “war of partition” instead. See Arie M. Dubnov, “Civil War, Total War, or a War of Partition? Reassessing the 1948 War in Palestine from a Global Perspective,” chap. 9 in *The Breakup of India and Palestine: The Causes and Legacies of Partition*, ed. Victor Kattan and Amit Ranjan (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2023).

5. YAGUR 1945 VERSUS TEL AVIV 1961: FROM CONFESSION TO CAMOUFLAGE

To be sure, Gouri was fifteen years old when Jabotinsky delivered his *Bruderkrieg* speech in Warsaw. Though it is unlikely that he was exposed to the warning that a global intra-Jewish war would break out, there is no doubt that he was exposed to the polemical ideas of Revisionist poets like Yonathan Ratosh and Uri Zvi Greenberg, whom he often quoted in the later stages of his life. Crucially, toward the end of World War II, the fear that intra-Zionist wrangles would intensify and result in a *Bruderkrieg* reappeared. They came close to a boiling point during the so-called *Saison*, or Hunting Season (November 1944–February 1945), when Haganah and Palmach members were called to duty to suppress the anti-British insurgency carried out by the right-wing paramilitary group Etzel (the Irgun). The practices included, besides whistleblowing and the transfer of intelligence to the mandatory police, also the arrest, kidnapping, and interrogation of right-wing underground fighters and their handover to the British authorities. And here, Gouri was no longer a passive observer or a reader of poetry alone.

On March 15, 1945, a squad composed of five Etzel fighters went out on a sabotage mission to blow up the Anglo-Iraqi pipeline that delivered oil from Kirkuk to the Haifa refineries. Their first stop was in Kfar Hasidim, not too far from Haifa, where the explosives were loaded onto a truck. There, members of the Palmach, who received intelligence reports from the Jewish settlement police (Ghaffirs) and the Haganah, ambushed the Etzel fighters and arrested them. Apart from the truck driver, who managed to flee the scene, the other four members of the squad, three young men and one young woman, were transferred, hands tied and faces covered, to the nearby Kibbutz Yagur, where they were interrogated for three days and nights, not without violence. After that, they were extradited to the British authorities.⁴²

Years later, in the winter of 1961, a short time after publishing his civil war poem, Gouri attended a cocktail party hosted by Geulah Cohen (1925–2019). Cohen was a prominent right-wing political activist and by then a well-known Israeli public figure. Formally associated with the right-wing groups Etzel and Lehi (Stern gang), she scorned moderate Zionist tactics and had little reservations or regrets about these paramilitary groups' turn to violent insurgency. Not less importantly, Cohen could recite entire passages from Greenberg's poetry by heart.⁴³ Gouri's attendance at such a social gathering was suggestive. It denoted the political reorientation he was undergoing during those years, seeking to move closer to the circles of his former ideological adversaries. It was during that evening, perhaps under the influence of alcohol, that Gouri felt the urge to revisit the May 1945 episode and to confess that he was the Palmach officer on duty in Kibbutz Yagur on those fateful days and the one in charge of the Etzel fighters' arrest.

During this unprompted confession, Gouri gave the party guests his version of the story. He admitted that he assembled the Haganah fighters and appealed to their "sense of national

⁴² Jacob Shavit, *Onat Ha-Tsayid: Ha-Sezon: Ha-'imut Ben Ha-Yishuv Ha-Me'urgan Le-Irgune Ha-MaḥTeret, 1937–1947* [Open season: The confrontation between the 'organized Yishuv' and the underground organizations (Etzel and Lehi), 1937–1947] (Tel Aviv: Hadar, 1976), 116; Yehuda Lapidot, *Haetzel BeḤefah* [Irgun in Haifa] (Tel Aviv: Berit Hayalei HaEtzel, 2006), 99–100; Shimon Re'em, *Ḥefah Bi-Lehavot: Mivtse'e Ha-Irgun Ha-Tseva'i Ha-Le'umi (Etsel) Be-Ḥefah Ha-Adumah, 1931–1948* [Haifa in flames: The Irgun's operations in red Haifa, 1931–1948] (Haifa: S. Re'em, 2001); Yaakov "Mazal" Banai, *Hayalim Almonim: Sefer Mivtzaei Ha-Lechi* [Unknown soldiers: Lehi's operations book], ed. Israel Eldad, 3rd ed. (Tel Aviv: Hotsaat Yair, 2003).

