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The art of politics and poetry: the political poetry of Jacques Prevert and Aryeh Sivan

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The article demonstrates the potency and volatility of political lyricism by comparing two masters of the trade, the French Jacques Prevert and the Israeli Aryeh Sivan. Although writing in two dissimilar cultures and witnessing disparate political environments, the poetry of Prevert and Sivan is similar in many ways. They are both keen observers of their societies' woes and both are equally critical. Their accounts are s are emphatic and caring and strewn in their passionate, affectionate and brutally honest verses, Prevert and Sivan are the quintessential models for contemporary political poetry. Both poets, despite their disparate cultures and dissimilar local experiences, painstak ingly probe and penetrate the political realities around them with velvet nails.

Keywords: Jacques Prevert; Aryeh Sivan; political poetry; Israel; France; collective choice making; resource allocation; political influence; order and justice; the spatial contagion model

What is political poetry?

Poetry is the art of assigning words to feelings and it can, as T.S. Eliot wrote, connect people even without 'making sense'. Politics is the art of resource allocation. Politics determines who gets what, when and why. Thus it is to be found in every human gathering where demand exceeds supply. Politics relies on power, authority and communication between people: ideal topics for poetry. This is why the meeting point between politics in poetry is so exhilarating and challenging. As two mediums of communication which breed on the beauty of language, symbolism and mystery, their convergence is volcanic.

What is political poetry and how is one to identify it? Perhaps these familiar lines from 'The Second Coming' (1919) by the great William Butler Yeats could supply a rudimentary answer to this vexing quandary:

> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.
> The blood dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
> The best lack all conviction, while the worst
> Are full of passionate intensity.[1]

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These piercing words mark one of the dramatic pinnacles of Yeats' work. They were written in 1920, the tumultuous and glorious second year of the Irish war of independence. But these were tantalizing political times in general: the guerrilla warfare of the IRA (Irish Republican Army) against the British was presaged by the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin. Another colossal attempt to challenge the old order occurred a year and a half later, with the October 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia. All these earth-shattering incidents happened against the background of a devastating war that brought down empires and destroyed millions of lives. Yeats perceived this horrific and destructive sequence of events as a portent of Armageddon, ushering in the second coming of Christ.

But Yeats' poem was never read as a theological or philosophic statement. It is habitually understood as a direct and powerful political stand against debilitating chaos and the undermining of aristocratic hegemony.[2] The poem was immediately embraced as a political declaration, a credo for the newly born century, and as such had a tremendous impact on the public discourse in Ireland as well as the entire continent. The *Second Coming* was mainly adopted by the self-proclaimed guardians of the status quo against the destabilizing challengers in the precarious and volatile reality between the two world wars. Subsequently, the poem became an exemplary illustration of political poesy, which leaves a mark in both worlds: inspiring the lyrical and stirring the political. It is the quintessential example of the potency of political poetry and the vitality it could generate and spread.

This is an article about political poetry and it depicts the interface between these two passionate and alluring domains poetry and politics. By focusing on two distinct poets, one French and one Israeli, both resounding and decisive in their political messages and ideological beliefs, the article attempts to highlight the ubiquitous and pervasive potential of the political verse. Despite representing dissimilar cultural milieus, and experiencing disparate historical experiences, Jacque Prevert of Paris and Aryeh Sivan of Tel Aviv belong to the same cadre of bards, who dare express their political woes, wishes and hopes in limericks, rhymes and couplets.

Politics: decision-making for the collective

Politics is making choices for the benefit of the community. Indeed, along most of human history the social and the political were identical. The distinction between the two or between state and society began only in the nineteenth century. In ancient Greece and Rome it did not exist although the two systems were markedly dissimilar. In Greece, or more accurately in Athens, the Aristotelian term *zoon politikon*, or a political animal, referred to the ideal Athenian citizen who lives for his polis and fulfils his human potential when he is politically active and participating. But this had been possible in a rather small space of several thousand people at most. In larger imperialist Rome, the conception of the political had to change. In an empire and large metropolitan cities, a hands-on immersion in the affairs of the polity was not feasible. This is why the Greek

notion of polities is not identical to the Roman idea of civil.[3] A new term was introduced in Rome to grapple with the expansion of jurisdiction and state duties: the legal codex, meaning that a new basis of social commitment and involvement is in effect, obedience to the law. Law and sanction against law violations became the glue to keep the community together. In the fairly small and intimate polis this was not necessary: each citizen could directly participate in debates and voting so the sense of belonging was vividly practised. While the Roman citizenship was activated *vertically* by authoritative power, juridical sanction and compliance, Athenian citizenship was *horizontally* fostered by vigorous participation and daily involvement in communal decision-making. No laws were necessary to compel him to do so. This was his goal in life and his opportunity to shine and prove himself worthy.[4] Furthermore, politics in Athens was a citizen's pride and glory; it symbolized his identity, substance and belonging. It was the quintessential expression of cooperative living: deliberation and discourse about public matters.

