

**RABBI AKIVA AND ZEV BACHER IN THE TRENCHES:
LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND WAR IN AVIGDOR HAMEIRI'S
*THE GREAT MADNESS***

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Much of the prose literature of the Great War was written by men who took part in it; it often takes the form of docu-novels. Only one example of this genre exists in Hebrew—Avidgor Hameiri's war novels. His books are unique in offering the Hebrew-reading public in the 1930s an eyewitness report of life at the front. The author's biography and his decision to compose his war narrative in Hebrew highlight the predicament of the Jewish soldiers caught up in the events. Hameiri's novel *The Great Madness* was the first bestseller published in pre-state Israel and below I explore the reasons for this success.

In 1929, a Hebrew novel was published in Palestine, becoming a best-seller almost overnight. Its subject was the Great War as experienced by a young Jew. The protagonist of *The Great Madness* is Avidgor Feuerstein, a Hungarian intellectual who joins the army at the beginning of the war and recounts his experiences from the eve of the war, through military training, to the battlefield, and eventually, captivity. The main events in the protagonist's life correspond to those of the author; the novel thus resembles a diary, or an autobiography, which reflects experience mimetically.¹ The making of the book, which the author insists was written during the events narrated, does not allow for the perspective and distance necessary for literary reworking nor for a detachment from the subject-matter typical of other literary creations. "I began to make notes two days after meeting the sergeant-major and finished the last chapter in Chortkov, the first station of my captivity in Russia, thirteen years ago," writes Hameiri in his introduction to the first edition of the novel. And he adds, "I have neither polished nor coarsened my notes, nor did I add to them or subtract from them. I made my notes and waited for the finale, for the return to general sanity."² In these opening remarks, Hameiri gives his work the status of a docu-novel. The

¹ H. Yaoz, "לבטי זהות ולבטי קיומיות יהודית ביצירת המאירי" (Identity questions and Jewish existential questions in the work of Hameiri), *Zehut* 3 (Summer 1984): 218.

² A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness* (trans. Y. Lotan; Haifa: Or-Ron, 1984), p. ii. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

subtitle of the Hebrew book is “notes”—not tales or novel; neither is it a history and it does not insist on historical truth.³

The author is Avigdor Hameiri (Feuerstein), born in the town of Davidhaza in the Carpatho-Ukraine (then a part of Hungary) in 1890. As a child, he was educated at his grandfather’s house, learning Hebrew and the Hebrew Bible. At the age of fifteen, the young Avigdor was admitted to the gymnasium near the rabbinical college in Budapest where he received secular education alongside a traditional Jewish one. In 1907, his first poem appeared in print, in the Hebrew weekly *Hamitzpe*. While pursuing his career as a Hebrew poet, he also worked as a journalist writing in Hungarian. With the outbreak of the Great War, Avigdor Feuerstein volunteered for the army, and he served as an officer at the Austro-Russian front. In the autumn of 1916, he was captured by the Russians and sent to a camp in Siberia. He was freed after the Russian revolution and traveled across Russia until 1919 when he reached Odessa, at the time one of the centers of modern Hebrew culture. In 1921, he immigrated to British-mandatory Palestine. He settled in Tel Aviv, where he lived until his death in 1970.

During the 1920s, Feuerstein’s war literature was published in the land of Israel under his Hebrew name Hameiri. He published three collections of stories (*Under Red Skies* [1925], *Jacob’s Bow* [1926], and *In the Name of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth* [1928]) based on his war experience as well as a play and two documentary novels. *The Great Madness* covers the period from the eve of the war until his capture by Russian soldiers, and his second novel, *Hell on Earth*, describes the time spent in captivity and the subsequent travels up to his arrival in Palestine. While the novels were written as diaries during the years of war and captivity, the short stories treat the war in a highly stylized and symbolic manner.⁴

³ G. Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), discusses the truth claims of testimonial narratives, especially those of Holocaust survivors. He argues that memoirs are authentic though they are judged against a “hypothetical original version” of the events (p. 92). See also chap. 6 “Testimony and Authenticity” for a discussion of such narratives and Hartman’s comment on p. 94 concerning the language of the testimony, an issue to which I shall return below.

⁴ *The Great Madness* is written in the first person and deals with real events, but by transforming experience into literary language, the facts receive artistic quality that distances them from documentary writing or traditional historiography. This type of literature is referred to by Paul Fussell as “memoir fiction”; see discussion of the work of Robert Graves in P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 220. Hameiri’s novel uses the structure of memory writing but with a conscious decision to write literature rather than a war diary. George Parfitt notes that such writing is typical of the literature of the Great War:

The novelist of the war stands between the diarist and the writer of an official military history. On the one hand the novelist needs the details of the diarist, but on the other has a

There are many hints in the novel to support Hameiri's claim that the notes were, at least partially, written during the war. At times, the factual information is incomplete or mistaken and the author corrects himself in later chapters. Also, the description of the fighting is short and laconic, although the novel is about the experience of war:

