

*Man, Interrupted: Abjection, Animality and Agency  
in Donkey by Sami Berdugo*

by Riki Traum

**Abstract**

*Donkey's presence is an essential characteristic of the Israeli Palestinian landscape. This essay addresses the donkey as an agent of a subjectivity that has been denied by the Israeli establishment, through a reading of Sami Berdugo's novel, Donkey (2019). The essay examines the political functionality and biopolitical significance of the donkey as a metaphor, companion, and scapegoat. I argue that Berdugo portrays the donkey as the agency that enables a transition from object/other to subject. This subjectivity is built on human/animal continuity and fluidity; in his novel, Berdugo collapses the boundaries between his protagonist and Donkey and renders what in life resists power, domination, and eventually the different forms of death. The essay analyzes the alternative sociopolitical matrix that Berdugo portrays in which animality mobilizes a change; it also examines Berdugo's literary strategy of "interrupting" the hegemonic cultural tyranny that has established, for years, rigid boundaries between humans and animals and by that denies freedom. Berdugo challenges "accepted" categories such as heteronormative sexuality, masculinity, and standard Hebrew through abjection and perversion; he "interrupts" and teases out the tyrannies of sexual and gender normativity by questioning and queering heteronormativity. Challenging the "accepted" and revealing its under-the-surface wounded matrix, is a literary concern that Berdugo has had for a long time; however, in Donkey he criticizes the Israeli tragic biopolitical condition, and he also challenges the narrator's traditional stance. The essay discusses ecological and biopolitical issues that reveal the tragedy of both humans and donkeys in Israel, and particularly in the southern periphery. Reading the Israeli reality through the human-cum-donkey prism renders the neglected peripheries as an alternative Israeli existence, which forms the sociopolitical subtext of Berdugo's novel. It is here, in the periphery of mental and material poverty, that Berdugo insists on the very idea of life.*

## Introduction

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## Introduction

“And if there were not the donkey to keep Abraham company it would be infernal. But there is the donkey. The animal [...] who puts a limit on abandonment.”<sup>1</sup>

Donkeys physically and metaphorically traverse the Israeli Palestinian landscape. In Hebrew and Israeli literature, the donkey is often Othered;<sup>2</sup> in some cases, the

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<sup>1</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Writing Blind: Conversation with the Donkey,” in *Stigmata*, Hélène Cixous (London-New York: Routledge, 1998), 115-125, 118.

<sup>2</sup> Palestinian artists tend to anthropomorphize the donkey. See for example Mahmud Darwish in Simon Bitton and Elias Sanbar, dir., *Mahmud Darwish: As the Land in Language* (France, 1997),

donkey is depicted as a contemptible animal, whose inferiority maintains the human/animal distinction and through that the binary oppositions of inferiority/superiority, abuser/abused, mindfulness/mindlessness, as well as binary heteronormative ideals of masculinity/femininity.<sup>3</sup> The donkey is a trope that carries sociocultural perceptions, and at the same time, it is a beast that is denied a proper sociocultural space. In these representations, the donkey exemplifies a tragic and ongoing codependency between human and animals, one that has engendered a humanist approach that anthropomorphizes the donkey's suffering, and a non-humanist approach that uses the donkey as a strategy of othering and dehumanizing individuals by likening them to donkeys. Since the prevailing tendency among both humanists (who anthropomorphize the donkey) and non-humanists (who animalize people) is to avoid any critical study of the politicality of the donkey that represents, perhaps more than any other animal, Israel's conflictual sociopolitical matrix, it is this politicality that concerns me the most, and that has given rise to this essay. This is my first objective: to decipher

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documentary; Talia Lakshmi Kolluri, "The Good Donkey", *The Common* 21 (Amherst, MA: Amherst College, 2021), accessed June 5, 2023, <https://www.thecommononline.org/the-good-donkey/>; Mahmoud Shukair, *Me, My Friend, and the Donkey*, trans. by Anam Zafar (Ramallah: Tamer Institute for Community Education, 2016). An exception case is Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, trans. by Salma K. Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick (Northampton: Interlink Books, 2003). I will return to this work in my conclusion where I draw a poetic, aesthetic, and political comparison between Habiby's book and Berdugo's *Donkey*.

<sup>3</sup> In his letter of October 1, 1906, David Ben-Gurion wrote to his father in Pinsk about the emerging Hebrew culture and its national revival: the Hebrew signs in every shop, the Hebrew speech in the streets [...] Here is a young Hebrew boy galloping a fast horse with confidence, a Hebrew girl is riding a donkey. In Yaacov Shavit and Jehuda Reinharz, *The Donkey; A Cultural History: A Journey through Myth, Allegory, Symbol and Cliché* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2014), 153. I refer here, however, to writers who used the trope of the donkey to contend with or avoid the political significance of the animal or present it as a kind pet. Examples are Leah Goldberg, "The Donkey," in *What Do the Does Do* [Hebrew] (Sifriyat Poalim: Ankorim, 1949); Eliezer Steinberg and Hamor-Hamoratayim *Project Ben-Yehuda* [Yiddish], trans. by Hanania Raichman (1954), accessed June 5, 2023, <https://benyehuda.org/read/16314>; Gershon Shofman and Braying Donkey, *Project Ben-Yehuda* [Hebrew] (1960), accessed June 5, 2023, <https://benyehuda.org/read/35902>. Exceptions might be S. Yizhar, Miri's Metamorphosis, in *Davar for Children*, ed. Yitzhak Yatziv (Tel Aviv: 1947), 26-27; Yosl Birshteyn, *Between the Olive Trees* (1954), trans. Adi Mahalel, accessed June 5, 2023, <https://iberzets.org/arttranslation/%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%95%D7%99%D7%A9%D7%9F%D7%90%D7%99%D7%99%D7%9C%D7%91%D7%A2%D7%A8%D7%98%D7%9F/>. An interesting critical stance regarding the donkey is presented in a short film by Shira Geffen and Etagar Keret, dir. *And What about Me* (Israel: Israeli Cinematheque, 2012).