⁴³ Her memoir appeared in English translation with a telling title: Geulah Cohen, *Woman of Violence: Memoirs of a Young Terrorist, 1943–1948*, trans. Hillel Halkin (London: Hart-Davis, 1966).

responsibility," but also insisted that according to the intelligence he received, the Etzel unit was planning to blow up a church in the Carmel while high-ranking British officers and their families were attending services. His sole intention, he claimed, was to prevent the murder of innocent civilians. Furthermore, Gouri argued that he approached the Jewish intelligence officer who commanded the operation and asked him to give him his word of honor and promise that the Etzel fighters they caught would not be handed over to the British authorities. Gouri probably did not expect that one of the other attendees at the party would be one of the former Etzel detainees. Soon after the party, several Israeli newspapers picked up the juicy story.⁴⁴ A couple of weeks later, the version of the former Etzel members, refuting Gouri, also appeared in print. According to the Etzel veterans, if "a word of honor" were given, clearly no one kept it: the Etzel members were handed over to the British, who sentenced them and sent them overseas to detainee camps in Eritrea. Gouri, he argued, lied. It was the Haganah fighters, not the police, who handed them over to the British. Moreover, the claim that the Etzel had plotted to blow up a church and its inhabitants was a preposterous, gross lie, part of a campaign to portray them as monsters.⁴⁵ Pleading not guilty, Gouri returned to the story and gave his version—he acted under the impression he was preventing a massacre of civilians—in his veiled autobiographical sketches in later years. Yet this time, his doubts could no longer be suppressed. Was he disremembering the events? Upon reevaluating his past deeds, he concluded: "The *belles-lettres* dislike precise coordinates."⁴⁶

Though it is hard to ascertain what happened precisely in Yagur in May 1945, more than a vignette, the unexpected encounter at the December 1961 party tells us much about the self-imposed limits of Gouri's confessionalism. The story reveals Gouri's somewhat schizophrenic (but by no means exceptional) attitude toward the British empire as the enabler of settlement that is, at the very same time, foreign rule. But far more crucial, it speaks to a moment in the intra-Zionist rivalry when *bruderkrieg* was not an inconceivable, unthinkable possibility. Crucially, it discloses a critical and rare moment in Gouri's life: he attempted to address a touchy issue from the past and to come to terms with it but was quickly forced to recognize it as an utter failure. Defying his expectations, the attempt to revisit a sad affair was not met with applause but push-back. Gouri's desire to forge a new national and poetic persona that could bridge Zionist Right and Left was a miserable failure. His witness account and attempt to rehabilitate his name only ended up entangling him in bigger lies.

It is here that we reach the crux of the matter. From that moment, Gouri took cover in *poiesis*. This was not the *poiesis* Aristotle had in mind when arguing that the critical difference between history and poetics is that while the former is obsessed with "particular facts" (and thus can only tell us what happened), the latter is concerned with general or universal truths (and thus captures something more profound by telling us what *might* happen).⁴⁷ In Gouri's case, *poiesis* was a camouflage. It was the purposeful, clever blurring of fact with fiction. Making one's recent past into a fable was an ingenious solution. It emerged from an inability to reckon with the past, resolve inner dilemmas, and look at the uglier sides of the armed conflict he was part of. But more than a

⁴⁴ Elie Eyal, "Etzel, Lehi Ve-Palmach—Bmesiba Salonit" [Etzel, Lehi, and the Palmach in a salon party], *Haaretz*, December 1, 1961, 9; Justus [pen name for Yehoshua Justman], "Pgisha Bemafti'ah" [An unexpected encounter], *Ma'ariv*, December 1, 1961, 5.

⁴⁵ Ya'akov Nehoshtan, "Hahasgara—Biyedei Anshei Ha-Hagana" [The extradition—In the hands of the "Hagana"], *Ma'ariv*, December 21, 1961. See also Banai, *Hayalim Almonim*.

⁴⁶ Haim Gouri, "Maarav" [Ambush], in *Be-Shurot Arukot*, 215.

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Anthony Kenny, chap. 9, section 145b (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

psychological solution, it was a poetic one. Commitment to poetics that goes beyond the empirical and the historical, denying the “precise coordinates,” became Gouri’s new credo.

The uses of *poiesis* to inject an air of legend into the concrete and the historical or, alternatively, as a means to conceal and disguise uncomfortable truths, is most evident in Gouri’s journalistic oeuvre. Gouri’s *Mi Makir et Yosef G’?* (Who knows Joseph G?), a 1980 novel based on articles that were originally published in *La-merhav* in the early sixties, demonstrated his inability to control the ratio of reality to fantasy. Just as he did when reporting about the Eichmann trial, here Gouri cast himself as a “reporter” as well, yet these “reports” were glazed with a thick layer of mystery. Gouri’s stories were presumably a result of the privileged access he secured while in Paris to an enigmatic ex-Israeli named Joseph G. Gouri’s interlocutor showered him with incredible stories about his meetings with all the who’s who, from Joe Stalin and Hồ Chí Minh to Sartre, John Steinbeck, and numerous artists and legendary *bohémians*.⁴⁸ Most of the amassed “reports” were tall tales. They could have been dismissed as Purim-style grotesque stories based on exaggeration or fantasy. It seems that more than the book’s literary qualities, these were the rumors concerning the arrest of an Israeli citizen named Joseph (Yosef) Gutman-Givon by the Soviet authorities on various criminal charges, many of which were connected to fraud, which made the odd book into a mini-bestseller. Yet this turn of events also made it evident that Gouri had lost control of the literary character he had created and that the half-real, half-fictional Golem went out of control and rebelled against its creator. Unlike *Yalkut Ha-Kezavim* (*A Sack of Fables*), the famous compilation of doubtful accounts that were part of the Palmach folklore, these were not humorous, Oriental-flavored tales to be told for entertainment near a campfire but stories posing as authentic reports and eye-witness accounts.⁴⁹