It was a ferocious, desperate battle. For two days it went on at shelling distance, then we closed in and fought with bayonets. The Russians retreated, we occupied some of their bunkers, and on the fourth day we entered the town of Censtochowa. We won it with blood, after a monstrous fight and a lot of casualties.⁵

The battles themselves are similar to one another, and Hameiri is aware of the inadequacy of verbal descriptions of such an intensive, immediate experience when he writes:

I re-read the notes I made in my diary the day before, in which I described the battle, and I saw they were worthless. Mere chatter. There is no trace in them of a single one of the myriad sights of the battle. Words, words... Nothing. I don't think the genius has been born who can really do this. Perhaps if Beethoven and Dostoevsky were combined in a single soul!⁶

The notes here are a mumble of orders uttered under fire. As the novel was, to a certain extent, composed at the front, the author had more time for writing between battles than at the times of fighting.

Similarly, when introducing the horror description of what befell him during his short captivity by the Russians and the brutality of the drunken officers on the eve of the Orthodox Christmas, he writes, "In writing of these events I am sickened again. It's difficult to describe what we went through

concern with larger units of shape that usually concern the writer of a diary (G. Parfitt, *Fiction of the First World War* [London: Faber, 1988], p. 43).

Avner Holtzman defines Hameiri's docu-prose thus:

The basic principle at the heart of this kind of fiction is the employment of factual data and material, but using artistic organizational principles in arranging these facts together; this is mostly the case with the frames of plot and structure or a use of central repeating motifs that brings the facts together and gives them order and meaning. (A. Holtzman, "הרומאנים הרומאנים של אביגדור המאירי" [Avigdor Hameiri's docu-novels], in *השגעת הגדול* [The great madness; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1989], p. 277; translation mine).

Plot structure, metaphors, and a deliberate choice of facts transform documentary writing into a work of literature.

⁵ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 116.

⁶ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 172.

in that little farmhouse. It makes me want to throw up.”⁷ And indeed, the episode is recounted in brief.⁸ The essence of *The Great Madness* is in its autobiographical nature and the documentary quality that reads like an eyewitness account, while in Hameiri’s short stories the artistic writing is visible where the author gives meaning and structure to authentic wartime events.⁹

In the introduction, Hameiri states that he began writing his “notes” soon after he was enlisted, and indeed the early chapters describing life in Budapest on the eve of the war were written in retrospect, showing knowledge of the war’s breakout and betraying the first experience of the battlefield. For example, the image of death that the narrator conjures up as he takes leave from his friends in the city is so precise that it could not be written by someone who has not seen the violent death at the battlefield: “Death. And what a death! A torn human carcass lying in a field, before being tossed into a lime pit. And that’s that.”¹⁰ It is difficult to find similar instances where the author knows more than does the first-person narrator; it is this lack of perspective that gives the narrative its air of authenticity and what Glenda Abramson describes as “the chatty, sometimes humorous tone of the ‘novel.’”¹¹ However, this is not straightforward reportage. Consider the chapter “*Lacrimae Riusque Rerum*,” in which Hameiri describes the tears shed by his civilian clothes. His formal jacket and the bloodied military tunic, each in its turn, gain a metonymic meaning to describe the general condition of the person wearing them. The clothes serve as symbols of two opposing worlds.¹² The existence of parallel structures, plot frames, and leitmotifs throughout the novel does not suggest that the war has an overall

⁷ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 163.

⁸ The same experience, described in greater detail, forms the basis for Hameiri’s short story “בשם רבי ישו” (In the name of Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth), first published in Hebrew in a collection of war stories under the same title in 1928. Like his other war stories, this tale was written as “literature,” and it is dominated by structures and meanings rather than historical verisimilitude. Holtzman remarks that not only is the story more detailed than the chapter “A Russian Christmas” in the novel, but in the former, one can see an attempt to “widen the meaning of the reality described” so that all the factual details add up to a narrative encompassing the complex history of the Jewish-Christian conflict (A. Holtzman, “סיפורי המאירי” [Avigdor Hameiri and the literature of war; Tel Aviv: Maarakhot, 1986], p. 104; translation mine).

⁹ E. Ben-Ezer, “השעון הגדול לאביגדור המאירי” (Avigdor Hameiri’s *The Great Madness*), in אהבת סופרים (Bibliophilia; ed. Y. Eliraz; Jerusalem: Dvir, 1984), p. 111; E. Ben-Ezer, “סיפורי המלחמה לאביגדור המאירי” (Avigdor Hameiri’s war stories), *Haaretz*, April 2, 1971.

¹⁰ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 26.

¹¹ G. Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2008), p. 21 n. 27.

¹² A. Holtzman, *Avigdor Hameiri*, p. 62. He insists that this is the only point in the book where the laws of reality are broken. But Hameiri actually presents the entire war as a break away from reality and logic, and this description offers an extreme expression of war’s nightmarish nature.

structure or internal logic, for the writer repeatedly insists that the war lacks all sense or order, as the chosen title for his war diary suggests.