and foreground the political functionality of the donkey through a reading of Sami Berdugo's groundbreaking novel, *Donkey* (2019),<sup>4</sup> for which he received in 2020 Israel's two most prestigious literary awards: the Sapir Prize and the Brenner Prize. As a point of departure, my essay examines Berdugo's major practices of first reframing the Israeli sociopolitical matrix by shifting the focus onto its environmental issues that narrate the biopolitical tragedy of both humans and donkeys. Second, he portrays the donkey as an agent of a new subjectivity; the donkey turns the status of the protagonist into that of a subject. I read Berdugo's novel as a striking foregrounding of a human-cum-donkey subjectivity that rewrites the Israeli southern periphery. In that sense, *Donkey* both aligns with and deviates from Berdugo's voluminous body of work that includes collections of short stories and the seminal novels, *And Say to the Wind* (2002), *That Is to Say* (2010), *Land upon an Ongoing Tale* (2014), *Because Guy* (2017), and *All Five of Us* (2022). While Berdugo is interested in the mental-cum-physical exposure of his characters, one should note the proximity of his often painful and repulsive exposure to carnal and sexual pleasure.<sup>5</sup> In his work, suggestive sexuality and ill bodily conditions not only correspond to the mental climate of the plot, but they are also anchored in the author's relationships with the troubling contemporaneity of the state of Israel and its social-peripheral agony. In *Donkey*, however, the animal's presence reveals a biopolitical aspect of Berdugo's tormenting relationship with Israeli society, *one that must be released through animality to counter the inherent binaries that the national ethos (like any other national ethos) aims at perpetually recreating*. This binary system sets ontological boundaries between human/animal, but also (perhaps mainly) between the Self or the individual realm and what happens "outside" of this individual realm, a virtual-cum-palpable zone that Hannah Arendt calls "the world" or "the public space."<sup>6</sup> In *Donkey*, Berdugo teases the

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<sup>4</sup> Sami Berdugo, *Hamor (Donkey)* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2019). All (English) translations from Hebrew are by the author, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>5</sup> Hanna Soker-Schwager, "His Breaths in the Flesh of Words: Bodily and Linguistic Spares in *Because Guy* and *And Say to the Wind* by Sami Berdugo," in *Spare Thoughts: Superfluity in Hebrew Literature 1907-2017* [Hebrew], ed. Soker-Schwager (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press), 342-394, 342.

<sup>6</sup> Miguel Vatter, "Nativity and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt," *Revista De Ciencia Politica* 26, no. 2 (2006): 137-159, 146. Arendt's conceptualization of animality both informs and inspires my writing on Berdugo. The preservation of animality in men is a political interest that allows

power to deny life to the point of animality; he presents a protagonist whose allegedly (insignificant) life becomes meaningful (or full of life) because of his donkey. The protagonist whose relationship with his donkey evolves around intimate arousal and disgust, condescension and submissiveness, is inevitably doomed to become his donkey, to share his virtual-cum-palpable piece-of-life with the animal. It is also through donkey, however, that Berdugo identifies that what resists this domination in life also resists death. If donkeys' life and thus human-donkeys' life are the target of political power and domination, then these human-donkeys "must be capable of becoming the subject [...] of resistance to domination."<sup>7</sup> I rely here on an approach whose "indistinction" is borrowed from Gilles Deleuze, Donna Haraway, Giorgio Agamben, Rosi Braidotti, and Matthew Calarco,<sup>8</sup> all of whom question the ways in which the human/animal continuities are portrayed "as running unidirectionally from human to animal—why aren't continuities sought in the other direction?"<sup>9</sup> In this regard, I am inspired by Agamben who,

Instead of reinforcing traditional human/animal distinctions or searching for new versions of the anthropological difference, [...] argues that we should aim to stop this machine and try to think more carefully about the *indistinction* of human and animal life [. . .] What kind of politics might emerge beyond the exclusion of human animality and the biopolitical shaping of "proper" humanity? What practices might correspond to a life

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domination, according to Arendt. See Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Vatter, "Nativity and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt," 145.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Matthew Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Calarco, *Thinking Through Animals*, 50.

in which “human” and “animal” are no longer sharply delimited and separated?<sup>10</sup>

I suggest reading Berdugo’s literary practice as a set of “interruptions”<sup>11</sup> to the hegemonic cultural tyranny: Berdugo breaks what he calls, “the as-accepted”<sup>12</sup> that is also of a biopolitical nature. By interruptions I refer to Berdugo’s authorship, but also to the struggle that his protagonist is situated in, between the desire to overcome normativity (or to “interrupt” it) and at the same time, to engage with it.

How, then, Berdugo does this in *Donkey*? The protagonist and his donkey continuously negotiate with and respond to environmental challenges; environmental precarities and considerations underlie the novel and rewrite the social matrix of the southern periphery. In the first part of my essay, I outline the novel’s reframing of the Israeli sociopolitical matrix through an alternative one in which the donkey is the agent of change. Out of the peripheral mental and material poverty and through the donkey, Berdugo extracts life. To better understand the type of social matrix that Berdugo shapes, his plot should be conceived as one that is “interrupted,” through which the passive object of domination (and death) wrestles the active subject of freedom (and life).<sup>13</sup> In the second part, I analyze the novel’s set of “interruptions”; *Donkey* shows how these “interruptions” in fact constitute the (tragic) Israeli “biopolitical condition.” With Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection as my lens,<sup>14</sup> I will examine Berdugo’s use of abjection to “interrupt” Israeli identity through its animalization. I then show how Berdugo

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 54. Agamben uses the anthropological machine to describe a (political) mechanism that fabricates, reproduces, maintains, and perpetuates the human/animal distinction.

<sup>11</sup> By interruptions I invoke Bonnie Honig’s critical practice in her alternative reading of *Antigone* by Sophocles. Honig writes, “As a social practice [...] interruption postulates both equality, as when two people interrupt each other to knit together a conversation in tandem, and inequality as one party must yield the floor, as it were, to the other.” Honig presents her reading as posing as an interruption [...] a hybrid that seeks agonistically to engage with prior operations of this powerful text [*Antigone*], and to overcome some of them see Bonnie Honig, *Antigone, Interrupted* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13.

<sup>12</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 125.

<sup>13</sup> Vatter, “Nativity and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt,” 145.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

breaks codes of masculinity and heterosexuality, as extensions of the hegemonic order. Finally, I explain how in *Donkey*, Berdugo “interrupts” standard speech—in fact, the very act of speech itself—as part of the eco/biopolitical tensions that the novel renders. Berdugo’s linguistic performance “interrupts” the linguistic matrix of the novel, but it also undermines the type of political human-life that denies this performance. In this context, the paratexts<sup>15</sup> of the novel, including its chapter-headings, linguistic registers, the interplay among Hebrew, Arabic, and English, the epilogue, and even Berdugo’s interviews, are not only part of Berdugo’s interruptive authorship, but they also support Berdugo’s focus on an individual whose desire for life is easily dismissed.