The unique admixture of “authentic testimonies” with fantasy and fiction was further developed in later years and runs through the pages of *Reshimot Mibeit Ha-Yain* (Reports from the Wine House)—a compilation of various newspaper articles Gouri published between 1976 and 1991. A highly entertaining mélange of social and political commentary, poetic insights, gossip, and tall tales, Gouri moved himself to the backstage, presenting himself not as the “creator” as much as a “collector” of stories and testimonies which he gathered during late-night chats in a Tel-Avivian pub. Notably, Gouri planted numerous autobiographical hints in these newspaper columns and reports, tinting these fragments of memoir with elaborate colors of extravagant imagining and half-drunken exaggerations.⁵⁰ Moreover, highlighting the presence of veterans from

⁴⁸ Haim Gouri, *Mi Makir Et Yosef G’?* [Who knows Joseph G?] (Tel Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-me’uḥad, 1980).

⁴⁹ Dan Ben-Amotz and Hayim Hefer, *Yalkut Ha-Kezavim* (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibuts ha-mefuḥad, 1956).

⁵⁰ Haim Gouri, *Reshimot Mibeit Ha-Yain* [Reports from the wine house] (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1991). Reprinted in Gouri’s *Be-Shurot Arukot*, vol. 2, 190–386. Far less famous than the mythological Kassit café, the “wine house” was the codename Gouri gave to Matti’s, a local pub and buffet situated on the corner of Zevulun and Matalon streets in southern Tel Aviv. Locals referred to the place as “Mati the curser” due to the tendency of its owner, a Holocaust survivor named Matthieu (“Matti”) Landstein (1929–2019), to curse his customers. Calling a place that served beer and hard liquor a wine cellar was an ornamental gesture, also indicative of Gouri’s poetics of concealment. In this case, Gouri made his choice of phrase explicit: “I was once asked why I gave this place such a grand name: ‘The Wine House.’ But what can I call it? What name can be given to this old joint, which is neither a ‘café’ nor a ‘bar,’ and is not a ‘discotheque’ and is not a ‘pub’ in the English style and is not a ‘bistro’ in the French style and is not an ‘inn’[...] and is not exactly a ‘tavern.’ [...] Thus, the Wine House. So be it.” Gouri, *Be-Shurot Arukot*, 222. See also Gouri, “beoto yom geshem, ahar-hatzohoraim” [That rainy day, in the afternoon], *Davar*, January 28, 1983: 16; and Miriam Yachil-Wax, “sham yashavnu gam lagamnu [There we sat, and also drank],” review of *Reshimot Mibeit Ha-Yain*, *Yediot Aharanot*, June 14, 1991, in Gouri Archive, National Library of Israel, ARC. 4* 1813 06 23.

the Etzel and the Lehi, the former rival paramilitary groups, among the crowd that joined these nightly barstool conversations, Gouri marveled at the potential of his digressive accounts to have an added journalistic value of “exposure” of buried stories and uncomfortable truths revolving around intra-Zionist conflicts and violence. Such were, for example, the references he planted to the Chaya Zeidenberg case—a Jewish woman in her early twenties who was accused of treason and executed by Lehi members on February 1, 1948, during the early stages of the war. However, essential details in Gouri’s “reports” about his nighttime conversations with Zeidenberg’s ex-executioners were wrong: for instance, no one remembered her last name, and the fact that the young woman fell in love with a young Palestinian Arab from Jaffa was replaced with a passing reference to a passionate love affair with a British officer. And unlike the Lehi members who forced Zeidenberg to sign a “confession” before killing her, Gouri never produced a similar statement from his drinking buddies, whose anonymity was kept well hidden in the pub’s dim lights.⁵¹ The short flashback is concluded with one of Gouri’s typical statements to perpetuity: “Everything will be revealed one day. Everything is recorded in the chronicles of the past. Nothing is lost or forgotten, not even what the sea crabs write on the [sand] on the beach before the high tide comes.”⁵²

These were reminders of agonizing past affairs, aides-mémoires, and snapshots from a previous time and a society once on the verge of a civil war. But these were not “reports” in any conventional way, nor “history.” These were subdued clues awaiting someone else to decipher them and inspirations for future storytellers. Dancing lightly around the abyss, Gouri knew how to avoid touching painful wounds. What is said in the dark pub remains there.

6. “I WAS ALMOST IN MADRID”

There is another “civil war” Gouri participated in—metaphorically, that is. This was a civil war that, unlike the 1948 War, represented for him a clear, unblemished struggle between good and evil and a brutal war which, despite its savagery, was also the breeding ground of great poetry. In that civil war poets wore medals. They dipped their quills in ink and dipped themselves in the great war against world fascism, a baptism of fire. Gouri tells the story in his “autobiography,” in the form of the following short story:⁵³

Moishe was my contact person. He arranged the forged papers for me. I went aboard the Greek ship Penelope that docked in Haifa port. We sailed west. Near Crete, we encountered a severe storm. I was reminded of the horrifying part in the tale of Jonah: “[And] the Lord sent out a great wind on the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea so that the ship was about to be broken up.”⁵⁴ Tremendous water bursts at the height of the Carmel [Mountain] crashed against the Penelope, “the waves growled with the rush of wheels.” The sailors cried⁵⁵ out to

⁵¹ Gouri, *Be-Shurot Arukot*, vol. 2, 203–05.