The most obvious “literary device” that Hameiri uses throughout is his choice of language. Nowhere does he explain his decision to write his notes in Hebrew, thus constantly translating speech, thought, and experience into a written medium in a different language. While poets of the Great War, including the Hebrew poets Uri Zvi Greenberg and Shaul Tchernichowsky, present it in stylized form, Hameiri’s prose claims to be mimetic, to record faithfully, and yet it does that through the prism of another language.

The war brings to focus the issue of language on various levels. Patriotism and identity are closely linked to the existence of several languages in the Austro-Hungarian empire, whose troops Hameiri calls “this marching Tower of Babel.”¹³ Hameiri provides examples of German, and even Russian, used by his soldiers and by the officers, by transliterating or introducing foreign script to his text and translating it into Hebrew—short phrases such as “sie [the dead] habns [*sic.*] gut” or “zum rapport”¹⁴—but only at the very end of the book does he reveal that the dominant language is Hungarian.¹⁵ The narrator recognizes other Jewish soldiers through their use of Hebrew (usually swearing—like Margolis calling after the Major).¹⁶ Also, the language barrier and the use of translators play a role in describing any encounter with Russian enemy soldiers.

Another language “barrier” that the narrator is aware of and tries to reproduce in the Hebrew is the distance between military speech and that of civilians. Not surprisingly, the author is aware of this dissonance in the beginning of his army service, but the longer he stays at the front the more “natural” military jargon seems to him. When he first joins the army, after the first day all the new recruits are sent home and ordered to report back to the base the next morning. The sergeant tells them:

Upon the order of His Excellency, the colonel, you will now go home and return in the morning ready for the journey. And now, dismiss! We did not dismiss. We simply turned away and left.¹⁷

¹³ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 222.

¹⁴ A. Hameiri, *השגעון הגדול* (*The great madness*; Jerusalem: Mitzpeh, 1929), pp. 116, 132. These German phrases do not appear in the English translation.

¹⁵ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 243.

¹⁶ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 94.

¹⁷ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 30.

Once back in the barracks, the soldiers are taken to the front in what Hameiri describes as a surreal nightmarish journey. When they reach their destination, late at night in pouring rain, they hear the command: "Fall out the wagon!" "Fall out. Not get off, of course," reflects the narrator.¹⁸ Once used to military life and speech, our narrator no longer notices this particular use of everyday verbs but rather comments on the use of profane and obscene language by everyone at the front.

While Hameiri reconstructs reality very faithfully, the Hebrew reader of *The Great Madness* feels a constant distance from the reality presented, through the lack of military terms in Hebrew. Thus, Hameiri uses German military ranks or Hebrew literal translations of them and resorts to foreign words for simple military terms, such as *גרמאנט*, *אופיצר*, *רזרביסטן*, *ציביל*, and *אמוניציה*.¹⁹

But language for our narrator, as well as for the author, is first and foremost the medium for creative writing. As a poet and journalist, he is aware of the process of selection underlying any kind of writing. In the first chapter, Hameiri lists the news items that reach his desk at the newspaper office in Budapest where he worked just days before the war. It is a seemingly random list:

(a) Professor Brunner proposes to establish an international university at The Hague, whose language of tuition is to be Esperanto. The proposal will be accepted tomorrow. — (b) A lecture by Professor Einstein on the theory of relativity, in Leipzig, brought tears to the eyes of his small audience. There is a proposal in Germany to build an observatory which will bear his name. — (c) Edison is about to complete his electrical screen, which will be able to stop any kind of war in the world. — (d) Speaking at a court dinner yesterday, Kaiser Wilhelm said that as long as he was alive, there would be no war in Europe. — (e) At an interview with the Brahmin Lanondi, the Hindu priest expressed his opinion regarding the smoking of opium. For us true Hindus, he said, opium is superfluous. The European barbarians need it. The sublime smoke would show them in a dream, at least, the real purpose of man in life: to extirpate the "I" and the "Thou" within us and to recognize both as divine. — (f) The Austrian Colonel Ruedel, who, as it was conclusively proved, has sold all the plans of the fortress of Przemysl to the Russians, shot himself this morning with a revolver left on his desk by two fellow officers. — End.²⁰

¹⁸ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 40.

¹⁹ Translated, in the order of Hebrew words, as "ammunition," "grenade," "officer," "reserve soldier," and "civilian."

²⁰ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, pp. 1–2.