## Part I

### “Life Doesn’t Keep Its Promise”: The Tragic Life and Death of Human-Donkeys

*Donkey* was inspired by the tragic death of a young worker in a construction site accident in Israel, something that is becoming increasingly common. Berdugo’s protagonist (or anti-hero) is named after the dead worker, Roslan Isekov, an Azerbaijani immigrant. Berdugo tells the story of one member of a much larger community whose life and death remain a phantom limb of the Israeli political body that Berdugo resents. What is intriguing in *Donkey* is the non-foundational metonymy of the donkey that constitutes a discursive economy of displacement and invisibility. Alternatively, it is the invisible donkey that “does not count,” who brings into focus invisible Israelis who, like the donkey, “do not count” and are being rapidly and constantly supplanted by the hegemonic force. The novel, set over eight days in 2018, develops around two axes. The main plot opens with the serendipitous encounter between the protagonist, 50-year-old Roslan Isekov and

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<sup>15</sup> By paratexts, Gerard Genette refers to material that lies on the threshold of the narrative. This includes chapter-headings, pictures, promotional material, interviews given by the author, dust jackets, preface, foreword and even other novels written by the author, which can influence our understanding of the narrative and hence, become part of the narrative. Divya Anand, “Words on Water: Nature and Agency in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*,” *Concentric: Literature and Cultural Studies* 34, no. 1 (2008): 21-44, 22.

Donkey. Two police officers ask him to take care of the abused animal temporarily, but never return to reclaim it. The story follows the evolving relationship between the two who are now in Roslan's house in Bat-Hadar, a planned community in southern Israel. This axis follows Roslan's life after quitting his job as a secretary in a local Committee of Planning and Building on the shore of Ashkelon. Roslan's position exposes him to bureaucratic and ecological issues of neglect that he projects on the life of the (peripheral) residents in these areas: he "heard the voices of both women and men, for worse he heard them, their anger, their complaints, their despair, the southern *hutzpah*, the prostitution of their vocality that reached him not because of its loosened, worn, slaughtered nature, but because of it being simply a prostitute, forced to be penetrated, used, lacking singularity, dismissive, and oppressed, that doesn't feel her own pain anymore."<sup>16</sup> Roslan meets the donkey at a point in his life when he has lost his passion to live and his hope in human existence, a hope that even his affair with his Jewish-American lover, Steve Silberman, cannot not salvage. The second axis recounts the events of one day in 1994, when 26-year-old Roslan, a student of practical engineering, the only child of Olga and Arthur from Kiryat Yam, decides to move away for no apparent reason. This axis focuses on Roslan's grim childhood in Kiryat Yam, and the existential struggle of his impoverished immigrant parents to survive. The Azerbaijanian community too exists in poverty, rage, and neglect that ties it to the southern settlement in which Roslan lives with his donkey years later. That wintry day of 1994, when Roslan leaves home, ends in tragedy as his waiting parents fall asleep and the spiral heater in their living room sets their small apartment on fire. Roslan, by then on his way to the old Central Station in Tel Aviv, does not know about their deaths, and attempts to live his life—"in spite of it all," almost in Y. H. Brenner's spirit. But in a way, the story begins on that day in 1994—in the past that insists upon remaining the present—when Roslan simply "continues" to live, until his encounter with the donkey, when he takes ownership of the animal, conquers the dichotomy between the two of them, and in so doing takes ownership of himself.

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<sup>16</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 89.



### Ecological Tensions: The Force of Life

Berdugo surgically focuses on what the environmentalist critic, Lawrence Buell defines as “refractions of physical environments and human interactions with those environments.”<sup>17</sup> Clashes between the characters in the novel and their environment are presented already through the troubled domestic life of Roslan parents in Kiryat Yam. The sub-narrative foregrounds Roslan’s parents in 1994, also appears under the laconic meta-title of “Transition” (to mark the transition to the past), and emphasizes the father’s severe cold and coughing, while failing to keep the cold winds out of their apartment:

Coold... very. The wintry weather broke through with no preparation to its beginning, which is usually milder. On Ben-Zvi Boulevard, the first floor of building 29, Entrance C, in Isekov’s apartment, they try to ram the coldness. The pane of the big window in the living room is closed almost entirely, not hermetically. Earlier, just before 4p.m., Arthur dragged it in its old track, with the little energy that was left he brought the heavy glass to its possible edge and trapped it with its plastic lock that still left some narrow open space to the outside, where he held his hand for a moment to check the movement of the penetrative wind, a dead movement, and then he pulled the curtain on top of everything—100% of high quality polyester fabric in the color purple—he hoped that the house will get warmer like that, or that the coldness won’t increase, and most of all, Arthur wished quietly in his heart to finally recover from the flu that fell on him.<sup>18</sup>

Arthur’s struggle to protect his home and family underpins the narrative of these sections, a struggle that highlights the thin-walled apartment and thus the permeable and vulnerable existence of the family in the north. The hardworking family, whose dull routine could easily have been typical of the daily life of many immigrants, suffers from the “invasion” of a bad wind, that takes over the apartment and threatens the father’s frail health. Even though the real threat is

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<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 30.

<sup>18</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 45.

preconditioned, a threat that comes “from the house and the family,”<sup>19</sup> the ecological drama marks the impossible triumph and the parents’ inevitable fate. Immigrant parents are never safe, even “the heart of their home is not caged properly, a conspiring chill invades it silently, trembled mainly the strong and covered arms of Arthur who carries a severe flu.”<sup>20</sup> The caged apartment is a charged metaphor that underlines not only the apartment’s bad condition but also the status of the (parents) immigrants: put in cages as a human (animal-like?)—threat that menaces the existing “civilized” life that the state has established; it is the ‘everlasting temporality’ shared by many immigrants in Israel. Added to this preconditioned exposure, Arthur’s illness suggests a physical vulnerability that accentuates the family’s alienation (and the father’s alienation as the head of the family): his body struggles with the virus while being defeated by the wind. In the meantime, Olga, the mother, is “passively absorbing the future of the temperature.”<sup>21</sup> This tension between passivity and struggle characterizes Roslan’s lonely youth that is marked by the lack of agency that makes change possible. Indeed, Olga and Arthur die in their sleep, while their small apartment burns. Berdugo’s choice of fire as their cause of death is ecologically intriguing: the fire is domestic and private, a result of a malfunctioning heater. If the dramatic weather had previously defeated the family from the outside, it is the domestic fire that kills them from the inside. The fire becomes a biopolitical trope that represents the politics of death in the story the inevitable “thanatopolitics.”<sup>22</sup> The ecological drama, however, accompanies Roslan throughout the novel: during his escape to Tel Aviv, for instance, as he recognizes “a storm on the shoreline and serenity in the middle of the sea, and everything is simultaneous in one unified organism.”<sup>23</sup> Amazed by this vision, he wonders, “is this nature?” and replies immediately, “no, this is probably life.”<sup>24</sup> Through the “unified organism,” Berdugo flattens topographic differences and distills a sense of life, a concept that he insists on throughout the novel; Roslan recognizes the inseparability of life and nature and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>22</sup> Vatter, “Nativity and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt,” 145.