⁵² Gouri, *Be-Shurot Arukot*, vol. 2, 205.

⁵³ Haim Gouri, *With Poetry and Time*, vol. 1, 5–34.

⁵⁴ Jonah 1:4.

⁵⁵ Intertextuality: quote of a line from the poem “On the Sea” by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (in the Hebrew original: (הַיָּם גָּלִים בְּרוּךְ גַּלְגָּלִים). The poem was translated to Yiddish by Bialik. During the 1960s, the composer Yinon Ne’eman adapted it for choir, using the sentence as its opening line. See Ziva Shamir, “Hamu galim: ‘al ‘yam lieder’ [On the sea: on Yiddish sea poetry],” chap. 9 in Ha-Meshorer, Ha-Gevirah Ve-Ha-Shifhah Byalik Ben ‘ivrit Le-Yidish [The minstrel, the mistress and the maid: Bialik between Hebrew & Yiddish] (Tel Aviv: Safra & Hakibutz Hameuhad, 2013).

their Gods. I asked Captain Papandreou⁵⁶ what would be [of us]?! And he mumbled, with his pipe between his teeth, “Bad sea, very bad sea.” I was afraid that they would throw me into the sea so that the sea would rest from its wrath, but the heavens had mercy on us and me.

We arrived in Marseille, where comrade Jean “Le Grand,” a large and kind man, was waiting for us. After a night at the “Maurice” hotel, we continued towards the Pyrenees. We crossed the border near San Sebastián. From there, to Bilbao and on to Madrid.

The section opens with an allusion to the story of Jonah the prophet, which is read, and not by chance, during the course of the Yom Kippur atonement because it is seen as an allegorical story dealing with a divine mission, sin, and repentance. The prophet Jonah sins but is forced to realize that “one cannot escape from the Lord” and repents by praying and carrying out the task of goodness imposed on him by God. Here, the Jewish myth merges with the Greek one. We are invited to join his “Odyssey” once again, just as in the 1960 poem cycle *Shoshanat Ruhot*. Even the name of the ship carrying him—Penelope—is a character in Homer’s epic, praised by the Church fathers for her sexual loyalty to her absent husband.

But the story soon turns into a Hollywood melodrama or perhaps an Israeli imitation of Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls*:

I will not tell now all that happened to me in that odyssey. I was also at the center of the drama that became the symbol of an era. It was not for nothing that freedom fighters came there from all over the world. The best idealists stood there to battle the fascist legions of General Franco, embodying in their blood the motto “*No pasarán!*” which means “They shall not pass.” I also met there many Jews from Eretz Israel and the entire world, members of “the nation which binds itself to all the altars of freedom,” as Heinrich Heine said.

There I also met Ernest Hemingway, André Malraux, Stephen Spender, and other writers and poets who witnessed the city struggling to the point of falling and the bombing of the town of Guernica, which cries out to this day from Picasso’s giant painting. An era comes to an end. You could feel in the air this was the Nazi-fascist prelude to World War II.

The Spanish Civil War embodies—in retrospect—something much bigger than the general rehearsal for the Second World War. It was turned into a mythical struggle of a different kind: a war without qualms and moral inhibitions, a clash between evil and good, between the dark forces of world fascism and the volunteers of the Left from all over the world. And even more: Spain is the purgatory of world poetry and literature. More than an initiation ritual into actual warfare, the poets of the Spanish Civil War gained a gratis entry ticket into an exclusive writers’ club where Gouri is a member rubbing shoulders with Spender, Malraux, and Hemingway himself. Spain, in other words, was not a territory, a concrete geography, as much as a symbol and subject of literary fascination. Fancying oneself as fighting in Spain side by side next to world-renowned poets and novelists was not different, in that respect, from the seasonal pilgrimages to Le Select café in Montparnasse, where Hemingway and numerous other famous foreign writers and

⁵⁶ Might be a veiled reference to the Greek politician Georgios Papandreou (1888–1968), who was a visceral opponent of the monarchist and conservative circles, founded the Greek Democratic Socialist Party (Demokratiko Sosialistiko Komma Ellados) in 1935, and was exiled in 1938 during the time of the royalist dictatorship of Metaxas.

artists used to gather, musing about impossible encounters and hoping to inhale some remaining stardust.⁵⁷ Like Malraux and de Gaulle’s *Résistancialisme*—that exaggerated, mythological depiction of the French Resistance to the Nazi Occupation—so was Madrid of 1936 a material of artistic myth and a pedestal on which postwar authority was erected.