These news items represent the optimistic worldview of the *fin de siècle* with a belief in progress, the advancement of science, and the human spirit—all standing in stark contrast to the reality of war. In the Hebrew edition of the novel, Hameiri positions Einstein as the antithesis of war, writing, “I dedicate these notes to the sane man Albert Einstein who did not obey the command of my Feldwebel” (translation mine). The narrator is aware of the chasm between the news of yesterday and the new reality that is quickly taking over Europe: “On my desk lie last night’s cables: the Einstein observatory, the international university, Esperanto. And in the streets—a storm.”²¹

The political and socio-economic reasons that lead to the outbreak of war are not described in the novel, thus creating a sense that the war was unexpected and sudden, a mad and inexplicable outburst of passion. On his way to the front, during the “savage journey,”²² the narrator discovers that his fellow Europeans are indeed barbarians, just as the Brahmin Lanondi described them, and the war is their “opium.” Irony follows Hameiri to the military barracks and to the front.²³

The art of storytelling assists the protagonist in his low moments at the front and transforms his notes about the war into a work of literature. The novel comprises different literary genres and incorporates poems, songs, letters, and diary entries. This mixture of genres adds to the mimetic quality of the writing, but also draws attention to it as a literary work, a verbal reworking of reality. The joy expressed by the Jewish soldier Margolis at finding a biblical verse to describe “the plague village” the troops pass en route to the front²⁴ as “the whorish town” (עיר הזונה) is also the author’s delight, for now he has added intertextuality and literary depth to the seemingly objective report of reality.²⁵ The novel is rich in allusions to literature and the way writing derives from reality but also affects it. For example, the narrator takes with him to the front “Mechnikov’s ‘Optimistic World View’, published in Budapest in 1908.”²⁶ One soldier spits his tobacco on the book

²¹ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 14.

²² A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 29.

²³ P. Fussell, *The Great War*, p. 7, sees the entire experience of war as ironic and therefore regards irony as the correct tone for war literature. Jay Winter, on the other hand, claims that the literature of the Great War is based on the tradition of the nineteenth-century novel and is more traditional than is usually assumed. See J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 4–5. One of the ways by which Hameiri achieves irony is by writing in Hebrew, a language that distances the narrator from the events narrated.

²⁴ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 100.

²⁵ A similar “discovery” is described in *The Great Madness*, chapter 26, p. 217.

²⁶ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 36.

and another uses its pages as toilet paper. The material of which the book is made is of more use in the front line than its content.

Despite this reduction of literary culture, the author discovers that the written word does have its place within the military context, but only for a literary work that is “romantic, patriotic, sentimental and plainly military.”²⁷ The narrator is commanded to compose such a poem while at an officers’ training course and this poem proves extremely effective. Not only does it bring tears to the eyes of those who hear it, but it is also the cause for the narrator’s speedy promotion, three ranks in three days. Interestingly, despite its positive reception, Hameiri chooses not to include the poem itself in his novel, although other poems do find their way into the book. Perhaps the circumstances that forced him to write this poem, under command, prevented it from being included in the final work. The narrator admits:

I could not fall asleep that night. To this day I cannot say why—was it happiness, or was it the strangeness of the fact that I had written a poem, and a good one, to order?

An order, mind you, not from one of the great editors of the day—but at the command of First Lieutenant Print.

It would be interesting to see how the muse looks in uniform.²⁸

The narrator does not want to use his writing to promote the war effort in any way and in the same vein Hameiri wishes his novels and war stories were read as a cry against militarism.²⁹ He discovers the vitality and the therapeutic role of folk literature in the Hungarian tradition. It helps the soldiers pass the time during the tense hours before setting out to fight, and for the narrator, the folk songs are compensation “for all the trials and sufferings and the constant menace of death in this great madness.”³⁰ *The Great Madness* itself serves to sustain Hameiri while the world is burning all around him.

1. THE JEWISH QUESTION

The narrator’s world is that of literature and art, and he understands reality through the prism of words, metaphors, and literary tropes. In order to

²⁷ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 70.

²⁸ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, pp. 75–76.

²⁹ See, for example, his public lecture, A. Hameiri, “על הפאשיזם ושיאו המלחמה” (About fascism and its climax: The war; Tel Aviv: Antipa, May 1935).

³⁰ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 159.

emphasize the absurdity of his enlisting to the army, he says: “[i]t’s a great comedy with a very unusual ‘hero’. Staged, it would be a sensation.”³¹ His cultural world is made up of four main components: world literature, Hungarian literature, Jewish culture, and Zionist Modern Hebrew culture.³² And indeed, the protagonist of *The Great Madness* is the product of these three cultures and the war is for him an opportunity to examine his connection and obligations toward each of them.³³

In the introduction, Hameiri admits: “I had not set out to observe the Jew in myself and in my comrades-in-death, but that is how it turned out. Looking back, I’m glad it did.”³⁴ The claim is only partially true. The decision to write notes about life as a soldier in Hebrew renders the narrator’s Jewish background an essential part of his war experience. Moreover, the pacifist intellectual only joins the Austro-Hungarian army voluntarily following the accusation by a former friend, Dr. Garay, in the single word to him — “Jew.”³⁵

Choosing to write in Hebrew, a choice assuming a Hebrew readership, contributes to a Jewish viewpoint on the events, even when the experiences described are universal. And indeed, Judaism has a major place in the novel even without Jewish participants.³⁶ The novel’s world is not a Hebrew one, and the move from lived experience into a written record is thus also a translation of experience into another language.³⁷ While still a citizen, an

³¹ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 42. Despite the many dramatic elements in the novel, Hameiri’s play based on his novel was not a success. Hameiri translated, directed, and produced the Hebrew stage version of Jaroslav Hasek’s *The Good Soldier Svejk* in 1936. This play received critical and popular acclaim; it was performed more than a thousand times.