<sup>23</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 186.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

reclaims the lost sense of what Berdugo calls in his epilogue, “Mere life.”<sup>25</sup> This is where the donkey serves heuristically to change Roslan’s fate. The southern sun that counteracts the cold north, is described as “unpleasant sun”<sup>26</sup> whose solar radiation exposes Roslan and his donkey to a new set of ecological challenges. But to Roslan’s amazement, the drying neglected yard, the soil, and its natural yield welcome both Roslan and donkey:

Donkey tapped lightly with his horseshoes, and to Roslan it seemed like a respectful march, as if donkey is thankful for his food before meal—a jocular food blessing. And when he reached the pile, he [donkey, R”T] lowered his head and started to gather weeds, in a nonselective manner, and yet it looked as if he is pulling them in preciseness with his thick rough tongue, chewing them gently with his stony teeth, glidingly swallowing them, and gathering more of them in his mouth. Donkey was probably hungry in a non-animalistic passion, and Roslan stood next to him and wondered, amazed by the simplicity of health, by the necessity of food and its justification, and astounded by his proper choice of weed and how he gathered what’s necessary, and the more donkey consumed the grains the deeper was the feeling in Roslan’s round lower-belly: the art of animal and life.<sup>27</sup>

This “simplicity of health” brought by donkey is epiphanic to Roslan. The above passage, it seems, recalls the two conflictual Greek concepts, *zoē* and *bios*: the cyclic “bare life” of animals, men, and gods (*zoē*) and what Giorgio Agamben perceives as, “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (*bios*).<sup>28</sup> Donkey reintroduces Roslan with the very idea of “bare life”; yet the donkey’s hunger

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 214.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>28</sup> For Agamben, the event of modernity is allowed by the entry of *zoē* into the sphere of the polis. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 9. See also, Elizabeth D. Gruber, “Nature on the Verge: Confronting ‘Bare Life’ in *Arden of Faversham* and *King Lear*,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22, no. 1 (2015): 98–114, 99. *Zoē* and *bios* have received much scholarly attention by Hannah Arendt; however, the philosophical discourse of these two terms is beyond the scope of this paper.

should be conceived in “non-animalistic” biopolitical terms of “health,” “necessity,” and “justification.” Roslan’s backyard functions as simulacra of the Israeli periphery whose brutish physicality of pain, duress and immobility permits the condition in which “a human lapses into presumptively ‘lower’ state”<sup>29</sup> that enables what otherwise is denied. Noticeably, the neglected backyard and the parents’ apartment represent human spaces that are “forced to be penetrated.”<sup>30</sup> The permeable metaphor that Berdugo applies to the Israeli periphery situates life and death in an eerie juxtaposition. It is precisely here where the human-donkey correspondence comes into play, while the donkey becomes an “agent of revelation” and offers Roslan a haunting sensation of the familiar and the strange.<sup>31</sup> The depiction of donkey’s eating and Roslan’s lower belly that apparently digests the animal’s food, clarifies the natural (and continuous) bonding between the two; it anchors the most familiar passion in a blunt state of anomie. But there is more. Berdugo offers here an alternative agenda that denies any residues of the Israeli chronicle (protected by its *bios*). When he opens his “transition” to the past, Berdugo adds a subversive comment that one might easily dismiss:

It was one day. 1994. A day that is not an allegory, but a singular day, in and of itself. A day at the beginning of November. No one has been murdered yet in this November of 1994, who can even think about a *future grandiose death*, or falling in love, or cherry bloom in Israel, or about a permanent enslavement to loneliness.<sup>32</sup>

The “future grandiose death” evokes the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on November 4, 1995. But by juxtaposing this (political) grandiose murder with love, cherry bloom, and permanent loneliness, Berdugo unveils his literary intention to narrate an alternative set of priorities that rethinks and reorganizes the political order and agenda.

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth D. Gruber, “Nature on the Verge,” 100.

<sup>30</sup> Even the prostitution-like southern diction evokes this type of permeability see Berdugo, *Donkey*, 89.

<sup>31</sup> Jeanne Addison Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild: Geography, Genus, and Gender* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991,) 75.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 45. My emphasis.

## Donkey as Agent

In *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2006), Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin discuss animals in terms of agency. They note that:

[A]gency has been a problematic issue for both postcolonial and environmental studies since, in the anthropocentric version of this problem, ‘others’ may speak but their speech is often pre-positioned so as not to be heard by those in power [...]. Animals, similarly, are rarely seen independent actors, a sometimes strategic human failing that reminds us that “what is at stake [in recognizing animal agency] is our own ability to think beyond ourselves.”<sup>33</sup>

In the novel, the donkey moves beyond a metonymy to an actual “participant that dynamically engages and exerts an impact on the human drama.”<sup>34</sup> The donkey, as both animal and symbol, exposes “the competing claims” of human and non-human species for life.<sup>35</sup> I will return to the “competing” component in the novel, but even before that, since the donkey arouses and stimulates Roslan,<sup>36</sup> one might read it as a clear affirmation of the very idea of Eros. The novel develops towards an alternative form of life that perceives vulnerability, suffering, and animality as resources for some enacted reality. Precisely because “donkeys are commonplaces,”<sup>37</sup> Roslan, the anti-hero, can claim for existence on the small piece of land that he shares with the animal.

This claim for existence or sense of life, where freedom is put into place, occurs when Roslan gathers weeds for his donkey for the first time. In this simple act of gathering food, “the life or death of the weeds are insignificant to him,” since all

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<sup>33</sup> Erica Fudge, *Animal* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002), 22. See also, Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London: Routledge, 2015), 208.

<sup>34</sup> Fudge, *Animal*, 23.

<sup>35</sup> Anand, “Words on Water,” 23.

<sup>36</sup> In the novella, “My Young Brother Yehuda,” Berdugo also describes an intimacy between the protagonist and his dog. Sami Berdugo, *Orphans* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Jill Bough, *Donkey* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), 7.

that matters is keeping the donkey fed and active. The vivid descriptions mimic the promise of life that feeding itself conceals, as Roslan

takes advantage of what nature delivers in such easiness, gift by gift. And what type of simple doing it is to take from whatever exists, whatever is given, for free, with grace [...] and all this pleases Roslan, wraps his heart tightly, and even his arms get a blissful essence, turn happy, hungry, while gathering more and more.<sup>38</sup>

The description is not only passionate and energetic, but it accentuates Roslan's liveliness in a manner that is rare in the novel. What Berdugo depicts here is a food web in which Roslan is allowed to fully participate and to feel valuable as a subject. This sense of approval—of being an active participant in the event of life—is further accentuated in the following depiction:

No, it's this hour, in the neglected backyard, that actually locates Roslan erect amid his own life, life literally, with its right purpose, and when he saw donkey standing not far from the fresh animal droppings, he took a warmed and wide breath to his lungs, as if by inhaling he affirms the force of life.<sup>39</sup>