The atmosphere is masculine and loaded with testosterone. To be sure, women participated in the battles of the Spanish Civil War, including the anarchist organization *Mujeres Libres*. And along with the male writers and poets, female writers such as the French philosopher Simone Weil arrived in Spain. But the “freedom fighters” Gouri imagines are only the ones wearing beards and carrying a Y-chromosome. The story continues to its surprising end:

Years later, I was fond of telling [my audience] about my role as a trumpeter in the Dabrowski Battalion and later as a personal signalman [military radioman] of the Thälmann Regiment’s commander.⁵⁸ I spoke about it around the campfire before gaping young men and attentive, enchanted maidens. One evening, while I was describing the campaign in the university quarter in Madrid, a despicable fellow interrupted me: “As far as I know, you were born in October 1923. So you fought in Spain at the age of 13?! Tell grandma!”

Always, yes, always, in any group, you find the sober skeptic who sneers at legends. So what if I wasn’t there? So what if I was only almost there? I know quite a few people who live in the seam zone between the real and the fictitious, who take part in wars that were not theirs or adopt loves that belong to others. And I was almost in Madrid.⁵⁹

How to interpret the insertion of such a fictional fragment into the autobiographical work? What kind of hybridization of fact and fiction do we see here?

Being a historian, I’m interested in that “one bastard” who, uninvited, invades Gouri’s story. That cheeky fellow who interjects is impolite. His act is nothing but a rude interruption of the theatrical show in its middle. With a simple back-of-the-envelope calculation, that commonsensical historian forces the poet to break the *façon*. What an awful skeptic, a disbeliever! Gouri clearly does not like it when the historian enters the room. He knows he would pop the hot air balloon inflated by him. And yet, Gouri wrote this story and chose to include him. Why did he leave these breadcrumbs, weaving clues and hints into his story? Doesn’t he crave the company of these skeptics, blind to his aura? Is he not addressing us, the readers, in a concealed confession: “Come, my reader, look and see. Be cautious. Poetics are nourishment, but you should not swallow all you are offered as food.”

Gouri tells us in so many words: my art is built on invention, concealment, and pretense. And it is this combination of fact and fiction that makes these elements so special. Charm requires imprecision.

⁵⁷ In his conversation with colleagues and recollections from Paris, Gouri mentioned time and again that whenever he visited the French metropolis he would spend much of his time in *Le Select*. See email correspondence with Dory Manor, March 28, 2023, as well as Joel Sher, “Haim Gouri beparis” [Haim Gouri in Paris] [blogpost in Hebrew], *Frankophilim anoninimim* [*Francophiles Anonymous*], 2022, <https://www.francophilesanonymes.com/paris/chaim-guri/>. A former diplomat, Sher worked in the Israeli embassy in Paris during the early 1960s and accompanied Gouri on his 1963 visit after the publication of *Facing the Glass Booth* in French translation.

⁵⁸ Names of battalions of the International Brigades, formed entirely of volunteers, during the Spanish Civil War. The first was named after its commander, the Polish General Jarosław Żądło-Dąbrowski. The second was named after the imprisoned German communist Ernst Thälmann and was involved in the battles in defense of Madrid.

⁵⁹ Translation mine from Haim Gouri, “To the End of the West,” in *‘im Ha-Shirah V’eha-Zeman*, vol. 1, 34–35. The excerpt was also published, under the title “I Was Almost in Madrid,” in *Haaretz* on April 15, 2008.

7. APHASIA, OR A POETICS OF HIDE AND SEEK

Besides his shifting political allegiances and relentless reexamination of his past political convictions, Gouri's self-torture and perpetual lurking on past deeds were central features in the public persona he groomed and was known for in the tiny Israeli world of arts and letters of his time. So much so that the poet, translator, and editor Moshe Basok (1907-66) wrote a short satirical verse entitled "To My Confessionalist Comrade," in which he mocked Gouri's tendency for guilt-ridden public revelations of remorse, comparing him to a stone thrower who enjoys hearing windows smashed to pieces: "the confession rings like a bell: Glin-Glan, Glin-Glan — / Ringing their blasphemy loudly."⁶⁰

We do not know if Gouri's attempt to "confess" his conduct in Yagur in 1945 was one of the acts of "blasphemy" scorned by Basok. What we do know, however, is that Gouri was no confessionalist in any conventional sense. He remained unenchanted by the Rousseauesque tradition of startlingly frank confessions, dismissed by him as a clumsy and vulgar type of writing, the same way that he dismissed the thorough historical investigation of past events. Likewise, he did not conceal his contempt of what came to be known in American literature of the 1960s as confessional poetry. He perceived the notion of confession as narcissistic, self-indulgent. Great art was not about undressing and transgression. He made it clear that he found nothing appealing about a stripped body exposing its scars or a tormented soul putting its traumas on display. Poetry was for him the art of silence and concealment, practices indicating virtue and humility. He addressed the issue explicitly in 1975 in an essay on Ezra Zussman, a Hebrew poet and translator of Voltaire's *Candide*. Entitled "Chapters from a Midnight Confession: On the Nudity and the Allusion," Gouri opened his essay with the following catechism:

... You shall never discover the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth: not in confessions, not in "third-degree" investigations, not in [psychoanalytic] "analyses." Hence, in a matter-of-factual way, I say: not even in a poem. And how good it is. We are not easy to confess. I fear the naked. Such a thrill usually ends in pain, with embarrassment. To Whom are you talking? This town is full of people who hush their secrets. That is the nobility of the spirit, believe me. Their secrets may, heaven forbid, cause metals to bend, wear out the global world of arts and letters.