³² These are reflected in the names listed by Hameiri and rendered by the English translator as “the great editors of the day” (see above and p. 76 in the English edition). They are Georg Brandes, Ignatius (Hugo Veigelsberg), David Frischmann, and Joseph Patai.

³³ The novel presents three elements that form the narrator’s psyche:

- Universal humanism expressed in his pacifist ideology.
- National identification with and love of Hungary, a feeling that intensifies and becomes more clearly pronounced with the rise of anti-Semitic doubts concerning the loyalty of Jews to their Hungarian homeland.
- Judaism and Zionism, which the author takes for granted. The encounter with anti-Semitism and with different Jews on both sides of the conflict makes the narrator more aware of his Jewish heritage. See E. Ben-Ezer, “Avigdor Hameiri’s *The Great Madness*,” p. 106.

³⁴ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 11.

³⁵ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 14. Hannah Yaoz-Kest notes the significance of this moment and its influence on the narrator by comparing it to the effect the Dreyfus affair had on Theodor Herzl. See H. Yaoz-Kest, “קיום לתפיסתם הלאומית של היוצרים אביגדור המאירי, יצחק שמעוני ודוד למדן” (National perception in the works of Avigdor Hameiri, Yitzhak Lamdan and David Shimoni; M.A. thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1970), p. 21.

³⁶ H. Bar Droma, “השעשוען הגדול לא המאירי” (A. Hameiri’s *The Great Madness*), *Ha-Doar*, Sept. 12, 1930, p. 708, explains that the attitude to the problem is that of a Jew.

³⁷ E. Ben-Ezer, “Avigdor Hameiri’s *The Great Madness*,” p. 115.

assimilated Jew and an active participant in the Bohemian nightlife of Budapest, the writer's associations derive from his Jewish upbringing. The German city Worms, for example, is for him the city of the great medieval biblical scholar Rashi.³⁸ Hameiri presents the "intelligence" of the officers' course as the complete opposite of Jewish wisdom. "In place of Rabbi Pinchas of Koritz—*Herr* First Lieutenant Print. In place of two luminous, supremely wise eyes—His Imperial Majesty's polished uniform buttons."³⁹ The elderly General Schweitzer, a former officer in the Imperial army and a Jew, finds a Jewish reason to join the forces at the time when the narrator is still reluctant to look out for the Jewish aspect of the war. The old man blesses the narrator: "Go in peace, my son, and should God grant you the privilege of fighting to protect the walls of Jerusalem, don't forget me there, at the Temple W..."⁴⁰ Our protagonist, though a Jew, does not see a clear connection between the Eastern Front and the Land of Israel.⁴¹ Only much later in the novel, when rumors of the possible creation of a Jewish Brigade in the enemy camp reach him, does he relate the war in Europe to his Zionist aspiration, aware of the complexity of the issue:

The idea cast a spell on us. Imagine, a Jewish brigade conquering Jerusalem... Good God! How wonderful, how terrible! Terrible it was, for what if we were to encounter this brigade and have to fight against it?

No, no, of course, there's nothing of it. If they came, we would know our duty to our Homeland. Not one of us would hesitate for a moment. God forbid we should dream of treason at the front. But a Hebrew brigade...! Ach, nonsense! There was no such thing.⁴²

The condition of the Jewish soldier in the Great War was unique. Emancipated Jews were full-fledged citizens on both sides and for the first time could demonstrate loyalty to their country by joining the military. And yet, the encounter with Jews across the border was not simple, nor was the issue of Jewish national aspirations. Our protagonist does not deny his Jewish background, but he is not used to being asked about it. Almost against himself, the narrator begins to wonder about the religious affiliation of his fellow soldiers. Anti-Semitic attitudes push the narrator to view himself as a representative of the Jewish people, and thus his personal fate becomes part

³⁸ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 6.

³⁹ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 64.

⁴⁰ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 22.

⁴¹ On the Jewish aspect of the narrator's identity and the treatment of anti-Semitism and Zionist aspirations in the novel, see G. Abramson, *Hebrew Writing*, pp. 34–36.