In its emotional and libidinal energy, the donkey's force of life might be compared to Roslan's lover Steve, who indeed, "demands the immediate vanishing of the animal, and maybe even more than this, if only possible." Roslan's lover rejects the donkey and uses threats and brutal language to express his disapproval: "I'm telling you, if you don't do something with this donkey, I don't know what I..."<sup>40</sup> The blunt threat of the lover reaffirms and validates the irreplaceable merit of the donkey, juxtaposed here with the human lover. The fact that this threat comes from Roslan's lover, locates the donkey at the emotional-libidinal matrix of the characters, assuring his presence not only as an essential companionship but also as a desired living entity. Steve's reaction also brings to mind Agamben's question,

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<sup>38</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

“why Western politics first constitutes itself through an exclusion (which is simultaneously an inclusion) of bare life. What is the relation between politics and life, if life presents itself as what is included by means of an exclusion?”<sup>41</sup> Translating these questions into the Israeli reality that Berdugo portrays, it seems that donkey carries the peculiar privilege of being the excluded one who mobilizes Roslan’s (excluded) subjectivity. The sense of life and the type of emancipation that donkey offers, cannot be offered by any other human agency.

## Part II

### Naked, Limp, and Perverse: The Abject as Interruption

The subchapter titled “Abjection,” appears early in the novel. It opens immediately after a graphic description of the sexual encounter between Roslan and Steve:

Even when he held in his mouth the ejaculation, and hastened to the shower to spit it there in the deeply and severely cracked sink, even then Roslan kept doing nothing, remained naked and limp on the futon sofa bed, and mostly rediscovered, and quickly, that he is detached, that looming time’s particles do not deserve their existence, to be followed, that for him, they are all fallen, uprooted<sup>42</sup>

This proximity of the limp body, post sexual activity, to a deep sense of displacement is meaningful: just before spitting out the sperm, still impure, sinful gay man, Roslan experiences his utmost displacement. Could sexual activity be more antinormative, provocative, and political? It is here that Roslan considers the very idea of agency, or more precisely the lack of it: “what could have happened, if he-himself did nothing? It is Steve Silberman who was active...”<sup>43</sup> While holding the symbolic abject in his mouth, Roslan is decoding the sexual act into

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<sup>41</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, II.

<sup>42</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 33.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

active/passive, pursuer/pursued categories which accentuates the tension between the sexual functionality of his own body (whose masculinity is questioned by Roslan throughout the book) and its political significance, and by that also its relation to and placement at the “body politic.”

In *Powers of Horrors: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Julia Kristeva argues for a theory of subject formation in which a disavowed “founding repudiation” of the maternal body is the basis of the social self. According to Kristeva, to come into being, the social self must abject, or cast away, “those material elements that remind it of the original union with that body.”<sup>44</sup> Kristeva’s long list of such materials includes tears, blood, sperm, urine, and more—all of which accentuates behaviors that “do not belong to the ‘clean and proper’ social body: incest, crime, etc.”<sup>45</sup> To become a social being, the “I” must expel elements that cannot be entirely expelled, and thus remain a threat.<sup>46</sup> Abjection then resides in “that liminal state that hovers on the threshold of the body and body politic.”<sup>47</sup> Judith Butler, who posits a similar dynamic of rejection, argues that “this exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject.”<sup>48</sup>

The novel presents different forms of abjection, while breaking the binary distinction between abject/subject. The major distinction that the novel aims to collapse is the one between Roslan and Donkey: in this sense, the latter is the all-too-obvious abject. But the indistinctiveness between Roslan and his donkey is expressed by the fact that they both represent different forms (animal and human) of an abject. It is through the so-called forbidden sexual pleasures, illness, and bodily discharge that Berdugo releases the idea of an abject that resides within Roslan: Roslan is the abject who denies his immigrant parents or his foreign lover, and at the same time as a gay immigrant who is part of a minor community he is

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<sup>44</sup> Délice Williams, “Spectacular Subjects: Abjection, Agency, and Embodiment in Indra Sinha’s *Animal’s People*,” *Interventions* 20, no. 4 (2018): 586-603, 587.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*; Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London-New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>47</sup> McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 71.

<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London-New York: Routledge, 1993), 3.



socially, politically, and culturally denied by the normative hegemonic “center.” His exclusion is evidential, and he shares a crucial existential meaning with his donkey.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, Roslan is aware of the abjection that he carries as a mark of Cain and reconciles with it: “Hence Roslan was an abject, and did not refuse to accept the abjection, folded his legs on the futon mattress, tried to hide by threading in between them his almost dead penis that mimics woman’s genitals that he never wanted because he felt angrily...”<sup>50</sup> The effeminacy that Roslan attributes to his genitals positions him as another form of abject, the feminine one. But the reader should note here the type of negation employed by Berdugo to stress the process of Roslan’s reconciliation (with this effeminacy): “*did not refuse to accept*” (my emphasis). This is the undoing of what Kristeva describes as the inability to fully expel: the denied subject, the abject, who is fully aware of his position, reconciles with it, settles, and accepts his threshold position. The doubled negation of “did not refuse” (instead of simply “accepted”) accentuates Roslan’s conflict between his desire to refuse and his involuntary consent. Although the language suggests Roslan’s choice, the reader knows that Roslan is denied choices. Kristeva calls attention to the function of effeminacy in the economy of indistinctiveness between the subject and what is external to the subject. “What we designate as ‘feminine,’” she writes, “will be seen as an ‘other’ without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity.”<sup>51</sup> The subject experiences coming face to face with what Kristeva calls “an unnamable otherness.” This “unnamable” marks the

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<sup>49</sup> Donkey’s health deteriorates throughout the book, but as soon as Roslan gets the animal, he notices the donkey’s skin ailment: his walk is dragged out the road and his eyes are fixed at donkey, focusing now on his gray-brownish fur, whose lateral part, behind the back leg is shaved-like, or maybe even violently cut, and probably will not regrow. The narrator returns periodically to this bald patch. Roslan himself has *pityriasis rosea*, a temporary rash of raised red scaly patches. This condition requires a series of doctor’s appointments and Roslan knows that nothing has changed. The rash neither increased nor disappeared, and if so, so what is it [...] maybe these are signals from the thickness of the body, the inwardness of his limbs, a dormant disease that bursts out Berdugo, *Donkey*, 7 and 77. The condition of the body, however, is one of the novel’s greatest ironies: in its natural state the organic body cannot be trusted to remain intact and is vulnerable to illness and infection. Rina Aryeh, “The Fragmented Body as An Index of Abjection,” in *Abject Visions: Powers of Horror in Art and Visual Culture*, eds. Rina Arya and Nicolas Chare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 146-163, 149.

