
Poetically Incorrect

Hanan Hever

**Beautiful Motherland of Death:
Aesthetics and Politics in the
Poetry of Uri Tzvi Greenberg**

Am Oved, 2004, 213 pages, Hebrew.

Reviewed by Tsur Ehrlich

Hanan Hever's *Beautiful Motherland of Death*, a collection of seven essays on the poet Uri Tzvi Greenberg, is not so much a scholarly interpretation as an indictment. Hever, a professor of literature at the Hebrew University, concedes that Greenberg is one of the greatest Hebrew poets since Haim Nahman Bialik. Nonetheless, he aims here to prove that Greenberg was not simply a fascist, as others have claimed, but also a *poetic* fascist—in other words, that fascism pervades not only the content, but also the style and structure of Greenberg's poetry.

Hever's accusation, moreover, is aimed not only at Greenberg, but also at Jewish nationalism and Israeli

society. Here, however, an even more serious allegation is added: In refusing to reject Greenberg completely, Israel and Zionism are accused of *concealing* their own latent fascism.

From the outset, *Beautiful Motherland of Death* promises to be a pyrotechnic read, given that the critic and the poet come from opposite extremes of the political spectrum. Indeed, Greenberg (1896-1981), who aligned himself with Ze'ev Jabotinsky's Revisionist movement of the late 1920s, was too hawkish even for the hawks: His radical worldview, along with his mercurial personality, prevented him from ever finding a permanent home in the mainstream Right. Hever, by contrast, is one of the leading Israeli intellectuals on the post-Zionist Left. A shared radicalism is a powerful catalyst for this kind of meeting of the minds. "Greenberg's poetry," Hever has said, "has depths from which I never tire of drinking. I never stop reading him. There is something in his radicalism that fascinates me."

If Greenberg's radicalism fascinates Hever, it also disturbs him. In an interview with *Haaetz* shortly after his book was published, Hever explained that "attitudes of so radical a nature have not been condemned [by Israeli society] in any drastic way, but rather consigned to the margins as the dialogue continues." According to Hever, Israeli society is guilty of tolerating fascist undercurrents in its midst. In *Beautiful Motherland of Death*, this claim carries neo-Marxist overtones:

The possibilities for the existence of a common ground between Uri Tzvi Greenberg and the Israeli hegemony, and the fact that there *is* such a combination of unacceptable political views and their legitimate public airing... bears witness to the structure of the profundity, hidden from view, of a Jewish nationalism that is becoming the norm in the mechanisms of its supremacy and sovereignty.

Hever is thus enchanted by Greenberg's aesthetics, but despises his poetry's political content. In this sense he is no different from generations of readers who preceded him. But while they managed to resolve this dissonance by distinguishing between Greenberg's politics and his aesthetics, Hever finds this solution intolerable precisely because of the way Greenberg's poetry mixes the political with the aesthetic; indeed, the reader cannot avoid confronting

the political subtexts beneath the aesthetic surface. As Hever points out, the "aesthetization of politics" is Greenberg's trademark, a claim he reiterates throughout the book.

The aesthetization of politics, Hever explains, is a prominent feature of fascist art and of fascism itself. In the view of the fascist founder of the futurist movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, for example, beauty is the highest ideal, and politics must be subordinated to it. Morality, on the other hand, only muddies the waters, since "art can exist only as violence, cruelty, and injustice." Indeed, the Hitler and Mussolini regimes set great store on aesthetics in public life, even if, to them, the aesthetic was merely a means to an end. Fascist propagandists were well aware that it is far more effective to excite the masses by appealing to instinct rather than to intellect.

Thus, in Hever's eyes, any poet who exalts the values of beauty and glory, and occasionally employs them as moral criteria, is suspect of fascism. If, moreover, the poet happens to be passionately nationalistic, glorifies the return of the Jewish people to its biblical homeland, exhorts his readers to wield the sword in defense of that homeland, loathes socialism, and paints a stark post-Holocaust picture of a wall of eternal enmity dividing Jews from non-Jews—in short, if he is

Uri Tzvi Greenberg—that suspicion quickly becomes a conviction.

Unfortunately, Hever does not offer enough evidence to support his claim. He does not, for example, seem bothered by the fact that fascism is essentially atheistic, whereas Greenberg's poetry, at least from the 1930s onward, is imbued with profound religiosity. Nor does the background to Greenberg's alleged "racism"—the violent response of the local Arabs to the Jews' early attempts to settle in Palestine; the horror of the Holocaust, in which his entire family was murdered; and, finally, his first-hand experience of the Arab riots in Hebron in 1929 and throughout Palestine in 1936-1939—give Hever pause. Instead, he tars the poet with the same brush as the European fascists of the 1920s and 1930s.