⁴² A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 233.

of Jewish history in general. He admits, “[a]t that moment I felt I had to settle with [the Major] all my accounts and all the accounts of the Jewish people, from the Exodus to his poisonous order to send me to the front ahead of time, because I insisted on remaining a Jew.”⁴³

Hameiri states that the Jews are exceptional soldiers in wartime and takes pains to explain this phenomenon. He illustrates his reasoning with positive descriptions of Jewish soldiers, especially the observant reserve soldier nicknamed “Uncle Osterreicher” and the former yeshivah student Margolis. In a novel that aims to present a mad reality, the contrasts are stark and extreme, and thus these Jewish soldiers are seen as the epitome of the good in contrast to those who represent evil, among them converted Jews and anti-Semitic officers.⁴⁴ The continued emphasis on the bravery, kindness, and talent of the Jewish soldiers overshadows the fact that Hameiri also mentions other Jews in the novel. The good Jews are those who keep to their faith and values and continue to adhere to their traditions even during the fighting, a stance respected by Jews and non-Jews alike. When the narrator is told to go on a hopeless mission, he chooses to take with him “the roughest types as well as the wildest and rashest. There were among them artists, gypsies, *Yeshivah* students, veteran horse thieves, notorious gamblers and pickpockets.”⁴⁵ It later transpires that under fire “[t]his band of hoodlums, artists, pickpockets and *Yeshivah* students performed wonders, especially the four professional card-players.”⁴⁶ While they prove to be outstanding soldiers, the narrator still lists the yeshivah students among the shadiest characters. Here, as on other occasions throughout the novel, the narrator highlights the good found in the simple man, not necessarily the Jew, while evil is found in the image of the professional officer.

Approximately 1,250,000 Jewish soldiers participated in the Great War, including some 300,000 in the Austro-Hungarian army; about one per cent of them served as officers. Although clearly a Jew, the narrator is not a religious person. “I hardly believe at all, Excellency, which is why I don’t believe in other religions, either,” he tells his commander, explaining his refusal to convert.⁴⁷ Although he does not deny his Jewish roots, before the war he considered himself first and foremost a man and only then as a Jew.

⁴³ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 82.

⁴⁴ On contrast as the organizing structure of the novel see G. Shaked, 1980–1880 הסיפור העברי (Hebrew literature 1880–1980; Jerusalem: Keter, 1983), 2:314; A. Holtzman, “Hameiri’s Docu-novels,” p. 286; A. Holtzman, *Avigdor Hameiri*, pp. 57–58.

⁴⁵ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 138.

⁴⁶ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 171.

⁴⁷ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 80.

The Major asks him, “Why are you so proud of [being Jewish]?” and the cadet answers, “Beg to report: I’m not proud, Excellency, but when I am expected to be ashamed of it, I become proud.”⁴⁸ The narrator reconsiders his loyalty to the Hungarian homeland and the Imperial army, especially when rumors about a Hebrew army and the possibility of the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine reach him. He discovers that other soldiers around him are not motivated by nationalism or love of the homeland and that it is not only the Jewish soldiers who empathize and identify with the enemy soldiers across the line. Here, too, the Jewish issue receives a universal cover, with the Jewish example presented as the version closest to the narrator’s heart but by no mean separate from the experience of other soldiers.

Sections of the novel first appeared in *Haaretz* newspaper in the 1920s under the title *The Great Paradox*.⁴⁹ Hameiri collected his “notes” as *The Great Madness* in 1929, and it became a bestseller almost overnight. Its success derived, in part, from its non-canonical description of the action as well as the emotional intensity derived from the use of the first-person narrative. The fact that the protagonist is Jewish also attracted readers who were keen to identify with a new image of a Jew: an officer who goes out to battle as a proud representative of his people but nonetheless carries with him a pacifist ideology. Reviews published when the novel first appeared tend to describe the novel as a documentary journal or diary, promoting pride in the image of the new Jew as he appears in the work.⁵⁰

The distance between the reality experienced by the Jews living in Palestine and that of the Jew fighting the Great War in Europe might explain why Hameiri’s war stories did not enjoy a wide readership in the 1920s. *The*

⁴⁸ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 80.

⁴⁹ A. Holtzman, *Avigdor Hameiri*, p. 63. He suggests that the original name was changed because the word “paradox” is too theoretical and lacks the emotional connotation found in the word “madness.”

⁵⁰ M. Bloshar, “השעון הגדול” (The great madness), *Haaretz*, Jan. 3, 1930, writes that the novel “is made up of a list of facts without the literary plotting found in [Hameiri’s] short stories, without the editing of life into literature” (translation mine). Some found this documentary style unattractive because of the lack of literary embellishment: see, for example, M. Ben Eliezer, “השעון הגדול” (The great madness), *Moznaim* 1 (1930): 14–15. All the early reviews of Hameiri’s novel compare it to E. M. Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (first published in German in January 1929). “It is nice to note that a Hebrew novel also managed to create a sort of psychosis,” remarks Bloshar. And Moshe Kleinman comments proudly, “our Hebrew literature has its own original war-story, from which a strong call of protest emerges, the protest of man and Jew alike” (M. Kleinman, “ביבליוגרפיה” (Bibliography), *Haolam* 17 (1919): 1062 (translation mine, emphasis in the original). For the Hebrew reader, *The Great Madness* is preferable because of its concern with the Jewish question. Uri Keisari summarised this point when he wrote, “just as in Europe everybody reads *All Quiet on the Western Front*, here in Israel everybody reads *The Great Madness*” (U. Keisari, “פליטון קטן: השעון הגדול” [A small feuilleton: *The Great Madness*], *Doar Hayom*, Jan. 5, 1930; translation mine).