<sup>50</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 58-59.

economy of non-distinctiveness when the subject cannot differentiate inside from outside or pleasure from pain. “The subject,” writes Kristeva, “will always be marked by the uncertainty of his borders and of his affective valency as well; these are all the more determining as the paternal function was weak or even nonexistent, opening the door to perversion or psychosis.”<sup>52</sup> Abjection, Kristeva stresses, “draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.”<sup>53</sup> This type of abjection that Kristeva describes, of the liminal space where the subject experiences a crisis of meaning, is where transformation—that is, life itself—is possible; the difference between internal and external becomes unclear, and in the process, conditional identity is stripped away to reveal a queer object.<sup>54</sup> This is the possibility that Berdugo wants his reader to consider. It is established early in the book, perhaps in donkey’s very first hours at Roslan’s yard, where Berdugo introduces the possibility of perversion (or bestiality) as the donkey arouses Roslan, awakes his sexual desire, while Roslan, “watches his tiny blade, the one that evokes the forbidden stimulus, measurably forbidden, even if during these moments he doesn’t care about what is not-allowed [...] since donkey enters the wild yard, each time Roslan sees it, his independent freedom is unified and becomes also justified.”<sup>55</sup> The pleasure that momentarily overcomes the pain is in and of itself justified; it is also this pleasure that makes Roslan feel less passive, and he turns from an object to subject whose freedom is justified/valued. This great sense of freedom is conditioned by the presence of the donkey.

### **Masculinity, Interrupted**

A major task that *Donkey* is engaged in is the blurring and queering of normative masculinity of the type that represents normative heterosexuality, establishment, and Israeli systems of power that constitute the Israeli political-militant mentality. By “queering” I wish to emphasize the fluidity of Roslan’s identity: Berdugo wishes, first and foremost, to queer-and-question heteronormative sexuality and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Phillips, “Abjection,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1-2 (2014): 19-21.

<sup>55</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 16.

examine its politicality. As mentioned, Roslan constantly explores and questions his (and not only his) masculinity. While working towards the human/donkey indistinction, Berdugo attends to masculinity whose significance to the Zionist enterprise has received much scholarly attention.<sup>56</sup> This blurring-cum-undermining is achieved through the collapsing of gender binary, often depicted in the novel as a stumbling block or impediment, in the national psyche. A poignant expression of this collapse-turn-indistinctiveness recurs when donkey's gender is in question, a query that puzzles Roslan: "Is Donkey a boy or a girl? Actually, not like that; one should ask, male-donkey or female-donkey, as merely anatomic typology of animals, as they were born, and not according to their sexual orientation or according to the behavior they acquire throughout their lives."<sup>57</sup> Berdugo asks to reverse the "gender trouble" and retrieve its origin: sex that marks the most basic preconditioned category, before (gender) roles are inscribed according to the conventional social order. Essentially, masculinity is portrayed as an environmental condition or indicator; at times, it is an ecosocial matter.<sup>58</sup> In a supermarket, where Roslan expects to encounter women, he wonders, "And why women do not come to the place? Where were the mothers lost?"<sup>59</sup> In the immediate literary sense, he might be referring to his own mother, but the question reveals a poignant political concern of imbalance between a necessary lost force (the mother) and a national contagious "infection" (masculinity). This absence of the (m)others (or the female figure in general), creates a void that allows Berdugo to feminize his male characters through their sexuality, habits, or lifestyle, and complicate the abjection by teasing it. For Berdugo the boundaries of Jewish abject—the hesitant one, whose sexual identity is blurred—are intimately connected to properly embodied masculinity, the one that should take hold

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<sup>56</sup> Tallie Ben-Daniel, "Zionism's Frontier Legacies: Colonial Masculinity and the American Council for Judaism in San Francisco," *American Studies* 54, no. 4 (2016): 49-71.

<sup>57</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 169.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 94 and 114. In the novel, Israeli masculinity is an affliction, a condition that infects other metonymies of the Israeli space and society. The palm trees in Kiryat Yam, for instance, are infected by this spiky masculinity that is coarse and rough, an image that suggests the way man affects, conquers, and masters nature; or the male shoppers at the local supermarket, whose bodies are content, fed up, calmed, walking in a crawling that is fertilizing and security-like, of the IDF. Once again, an image that evokes a repulsive heroism associated directly with its most prominent agency: the IDF.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

instead of the normative one, that he defines as the “average male.” Throughout the novel, Berdugo provides different representations of how “men negotiate and perform their masculinity and compete for hegemony, focusing on what might be called failed or abject masculinity in particular.”<sup>60</sup> Berdugo’s references to masculinity are scattered throughout the novel, but embedded in a way that demands his reader’s attention. At one point in *Donkey*, for instance, Berdugo poses in parentheses that “interrupt” the flow of Roslan’s reflections (on his boyfriend’s anatomy), some focal/basic questions: “(and who is the average male? Where is he exactly? Well, let us see him already, so we can point at him.)”<sup>61</sup> First, Berdugo questions the existence of a category such as “average male” and second, he “points at him” almost as an act of shaming. But does he refer to the average man as a statistic or rather as a mediocre man, neither too good nor too bad? The questions, however, bring the two options to mind. The form of masculinity that the novel portrays might best be described in Kristeva’s terms as “neither subject, nor object.”<sup>62</sup> Roslan is unable to perform masculinity in a way that is socially accepted, and thus his subjectivity, that remains “open” or “in the making” is called into question. Who are then the male prototypes in the novel? Roslan’s major male-representative, perhaps his only role-model, is his father Arthur, whom he describes as a “home-male” who “carries forever the certification of his birth, keeps it in his memory so that is never forgotten.”<sup>63</sup> Note the proximity between the animalized collocation “home male” and the phrase “domesticated animals” (in Hebrew: ‘ḥayat bayit,’ home animal). Here, too, Berdugo, aspires to release animality from masculinity which leaves the latter as a set of almost savage, tribal codes, vulgar, and essentially of eastern origin and brutish nature.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ellen Rees, “Abject Masculinity in Niels Fredrik Dahl’s *Herre*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 93, no. 2 (2021): 266-286, 267.

<sup>61</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 212. The line evokes Yona Wallach’s well-known poem, “Presleep Poem,” in which she writes: “If there is another sex br/ing it here so that we’ll get to know it...” see Zafrira Lidovsky Cohen, *Loosen the Fetters of The Tongue, Woman: The Poetry and Poetics of Yona Wallach* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2003), 66. For the poem in Hebrew, See Yona Wallach, *Selected poems 1963-1985* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1992), 65.

<sup>62</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 1.

<sup>63</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 137.