True, one mining for proof of extremism in Greenberg's poetry will not come up empty-handed: There are indeed lines in the poet's oeuvre that are striking in their nationalistic belligerency. One example is the ethnocentric, although not technically racist, assertion that "there are two types of people: Circumcised and uncircumcised," as well as Greenberg's many "prayers" for the victory of the people of Israel over their Arab enemies. Hever also quotes a stanza from the poem "The Book

of No God, No King, No Hero"—a description of Tel Aviv residents' fear of the neighboring Arab villages during the riots of 1936-1939—as an example of the poet's racism: "Sumel Village crouched like a cat with kittens / and Beit Dagon akin to a den of foxes / seem as daunting to Tel Aviv / as Verdun's fortress to soldiers." As I have heard Hever explain to a class of students, these lines demonstrate that Greenberg believed the Arabs to be no better than animals. He also ascribes to Greenberg the belief that violence is a "natural and inseparable part of life and the aesthetic realm," as evidenced by his poem "Song on the Eve of the Passover of Redemption": "As inscribed in the law of survival for all sound nations: / From time to time we go out to battle / and there is singing. Ceremony. And there is weeping. Orphanhood. Widowhood."

Yet Hever's interpretations are misleading, since the lines he quotes are often taken out of context. In the case of "Song on the Eve of the Passover of Redemption," for instance, the lines are excerpted from the section that begins, "Blessed be joyful paeans to peace," and which goes on to venerate peace, not war. So, too, is the title of Hever's book, taken from another of Greenberg's poems, deceptive, appearing as it does to be a glorification of death in line with the aesthetic-fascistic hierarchy of values. Only late

in the book does Hever reveal that this line of poetry is placed in the mouth of a Jewish refugee from Europe who has fled, in his mind, to the netherworld of those who perished in the Holocaust—a world that is far more beautiful in his eyes than the murderous world of the living.

Hever's critique of Greenberg is based not only on a selective and biased reading of specific passages, but also on a fashionable reductionism that ignores the uniqueness of the Jewish and Israeli experience in order to squeeze Greenberg into a European post-national, post-colonial paradigm. Thus is Greenberg's vision of the ancient Kingdom of Israel rendered, in Hever's language, simply "monarchism"; loyalty to the Jewish collective is "racism"; redemption is "utopian"; and poetic vision itself is merely "aesthetics."

Hever's reductionism is also at work in his interpretations of Greenberg's poetic motifs. Words such as "song," "beautiful," "splendor," and "gold" serve as opportunities for poetic reflection on the spiritual and moral ideals of justice and faith. Hever, however, interprets them literally, as purely aesthetic values. Thus the lines, "And a mighty organ sunk in Kidron / responds full-voiced to a divine song-offering" are stripped, under Hever's heavy hand, of all traces of prayerful yearning, leaving us

with merely the beauty of the image. By denuding Greenberg's symbols of their more profound meanings, Hever is left with a repository of dead examples to which he may easily apply his theoretical paradigm.

What significance does Hever therefore attach to the category of the "aesthetic" in general, and to its role in Greenberg's poetry in particular? On the one hand, the aesthetic is amoral, de-intellectualized beauty; it is the creative, unrestrained thinking that Freud called "primary" processes. But in Hever's view, the aesthetic is also the absolute, given in eternal categories: "The aesthetic," he writes, "is a category into which everything is gathered and raised to a pure, exalted level, undisturbed by the pragmatic constraints of historical life." Greenberg, Hever says, gives the vision absolute status and prefers it to reality.

Hever insists, however, that in Greenberg's poetry, the veneration of the aesthetic comes at the expense of other crucial concerns. "The aesthetization of politics," he writes, "prevents Greenberg's poetry from asking moral and practical questions." Yet this is surely misguided. Never mind the fact that questions of justice, responsibility, revenge, leadership, diplomacy, war, and peace are in evidence throughout Greenberg's

poetry. More important is the question: What *is* beauty to Greenberg? Is it really, as Hever would have us believe, the highest value in his poetic hierarchy? It is true that Greenberg's poetry is beautiful, yet beauty is hardly the point of his poems. In fact, in his later work, Greenberg seems at pains to de-aestheticize his poems so as not to detract from their message. We may even say that although Greenberg often displays a consummate control of artful stylistic devices, he is in fact at his best when he sets them aside.

Indeed, Greenberg's poems are far more rewarding if we understand that they use beauty as a device, by way of which the poet, together with the reader, may approach the transcendent. A well-known stanza from his "Last Prayer" provides an excellent example:

If you have decreed: Our brow shall
not brush the heights
nor shall we by prophecy ascend the
rungs of the golden ladder—
then let us make a covenant with
your living soil
in the beautiful vale of man,
*and from the tablet of our lives erase
one word: death*

The aesthetic is here represented by the words "golden" and "beautiful"; the former serves as a stepping stone

on the road to the poetic vision, while the latter sanctifies life.

Hever insists that Greenberg sees poetry as predominantly a matter of aesthetics, a substitute for ideological and rational judgment and for the practice of politics—that is, as something that possesses an absolute validity of its own. He is remiss, however, in failing to quote those lines from Greenberg's poetry that suggest an alternative possibility:

And woe to the man devoid of
poetry,
for the poem is the guiding wisdom,
the solid base for imminent joy
that is certainly happiness ahead of
time.