Great Madness changed that, and the passing mention in the novel of the Balfour Declaration and the possible creation of a Jewish State attracted more critical attention than any other episode. Hameiri, unlike his contemporaries in Europe, wrote his novel to a reading audience that did not experience the horrors of battle. The image of war presented by Hameiri became the one engraved in the minds of his readers in Palestine, complementing similar descriptions found in Hebrew translations of European novels of the war.

2. THE GREAT MADNESS

Some of the inconsistencies in the narrative derive from the general framework of the novel and from Hameiri's impossible attempt to describe in a formal text the madness of the war. The insanity, the contradictions, and the futility of war are expressed in a dialogue between the narrator and his sergeant major, when our speaker still uses language and concepts from his civilian life. "War, sir, is a great paradox," says the narrator but his comment is not understood, "[w]hat? What kind of ox?" asks the Sergeant-Major.⁵¹ Hameiri begins the introduction to his book with the words:

Three years I spent in that colossal madhouse, which spread over half the globe and wherein a thousand million frantic people rioted in a variety of frantic postures—enthusiastically, tearfully, exultingly, cunningly, naively, sadly, lovingly and defiantly.⁵²

According to his own testimony, the narrator in this context is "the madman observing himself."⁵³ He attempts to describe a different reality, insane but as real as the one he experienced on the eve of the war or that of his readers in Palestine a decade or more after the war. The emphasis on facts and details is there to support the truth claim of such a reality.⁵⁴

The narrator is swept by the intense emotions and the fast unfolding of events, a fact that is reflected in the writing. Initially, he regards the war with contempt; as a pacifist intellectual, he is revolted by patriotic feelings, refusing to see their power. But he does not remain indifferent for long; with honest reflection, he describes the self-conviction with which he willingly joins the army and fights:

⁵¹ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 45.

⁵² A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. i.

⁵³ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. i.

⁵⁴ P. Lender, "כה מספר אביגדור המאירי" (Thus narrates Avigdor Hameiri), *Haaretz*, April 5, 1946.

Why deny it? A solemn spirit seemed to be singing inside me to this score of “going away forever.” A thousand feelings jostled within me, clashed, quarreled, and finally compromised, merged and combined into a single great and agreeable feeling which manifested itself in the form of an all-embracing sigh of relief:
At last!⁵⁵

However, at other moments, he is keenly aware of the futility of war and its destructive power:

And on either side of the line men with rifles and hand-grenades and bayonets all ready to kill, to murder, to annihilate.... And not one of them hates the other.

Lunatics! Tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of lunatics! All possessed by a great madness, like a plague. And there is no doctor to examine them, to diagnose their insanity.⁵⁶

The narrator is aware of the destructive influence the war has on him. Army life changes him in both mind and spirit. The transition from civilian life to military existence is sharp, and yet the narrator discovers how easy the shift can be:

So, one fine day, I found that I too had become a typical soldier, a regular NCO, despite all my efforts to retain my civilian personality. I hadn't even felt the transformation. I no longer suffered from the army experience: to share a coffee cup with scores of gypsies, to finish a cigarette begun by one of my comrades, to relish a hunk of bread that had fallen on the ground, without so much as dusting it off first.... All these had become second nature and one never gave it any thought.

In the same way we grew accustomed to the idea of death, without regret, without nostalgia for our beautiful city and our beloved women far away.⁵⁷

The most destructive change is in values. The narrator finds himself trying to please his superiors and acting in accordance with the military code of behavior. He celebrates having received a compliment from his commanding officer: “What a triumph! What price all my literary triumphs compared with this one?! I'm a good fellow! Bravo!”⁵⁸ He is aware of the change he is undergoing and ashamed of it, yet he cannot overcome his wish to succeed and make a positive impression. This transformation bothers him most when

⁵⁵ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 24.

⁵⁶ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 170.

⁵⁷ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 90.

⁵⁸ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 55.

he can see its effect on his treatment of others. Training to be an officer, the narrator discovers that he has adopted a new value system that, deep inside, he despises. Concerning his commanding officers, he says, "I found that in our conversations, in all my dealings with them, I was trying to win their approval and to match their wishes and views."⁵⁹ The moment of trial for the narrator occurs when he is asked to reject a friend dismissed from officer training and accept the decision of his superiors. The narrator behaves as is expected of him, but he is disgusted by his own action:

I, the man of culture, disciple of Rabbi Akiva, the Gaon of Vilna, Professor Zev Bacher and Camille Flammarion.