The hour of revelation will look like an apocalyptic revelation. Mass crowding and chaos. Even gossipers shall sob: "Enough, enough already, in the name of God!" And while he was yet speaking, there came another.⁶¹ And choirs, like at the end of the world. And a gonorrhea leakage of confessions, noisy and shrouded in smoke, and that same emptying is what you hear. A mass murder of secrets, which were a hidden treasure, a forced smile, stiff hands.

Let us keep silent, then. I know my allies in that fraternity of invalids; I know them.⁶²

Similar remarks, peppered throughout Gouri's writings, reveal an unfailing and principled stand on all matters related to fact versus fiction. If there was an author who served as a source

⁶⁰ Moshe Basok, "Leḥaver ba'al haviduim" [To my confessionalist comrade], in *Mivḥar Shirim* (Tel Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-Me'uḥad, 1968), 287. I would like to thank Ido Bassok, his son, for providing me with the backstory of this poem.

⁶¹ Paraphrasing Job 1:16.

⁶² Haim Gouri, "Prakim Mivdui Hatzot—'Al Ha'eyirom Veharemez [Episodes from a midnight confession—About nudity and the hint]," *Ma'ariv*, November 14, 1975, 35. The essay was reprinted in *'Im Hashira*, vol. 2: 170.

of inspiration for Gouri—and probably a considerable degree of envy as well—it was André Malraux, the poet-novelist who was elevated to a national hero, appointed to political office under Charles de Gaulle, and treated as the human embodiment of culture. It is no coincidence that Gouri made numerous passing references to Malraux in his later works, and it was to him that he attributed the statement he turned into a credo: “Our real biography is made of the things that we seek to leave as mysteries.”⁶³ The conviction that the *belles-lettres* “dislike precise coordinates” was also attributed by Gouri to Malraux. For Malraux, as for Gouri, there is no such thing as autobiography; there are only “anti-memoirs.”⁶⁴ The veteran fighter turned poet will carry his earth-shattering secrets to the grave. The bewitching poetry and the gripping tale hinted at ugly truths without revealing them. They helped the poet cultivate a personal legend and impose himself upon posterity without betraying the non-epic dimensions of his life.

In conclusion, I propose reading Gouri's references to an internal civil war against these statements. As I've attempted to show throughout this essay, though the speaker in “I am Civil War” is indeed strikingly different from the living-dead soldier poet who speaks on behalf of the fallen soldiers of 1948, the Gouri who seems to have given way to a more intimate speaker full of doubt and hesitations was quickly replaced by an author who is anti-confessionalist in principle. Contributing to a potent and still dominant Israeli cultural code, he preferred using literature as the arena where the reexamination of touchy affairs from the past will take place and as a medium whose main feature is a dialogue with oneself.

At heart, there are almost two paradoxes at play here. First is a poet casting himself as a “witness” and “chronicler” of the nation's formative struggles, the one who “was there” to see and tell, yet he is someone who fears the historian's interrogation and avoids the priest's shriving pew. Second is the “internalization” of “civil war,” the ability of the poet to turn a venomous political conflict into a metaphor for an inner struggle, to reassert the position of the poet as identical to the body politic. Or, more precisely, Gouri's “I” becomes one with the “we” to embody the radical fissure in the nation's life and history. The social fabric of the nation, crosscut by deep ideological divisions, is internalized by the poet who “swallows” them.

What are the implications of such a maneuver on the ways we conceive the politically charged term “civil war”? Gouri, I would suggest, corrupts and empties the term of its political meaning. Like the older Hebrew discourse of *milhemet aḥim*, in his metaphorical use of the phrase “civil war,” Gouri also conceived his inner struggle as intra-Jewish, as opposed to “regular” war. To be sure, when Palestinians appeared in his writing, they were only the Jews' mirror opposites. Depriving them of their collective national name, Gouri insisted on tagging them in his writings using the semi-affectionate, semi-dismissive biblical-resounding label “Ishmael.”⁶⁵ There was a

⁶³ Haim Gouri, “Reshimot Mibeit Ha-Yain,” in *Be-Shurot Arukot*, vol. 2, 207–08. See also Gouri, *‘Im Ha-Shirah Vēha-Zeman*, vol. 1, 75, where Gouri praises de Gaulle for elevating André Malraux to such a degree and expresses sorrow that there is no poet of similar status in Israel.

⁶⁴ André Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (New York: Bantam Books, 1968). It seems safe to suggest that Gouri was familiar with Malraux's unconventional autobiography and that he read it close to its publication in 1968. Gouri quoted Malraux as early as 1974 in a speech before the Jewish Agency Congress. See “Transcript of H. Gouri's speech at the Jewish Agency meeting, 3rd session, Jerusalem, 6/18/1974,” in Gouri Archive, National Library of Israel, AARC. 4* 1813 07 112.