<sup>64</sup> This vulgarity is also emphasized in Berdugo’s description of the male circle of prayers at the synagogue. Here, Berdugo relies on Hebrew and Arabic as he mimics the specific jargon and its vulgar vocality. *Ibid.*, 247-248.

Masculinity is described as a tribal event in this family, and is associated with and validated by physical potency and strength: “The strength of the house in Azerbaijan as well as its support, were also compared to a male, and he, Arthur, obviously belongs to that group of men, because *kol ehad*, and not *ahat*, began to be there, in Kavkaz, a home-male already in early stages of his youth, and even before that, as he was born.”<sup>65</sup> Berdugo’s diction here, and particularly his choice of “kol ehad” (everyone) versus “lo ahat” (literally: “not even one,” in its feminine form) is highly important, sophisticated, and manipulative since the phrase “lo ahat” could mean both “not once” and “not even one female.” Both phrases/meanings fit the context of the sentence, while leaving the initial intention of the writer rather blurred. Clearly, Berdugo is interested in this duality that complicates and subverts cultural tradition in general and Roslan’s (eastern) Azerbaijanian lineage, in particular. Roslan, however, admits that he “doesn’t really belong anymore to the legacy of the young republic of Azerbaijan.”<sup>66</sup> Berdugo “kills” the two major father-figures in the novel (Roslan and Steve’s father), and although Roslan’s (abject) mother,<sup>67</sup> Olga, is also “killed” (going up in flames with her husband), the killing of the father is a literary “act” that Berdugo uses (not for the first time).<sup>68</sup> We are all familiar with the Freudian thesis of the murder of the father in *Moses and Monotheism*: “In connection with Judaic religion the archaic father and master of the primeval horde is killed by the conspiring sons who, later seized with a sense of guilt for an act that was upon the

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. The etymological origin of the name Ruslan is an old Caucasian form of the Turkic word arslan that means lion. Roslan (or Ruslan), then, could refer to lion (*Arye* in Hebrew), which suggests the lion with its masculine aspirations as the totem of the family. This masculine aspiration—that again, relies on animals—is firmly counteracted by the donkey, who challenges the traditional and heteronormative masculine psyche. The lion here, Roslan, not only exiles himself from the legacy of predators, but he also lives and takes care of a donkey. The tribal legacy of the Isekov family and its totem is contaminated by the donkey, the abject-Totem.

<sup>67</sup> According to Kristeva, the maternal body is neither an object nor non-object for the baby, but rather abject. As the process of subjectivity develops through the infant’s separation from the mother during the course of weaning, the infant undergoes a stage of abjection in which it ‘abjects,’ or finds abject, its mother’s body. See Jayne Wark, “Queering Abjection: A Lesbian, Feminist, and Canadian Perspective,” in *Abject Visions*, eds. Arya and Chare, 50-76, 55.

<sup>68</sup> This topic has been discussed with Berdugo in different interviews. For a further reading see Sami Berdugo, *Land Upon an Ongoing Tale* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2014) [Hebrew]; Sami Berdugo, *Because Guy* (Tel Aviv Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2017) [Hebrew].

whole inspired by ambivalent feelings, end up restoring paternal authority, no longer as an arbitrary power but as a right.”<sup>69</sup> By breaking this primal taboo (by killing not only Roslan’s father, but also the father of his lover Steve), Berdugo interrupts the all-too-secured line of fathers, breaks their continuity and restores the chance for a new type of authority.

### Hebrew, Interrupted

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt asserts that words and action “are the political events that ‘mark’ the linearity of a human life such that its *bios* can become that subject matter of a ‘story’ written by those who have witnessed the effects of the actions and words.”<sup>70</sup> It is this linearity that *Donkey* breaks to the point that language here becomes an autonomous biopolitical indicator; it is the event that shapes identities, redefines and recreates political categories. In the linguistic context, the novel’s political ambition is to accentuate the failure of the standard Hebrew to render the complexities that the peripheral reality offers. Chapter 2, for instance, opens with a striking insight that captures the mental-cum-linguistic poverty of the southern periphery:

“You’re here.” Like that [. . .] Steve asserts with his superficial voice, and poor dimples are exposed in his cheeks. And suffice it to say that he is exactly like that: insignificant; his personality is like that too. Here, in two words Steve sums up what is apparently so untrue to the back weedy yard, neither ‘you’ nor ‘here.’ “We are here” says Roslan and remains standing.<sup>71</sup>

Berdugo breaks down Steve’s casual expression to juxtapose exclusion with inclusion; the poignant contrast between the second-person singular pronoun (you) and the first-person plural pronoun one (we), teases not only the conflictual Israeli politics, but mainly the distinction between Roslan and the donkey, one that the former wishes to clear away. This, we should note, is narrated early in the

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<sup>69</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 56.

<sup>70</sup> Vatter, “Nativity and Biopolitics in Hannah Arendt,” 146.

<sup>71</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 23.

novel, when Berdugo establishes Roslan and Donkey’s form of ‘We.’ In another chapter, Berdugo conveys his linguistic perspective while describing a futile, “wasted” dialogue between Roslan and a policewoman (the “authority”) regarding the donkey. “It is clear to the eye and heart that here, in these seconds, a mere linguistic event took place, a language-instance that doesn’t constitute a certain new reality, that doesn’t involve any enthusiasm or concern for a change.”<sup>72</sup> But what is the exact biopolitical meaning of the “*mere* linguistic event”? The “mere” suggests linguistic immobility with no single promise or even a chance for a political change. When Roslan encounters the authority, Berdugo describes him as “paralyzed,” enveloped in a disappointment, “in the killing of a chance.”<sup>73</sup> This is the linguistic stagnation in which time (Roslan’s here-and-now, the present) freezes and any movement is denied. By “movement,” I mean a chance for life, the “additional capacity” in Agamben’s words, “that must be understood as problematic”<sup>74</sup> by the authority. Conversely, following a casual friendly remark in Arabic, Roslan admits that the person who had just greeted him “approves of me, laughs with me, understands me, he’s something of me [...] and there’s no need to translate the words, their kindness appears in their prolonged pronunciation, their liberty is stamped in the air.” The metalinguistic-cum-metaphysical understanding is at play here and it goes beyond words—as between Roslan and donkey. Unlike his conservative lover Steve, who preaches for a homogeneous (standard) Hebrew that functions as *superego* to block assimilation, Roslan/Berdugo maintains that the Arabic which is “non-Hebraic and non-Jewish, is proper [...] overflowed with preciseness the mutual fondness, and solidarity, even if for a few seconds.”<sup>75</sup> Berdugo connects the “abject” Arabic (which threatens the “pure” Jewish identity) to human freedom: the neighbor-language that blurs the borderlines between the Israeli subject and standard Hebrew, between the closed territory and the open-border, is the language that signifies a deep sense of solidarity and a chance that Roslan cannot obtain anywhere else. The subchapter titled “Speech” is striking in its clarity: words are described here as a creative tool that a person possesses—creative even if they

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, II.