I entered my room, took out my small mirror, gazed at my reflection and spat at it:

You scoundrel!⁶⁰ (p. 65)

The narrator advances in his military career, but his ambiguous attitude to the officer rank and the military code stays with him. The decision to write his notes during his service allows Hameiri to guard his identity as a Hebrew poet despite the necessity to become a professional soldier.⁶¹

The Great War brought forth a new kind of war literature that dealt with the personal aspect of the fighting and presented reality in terms far removed from literary convention. The writers were soldiers, writing for themselves and for a reading audience of fellow soldiers, and yet most of their creations were anti-militaristic. The literature of the Great War documents life at the front and serves to commemorate the fallen.⁶² Hameiri's novel belongs within the European tradition of the literature of the Great War more than it does in contemporary Hebrew literature.⁶³ However, it is unique in its aims and its significance for the readers, due to the choice of Hebrew as its language and its publication in the land of Israel. For the Jews living in

⁵⁹ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 63.

⁶⁰ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 65.

⁶¹ Rather than offering a study of the self as in an autobiography, Hameiri's focus is not on the psychological state of the individual but on the complex reality an entire generation faces. Thus, the narrator becomes a two-dimensional figure, a prototype.

⁶² J. M. Winter, *The Experience of World War I* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 226–229.

⁶³ A. Holtzman, "Hameiri's Docu-novels," pp. 281–282. In *Avigdor Hameiri and the Literature of War*, Holtzman seems to make an opposite claim when he writes that "this book fits well with the canonical tradition of modern Hebrew literature, due to its concerns with the basic problems of the modern Jew, faced by questions of his identity as a Jew and as a man posed by the war. This is achieved by the use of new literary forms and a great figurative, linguistic, and emotional evocation" (pp. 49–50, translation mine). I tend to agree with Holtzman's first point, seeing the novel as a component of European literature, due to its uniqueness in the Hebrew scene and its reception primarily as a Hebrew version of European war novel.

Palestine, the experience of war was different from that of the young Jewish officer on the Eastern Front, and the mere translation of that war experience into writing and into Hebrew did not suffice in making it a familiar narrative.⁶⁴ Its attraction was in its foreign feel. Thus, Hameiri's novels were widely read and enthusiastically received, but they did not become a major element in the newly emerging Hebrew literature in Palestine.

A gap between the author and his readers characterizes Hameiri's entire literary career in Israel. Although he describes the war with great ability and talent, he is aware that words fail to bring the experience to his readers who did not live through it. In a lecture on "Fascism and the War" (1935), Hameiri said:

For what do you know and how are you to know what war is? You, the young, whose life began after the war? And those of you of advanced age, who did not participate in the war and therefore cannot imagine it, neither the previous war, nor the war to come, of which you read in the newspapers all the time.⁶⁵

Despite the failure of language to express the meaning of war and to imprint its horrors on those who did not partake in it, Hameiri continued to write and talk about the war. In the above-mentioned lecture, he explains this insistence on doing the impossible, on re-creating the war in words:

I want to save your fresh and young lives, so that you don't walk into the grave, that you don't stop your beautiful life midway and do not agree to rot in a pit in the midst of your ascent, your work, your fresh lives!⁶⁶

Hameiri's genuine concern for the future of the Hebrew youth in Palestine brings him to repeatedly express in Hebrew his own experience of the war on Europe's soil.

3. CONCLUSION

The Great Madness describes a society in the extreme situation of war, one that tests its values and its foundations. "There you have the terrible paradox of the war. This vile madness has one virtue—through it we dis-

⁶⁴ On Hebrew literature of the First World War in Palestine, see G. Abramson, *Hebrew Writing*, part 3, pp. 261–377, where she discusses the writings of Aharon Reuveni, L. A. Arielli (Orloff), Yaakov Hurgin, Yehuda Burla, and Y. H. Brenner.

⁶⁵ A. Hameiri, "About Fascism," p. 3 (translation mine).

⁶⁶ A. Hameiri, "About Fascism," p. 3 (translation mine).

cover qualities in people that we might never have known otherwise.”⁶⁷ Both the good and the bad appear undisguised, and the reality of war allows Hameiri to criticize the society in which he lives. Here is a personal process that the author goes through in an attempt to define his identity and the culture to which he belongs. This process is catalyzed by the experience of war and the dilemmas it puts in front of the narrator, an assimilated Jew immersed in world culture but also a Zionist who grew up on Hebrew culture. At the end of the war, Hameiri is surprised to discover that he and his novel are considered an abnormality in the evolving Hebrew culture. In the sequel, *Hell on Earth*, Hameiri cites a conversation he had with Moshe Rosenblatt, a Zionist activist. Hameiri asks him:

Am I the only one among the young authors who participated in the war?
Well—answers Rosenblatt with surprise—what Hebrew writer would go to war? Is there nobody else to go to war that there is such a need for a writer?⁶⁸

And indeed, Hameiri’s work is the only example of docu-novels of the Great War written and published in Hebrew.

⁶⁷ A. Hameiri, *The Great Madness*, p. 137.

⁶⁸ A. Hameiri, *בגיהנום של טהם* (*Hell on earth*; 2 vols.; Tel Aviv: Mitzpeh, 1932), 1:66 (translation mine).