⁶⁵ See Haim Gouri, “Ishmael,” *Davar*, July 8, 1980: 2; Gouri, “Ahi Yishma'el” [My brother, Ishmael], *Davar*, December 5, 1980: 17; Gouri, “Yoter” [More: Recollections from a visit to Lebanon], *Davar*, July 9, 1982, in Gouri Archive, National Library of Israel, ARC. 4* 1813 02 37; Gouri, *‘Im Ha-Shirah Vēha-Zeman*, vol. 2, 44–45, 80, 87–89, 120, 145, and 154; Haim. *Eyval: Shirim*, 33.

curious dialectic at play in his writings about the modern Ishmaelites. The traits Gouri attributed to them— nationalist zeal, lack of regret, conviction without a doubt— made them the Jews’ dialectic opposite. Ishmael’s crude traits were a source of jealousy and even longing for the “good old times” when Jews were considered the David rather than the Goliath in the story. At the very same time, Ishmael’s radical otherness served as a marker of the Jews’ moral superiority, with the latter expressing constant self-questioning, inner doubt, and an almost obsessive zeal to discard national myths and slaughter sacred cows. Never questioning the state’s definition as “Jewish,” the “civil war” Gouri conceived was not the war against Ishmael, that stubborn thorn in the flesh, but his way to speak collectively about the Jews, eaten from the inside by repentance and self-questioning. Those internal political quarrels do not spare families that are torn by disputes, Gouri wrote in his autobiographical sketches, and they even “tear the soul of the individual in a civil war.”⁶⁶ Ishmael’s unrepentant, vulgar, and enviable violent behavior was a reminder of the long road Jews traveled since they abandoned “the culture of the besieged and the righteous.”⁶⁷

How emancipating was it to hate, clear and simple: to despise your enemy with zeal and no regrets! Wasn’t this the distinct mesmerizing power of a poet like Uri Zvi Greenberg? Gouri was attracted to the poet of rage, the poet who never concealed his abhorrence and fury. The 1967 War, famously described by Gershom Scholem as that “plastic hour of history,”⁶⁸ provided Gouri with the opportunity to join Greenberg and his associates, former foes turned partners with whom he authored the “Greater Land of Israel” petition. The first signs of that reorientation could be found already in the early 1960s, as I’ve shown here. Yet emotionally and sentimentally, he could never bring himself to become the raging hate-filled Greenberg, the same way he could never metamorphose and adopt Yehoda Amichai’s poetry of love, self-reflection, and compassion that disrupted the agreed ideological and national boundaries. Greenberg remained for him the angry myth-filled giant of the warmongering “Right” the same way Amichai was ultimately described by him as unadventurous, perhaps too domestic, vain and self-absorbed bourgeois disconnected from the heroic epic of Israeli history.⁶⁹ Neither Greenberg nor Amichai, the poetic space Gouri

⁶⁶ Gouri, *‘Im Ha-Shirah V’eha-Zeman*, vol. 2, 143.

⁶⁷ Haim Gouri, “Hadam ve-even hachelet” [The blood and the blue stone], review of a collection of Mahmoud Darwish’s poems in Hebrew translation, *Haaretz*, July 15, 2003, reproduced in *‘Im Ha-Shirah V’eha-Zeman*, vol. 2, 113–25. Identical language was used in an interview: Ari Shavit, “mize ‘akshav atem zrichim lehizaher. ki ‘akshav hadavar haze biydechem. ‘Akhshav torchem’: sicha ‘im haim gouri” [‘Now you have to be careful. because now this thing is in your hands. now it’s your turn’: A conversation with Haim Gouri] *Haaretz*, March 2, 2000.

⁶⁸ Gershom Scholem, “The Price of Messianism: Interview with David Biale,” *New York Review of Books*, August 14, 1980, 22.

⁶⁹ A concise summary of Gouri’s ambivalent attitude to Amichai’s poetry can be found in an article he published in *Ma’ariv* in the spring of 1985 in which he focused on a poem by Amichai describing the soft light coming out from a home refrigerator falling on the face of his lover. Gouri analyzed the scene thus: “[This is] a very particular woman, [which we see] in her everyday life. Her face is not illuminated by the light of the mythical candle [as in Alterman’s poetry], the ‘Gothic’ [light] of the ballad, nor by the light of the Palmach campfire [...] Instead, it is a matter-of-fact and quiet light of a home refrigerator bulb, an almost petit-bourgeois light.” Crucially, the article contrasts this domestic and bourgeois light with Gouri’s experiences from visiting fighting forces in the Sinai desert (which he called by its biblical name “Goshen” in the article) shortly after the Yom Kippur War (1973), where he met soldiers keeping silence and complete darkness in their trenches to avoid Egyptian snipers. In this way, Gouri doubled the counterpoint, contrasting the light of Amichai’s home refrigerator with the light of the campfire of the 1948 fighters on the one hand and with the military operational darkness of the 1973 combat units. See Gouri, “shitat hamekarer he-hafuch” [the upside-down fridge method], *‘im Ha-Shirah V’eha-Zeman*, vol. 2, 292–95. In his obituary of Amichai, Gouri returned to the same

carved himself between these two imagined ends of the spectrum captures his unique fingerprint. A self-appointed lamenting and secular *Shaliach Tzibbur* (the messenger of a congregation in a public prayer), he still sees himself as a spokesperson for a national collective.