Hever is not content merely to ferret out instances of Greenberg's political and poetic fascism, however. He also condemns the society that allowed Greenberg's views to take root. Yet on this point, the picture is far more complex than he paints it: Greenberg certainly enjoyed the admiration of the prestate nationalist groups Irgun and Lehi, but the mainstream Jewish public rejected his ideas as too extreme—especially after he was unfairly accused of inspiring the murder of the Labor Zionist leader and writer Haim Arlosoroff in 1933.

It is true that there were many who appreciated Greenberg's writing.

He was awarded Israel's most prestigious literary prizes—the Israel Prize and three Bialik prizes—and counted himself among David Ben-Gurion's closest friends. Furthermore, Greenberg's monumental lament on the destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust, included in his book *Streets of the River* (1951), enabled Israeli society, united in mourning, to reclaim the poet it had long shunned. Indeed, this rediscovery of Greenberg in the 1950s is the real source of Hever's animus, and the focus of two full chapters of his book. In his view, in *Streets of the River* Greenberg capitalized on a moment of societal consensus to propagate his racist doctrine. It is, in Hever's analysis, "an anti-humanistic dirge... the direct and crass representation of the killing, the bereavement, the murder and the slaughter, it is actually the starting point for a radical process of total transition into the area of the aesthetic."

Hever dwells in particular on Greenberg's special relationship with Ben-Gurion, offering it as proof of the poet's acceptance by Israeli society. Indeed, Hever reveals the unusual nature of their mutual admiration—that is, despite the fact that Ben-Gurion ostracized Menachem Begin's Herut movement, of which Greenberg was a member. For his part, Greenberg bore a heavy grudge

against Ben-Gurion's Mapai party, the forerunner of Labor, for its betrayal of the nationalist underground defense forces in the turbulent years leading up to the establishment of the state. Nonetheless, the two men remained loyal to one another in the most difficult of times.

To explain the unexpected relationship between the two men, Hever employs the same constricting theoretical categories which he uses throughout the book. Ben-Gurion, he explains, favored a total separation between the aesthetic and the political in literature. Ironically, this allowed the socialist-Zionist leader to read the works of the radical-nationalist poet in isolation from his political views, and to appreciate their beauty. Ben-Gurion went as far as claiming that Greenberg was the "nation's intellectual," and that his poetry embodied a pure sense of "Jewish-ethnic national honor." The political adversaries' differences, therefore, were overshadowed by their profound connection, one which threatened to merge the political (Ben-Gurion) with the aesthetic (Greenberg). As Hever explains, their dialogue was the driving force behind, among other things, "the will to preserve within the hegemonic discourse... the ostensibly repressed fascination with messianism, with nationalism, and with power, as proposed by Greenberg, which

translates the colorlessness of daily life into glorious, beautiful aestheticism.”

Hever forgets, however, that both the literary honors given to Greenberg and his friendship with Ben-Gurion were the exceptions rather than the rule. Although Israeli society did not throw Greenberg’s writings on the pyre, it still kept them at arm’s length. Indeed, today’s Israeli high-school students will most likely graduate without having studied even a single poem of Greenberg’s. At most, they will have heard him described as one of several “controversial” Hebrew poets.

Yet Hever believes that Israeli society has not gone far enough in demonizing Greenberg. In an interview with *Haaretz*, he explains that while Greenberg indeed “remains on the fringe, rejected and persecuted,” he was “never reviled as someone with whom we should have no dealings.” Of course, poets and intellectuals at the other extreme of political radicalism, including even those who contest the right of Israel to exist, do not in Hever’s view rate this sort of treatment. Thus, although Hever proposes a “renewed critical engagement of the Zionist-national debate,” one doubts that he would make a similar proposal for “critical engagement” of the anti-Zionist poet Yitzhak Laor, or the decision to award this year’s Prime Minister’s Prize for Literature to the anti-Zionist poet Maxim Gilan.

Hanan Hever’s argument is therefore three-pronged: He declares Greenberg the man a fascist; he “exposes” the fascism within Greenberg’s poetical style; and he condemns Israeli society for granting Greenberg legitimacy and ensuring him a place in the public discourse. As we have seen, however, Hever’s first two claims fail to convince, on account of their prejudiced and reductionist interpretations of Greenberg’s poetry; the third claim is simply untrue. To the limited extent that Israel has ever accepted Greenberg, it should be seen as a tribute to the flexibility and tolerance of a society willing to engage so controversial a poet—just the kind of tolerance that Hever lacks.

Despite its ideological and theoretical distortions, however, Hever’s book is valuable for its wide-ranging, provocative discussion of Greenberg’s poetry. *Beautiful Motherland of Death* will hopefully encourage other scholars to pay closer attention to this neglected artist—scholars who can deepen our understanding of his poems, and who know how to handle them with care.

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