<sup>75</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 115.

(words) hold “the strongest destructive force that the same man possesses.”<sup>76</sup> Language, then, may both create worlds and destroy them. It is in this chapter that Berdugo voices Roslan’s wish to avoid this linguistic excessiveness and “extends the boundaries of silencing.”<sup>77</sup> The distinction between silence (noun) and silencing (gerund) is dramatic: between the banal act of speech—excessive yet free speech—and its (political) denial, raises a comfort zone of possibility where Roslan wishes to dwell.

### **Conclusion: Canon, Interrupted**

In *Donkey*, Berdugo considers and constructs a type of subjectivity that the Israeli body politic severely excludes. Berdugo creates a bio-“interval”: a space of humans who are neither fully human (or whose humanity is overlooked) nor fully animal (or alternatively a bit of both) that enables despair, Thanatos, and “slim likelihood” to coexist along with Eros, hope, and even delight. From an eco/biopolitical perspective, the novel reveals how the peripheral neglect, as a subversive narrative that rewrites the Israeli southern periphery through different forms of violence, poverty, and political apathy, takes on a different significance: rather than accepting the actual tragedy of the historical Roslan, Berdugo releases life. At the end of the book, following the chilling and graphic depiction of the parents who perish in fire, Roslan is described as one who actively “took himself off the main paved road and turned into a narrow one.”<sup>78</sup> The type of subjectivity that Berdugo wants us to consider is one that *actively* resists death as the fate that one’s state and society designate. The genesis of this life, out of the allegedly inevitable death, is enabled through the collapsing of the relentless hierarchy between Roslan and his donkey and also through the constant teasing of the idea of death in its different forms. For that reason, Roslan is excited by the fire that he sets in the “Mizrahi summerizing areas”<sup>79</sup> outside his parents’ building. His excitement incited by death is a form of conquering death.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 140.



In Emile Habiby's highly acclaimed book, *The Secret Life of Saeed, the Pessoptimist* (1974), the title character is a Palestinian who escaped to Lebanon in 1948 and finds his way back to (now) Israel, as an informer. Saeed credits a donkey with his rebirth.<sup>80</sup> Habiby describes the donkey as “the substitute, the scapegoat, the supplement” that is also metonymic to Saeed who is “the substitute, the scapegoat, and the supplement” of the Israeli establishment.<sup>81</sup> In this book, Habiby presents the human-donkey as a possible threat to the Israeli political establishment. In a subversive act of authorship, Habiby writes his fourteenth chapter as a footnote in which he graphically recounts the grisly fate of stray donkeys following the war of 1948.<sup>82</sup> Yet, his powerful allegoric statement that “Many are the nations saved from a butcher's knife by an animal!”<sup>83</sup> resonates with Berdugo's novel that first problematizes and eventually rejects the preeminence of man above beast, while emphasizing the shared fate of man and animal throughout Israeli existence.

Berdugo abandons the national “accepted” narrative, for the story of a single marginal man, “the scapegoat,” whose life is reclaimed thanks to donkey, and by that he both creates an intertextual relation to Habiby's footnote (that in itself marks a textual marginality) and concretizes his allegory. Here Berdugo challenges the traditional position of the Observer of the People of Israel—a position that has traditionally been taken by established writers, out of their public authority and historical responsibility, to define Jewish life—through observing the overlooked and unattended, neglected areas of Israel and their lost potential. Precisely from his well-established and highly acclaimed status as a writer, Berdugo shifts hierarchies and ridicules the political agenda and its “accepted” categories. Berdugo then pointedly teases the literary canon and abandons the traditional stance of the narrator. At the peak of this exchange between fiction and reality, Berdugo settles the open account with his literary milieu:

On what the hell are you writing, the writers?

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<sup>80</sup> Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed*, 6.

<sup>81</sup> Soker-Schwager, *Spare Thoughts*, 282.

<sup>82</sup> When asked where their asses had gone, the Hebron officials laughed and replied that Tel Aviv butchers had used them all to make sausages. Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed*, 44.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

Why are you buried in all that?

Wake up! Wake up to the land, to the inherent pain of the local settlers, to the invention of the buildings and roads, to the breaking of the ugly Hebrew, to the not-good children, to the youngsters who just matured, wake up to the ostentatiousness of all the people of Israel and the people of the territories that are subject to it, go out to the eastern splendor that westerns its foundation, to the beauty that Roslan knows for the first time in his life, before these moments will pass from him.<sup>84</sup>

The lines have the tone of a manifesto that clarifies Berdugo's rage at his fellow writers who cannot see what is at stake: the bad children, the ugly speech, and unattended beauty that reveals itself momentarily as an authentic source of "bare life" that is perpetually denied and thus is about to disappear. Berdugo's complaint here is both authoritative and vulnerable, a silent (as a written text might be) scream that is unleashed before it's too late. Reading the donkey as an analytical category allows the debunking of social situations reified as natural; in a way, Berdugo writes this book to resist what has become natural. Berdugo adds an epilogue in the form of a letter to the late Roslan Isekov who gave the protagonist of the novel his name. Berdugo's writing is stormy and emotional, as he insists that Roslan has not died but in fact lives "much" on narrow wooden logs of scaffolding, in construction areas, where "he walks in heights." Here, Berdugo foregrounds the issue of visibility as a trope that recurs in the book. "I see you not disappearing, you've never disappeared," he writes, while addressing the sad fact that the Israeli society ignores Roslan as much as it overlooks the donkey. The final sentence with the dramatic apostrophe: "See him—he is alive, his blood be in *your* own eyes" [my emphasis] is not only a twist of the phrase "*damo be-rosho*" (his blood be in his own head, that is, he bears the responsibility), but it is a direct accusation against the Israeli establishment of not seeing the real, flesh-and-blood Roslan in both his life and death.

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<sup>84</sup> Berdugo, *Donkey*, 242-243.

**Riki Traum** is professor of Comparative Literature and Critical Writing at Ramapo College of New Jersey; and a lecturer of English, American, and Jewish literature at Fairleigh Dickinson University. Her research and publications focus on prose and poetry of the 1960s in Israel and the United States and on the avant-garde female voices of the era. Dr. Traum is also a translator of poetry from English into Hebrew. She is the editor of a volume of the poetry of Rina Shani (1937-1983), a powerful poetic voice of the 1960s in Israel, and she is also the author of its introductory essay. Her work has appeared in books and literary journals both in Israel and the United States. Currently, she is working on an anthology of translations of American women's poetry of the 1960s and 1970s into Hebrew. She teaches creative writing and explores relations between poetry and the visual arts, and painting in particular.

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