Gouri found himself forced to develop what is, at a final verdict, a conflictual, inconsistent relationship with the past. This inconsistency ran through his work, tinting his poetry as much as his newspaper reportage, essays, and autobiographical fragments. In the case of his celebrated account of the Eichmann trial, he was quick to pick up the role of the witness-storyteller, wishing accounts of the past to capture "the truth" and have an impact and legal weight in the real world.⁷⁰ At the same time, he began to use art to silence echoes of violence, or at least predicting that "later," after the end of violence, silence will come, "composed of fatigue and the darkness of empty bullet casings." The silence comes after the acts of viciousness and is their result. It functions just like a scar, a reminder of a former injury, and a warning. The writing is always done at the moment after, at the time of post-conflict silence. Writing is not therapeutic. It is not there to solve dilemmas or untie knots. It is what hides and simultaneously discloses past ruptures. Gouri took upon himself these two irreconcilable roles.

Silenced people, unwilling to disclose their past, pose a difficult challenge to historians seeking to discover "what happened?" A different set of challenges confronts us when dealing with someone like Gouri, who hides as much as he discloses, who presents himself as the custodian of stories that represent the formal social order while also telling us that he is an unreliable witness of his own life story. His mixed genres and media, leaping from poetry and short stories to newspaper reportage of actual events, makes the confrontation with his written corpus even trickier. The true is mixed with the fictitious. Storytelling becomes an invitation to revisit the past while obscuring it concurrently. Silencing is always self-silencing, an act of repressing painful memories and internal contradictions. To understand these internal contradictions and their relation to poetic speech, we can use the image of a split language: a use of language that is itself the product of brutal cutting and splitting.

It might be time for us to summon Ann Laura Stoler's notions of "aphasia" and "occlusion of knowledge." Instead of evocative terms such as amnesia, erasure, or forgetfulness, Stoler's aphasia is a notion that seeks to capture a particular kind of "blockage of knowledge," a "disremembering." Crucially, such disremembering affects our language. It causes difficulty in generating a vocabulary that "associates appropriate words and concepts to appropriate things."

Aphasia is a condition in which the occlusion of knowledge is at once a **dismembering of words from the objects to which they refer**, a difficulty retrieving both the semantic and lexical components of vocabularies, a loss of access that may verge on active dissociation, a difficulty comprehending what is seen and spoken.⁷¹

poem and the same interpretation: Gouri, "Tehushat hara'ad shel pgisha rishona [The trembling feeling of a first encounter]," *Y-Net News*, September 22, 2000, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/1,7340,L-130070,00.html>.

⁷⁰ Gouri, *Facing the Glass Booth*. The book was originally published in 1962. For discussion and analysis, see Renana Keydar, "Rethinking Plurality: On Ethics and Storytelling in the Search for Justice," *Dibur: Literary Journal* 1, no. 1 (2015), http://arcade.stanford.edu/dibur_issue/spoken-word-written-word-rethinking-representation-speech-literature-0.

⁷¹ Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Aphasia: Disabled Histories and Race in France," in *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 122–70.

Gouri did not erase the past, nor did he forget. Instead, he used poetics as a vehicle of memorial obstruction. It is poetry that suffers from aphasia. It elevates disremembering to a level of aesthetic dogma.

“I am Civil War” is a great poem, perhaps Gouri’s greatest. Yet we miss its power if we read it as *peshat*, in a literal or straightforward manner. Nor could we succumb to the poetic inducement without scrutiny. The move away from a collectivist “we” to an intimate “I” did not contradict as much as embolden an elitist self-conception of the 1948 War veterans, seeing themselves as the natural hegemony of the new state. The forlorn lyrical introspection and attempt to come to terms with oppressed memories or a traumatic past was discarded as too dangerous, an autoimmune disease. There are no “others,” different people with different recollections, views, and memories. All are internalized, silenced by making them part of the conflictual “me.” The look inward to face one’s inner demons is never substituted by reckoning and genuine dialogue with the other, neither the oppressed Palestinian nemesis nor the former Jewish Zionist ideological foe.

Coming to terms with Gouri’s aesthetics of concealment, we come to the sad conclusion that Gouri’s project, albeit impressive linguistically and artistically, was self-defeating and impossibly incongruous. The virtuoso poet who positioned himself in the public arena as the “memory carrier” who would provide stability and solidarity in an era of fragmentation, self-doubt, and discordant memories was at the same time developing a whimsical storytelling based on self-silencing and coverup or a purposeful blurring of concrete historical events with the fictitious. Gouri casts a giant shadow. His literary *Nachlass* is made of an enormous corpus of writings in different genres, which he bequeathed us throughout his long career. And his biography was indeed composed of the things he wished to obscure and disguise. A