Politics and history were intertwined in the Athenian world. Being politically active meant entering the pages of history. Herodotus and Thucydides, the two 'founding fathers of historical chronology', based their annals on political decisions and speeches. This is how historical narratives were initially created and conveyed. Politics was the source of historians' data and stories. Another commonality to politics and history was the word, the pronunciation, the expression. In both fields of expertise, the art of formulation, spoken or written, had been their source of reputation. But while Greek politics relied on reason, theory and rationality, its Roman counterpart was fed more on emotion and passion: loyalty to the homeland and commitment to patrimony, as Horatio, the revered poet, wrote: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (Sweet and glorified is death for the fatherland).[5] Patriotism, fervent and old-fashioned, was the cornerstone of Rome's fearsome power. When it swelled and expanded to include more foreigners than native Romans, the sense of obligation and dedication weakened and along with greed, corruption and vanity, the basis of power that maintained the Empire was gone and its days became numbered.

In the modern era, a new understanding of politics emerged with an emphasis on compromise and interaction as an alternative to coercion and hierarchy, actually, the antithesis of the traditional concept. In the pluralistic and heterogenic societies of today's world, conflicting interests and wills are better off being reconciled in a civilized manner. Politics, although occasionally cumbersome, even dirty, is this mediation platform that enables peaceful reconciliation of contending visions and claims for the public good. With this feature, politics really salvages modern societies from devastation and it is the guarantor of sustainable freedom. Contemporary politics is a mechanism of allocation not only of material resources and goods but also of intangibles such as rights, entitlements and opportunities. Settling disputes through deliberation and dialogue warrants the continued existence of the community far more than the duel, the combat or the crusades of old. And the opportunity politics grants for expressing a position, advancing a requirement and criticizing a status quo is the realistic way to, achieve

and preserve freedom. Forgoing the right to participate in politics is akin to giving up the prospect of being free.[6]

Modern politics is illustrative of advanced and complex societies and it has its roots in the European historical development experience. Aristotle wrote that politics is required in entities which host several units, not in a monolithic tribe, religion or tradition. The assertion of politics is a recognition that a plurality of groups reside together under the same roof and under the same authority which decides for all. Hence, it is basically the answer of how to settle the affairs of such an intricate entity with the least amount of friction and dissatisfaction. Its importance and viability is in tolerating various truths and in recognizing the possibility of government which equally and fairly represents all factions. Hence, politics can be understood as an activity by which different entities under the same governing authority coexist by having proportional access to resources; successful politics is maintaining order and stability.[7]

Regrettably, politics is all too often understood in its narrow and unflattering version as an arena of manipulation and unrestrained lust for power. The associations that usually accompany this depiction are Machiavellian and *Ahitophelian* coupled with unpleasant notions of mistrust, exploitation, conniving and unrelenting quest for power. But the perspective of elections and running for office, candidates and voters, parties and platforms is too narrow and selective to embrace the full meaning of the term 'politics'. The idea of politics contains much more, and its relevance and significance to almost every aspect of our lives cannot be overstated. As pointed out earlier, politics in its generic meaning is decision-making for the collective. The question is what is considered to be *a collective*? Put simply, a collective is more than one person. Places where one person lives are devoid of politics. Politics is clearly a social-bound idea; it is yet another creative opportunity or format for people to communicate. Robinson Crusoe lived on a desolate island for 28 lonely years. All this time he was apolitical, or rather non-political: he had no one to be *political with*, until the arrival of Friday, the escaped prisoner. Then, the island turns political.[8] In what way does it become so? These two foreigners had to learn to coexist. Decisions needed to be made for their survival as a unit, or as a collective. For example, who is going to light a fire and who is going to hunt? Who would watch for passing rescue ships and who would pick fruit for dinner that day? These were political decisions decided for the political body they both composed.

Similarly, a household is also a political unit and its constituency is the family members. The family is constituted of different people striving for dissimilar goals and priorities and advocating disparate scenarios for their joint future. The challenge therefore is how to determine common plans such as where to travel in the next vacation, when and where to move to a new apartment, what type of car to buy, and more mundane issues such as who does the dishes, who walks the dog, and what present to get for granny's birthday. These are all, big or small, political questions which must be dealt with in a political manner. In order to raise and decide upon alternative answers, a *political system* is required which

would enable and facilitate balanced and fair decision-making for the group and inhibit capricious decisions and ego altercations. Democracy, dictatorship, tyranny, despotism, oligarchy and meritocracy are all political decision-making systems ethical or not, this is what they are.[9]

What does politics do?

If the previous definition of politics has been epistemological, the next one is the *functional* definition: what politics does and what function it fulfils. The definition is taken from Harold Lasswell, a pioneer of American political science, who wrote that politics is *who gets what, when, how*.[10] The missing noun in this assertion is resources. Every community or political unit needs resources to grow, prosper and survive. Resources could be tangible or material (food, clothing, shelter, medicines, weaponry or oil) and intangible and symbolic (faith, confidence, ideology, resolve, solidarity or humour) and their absence or paucity might put the community under stress. Imagine an ideal (and therefore impossible) situation in which each one of us has everything she or he needs at every given moment. Imagine further a huge hall where resources are allocated and people arrive to ask for a new plot of land. 'A plot of land? Over there at the south-west corner', they are instructed. 'Next in line, what do you want? Historical rights? There, in the north-east corner'; 'and you? a spouse?' 'There, on the south-east wing', and so on and so forth. In this idyllic set-up, politics is minimal or even superfluous because the main rationale for it is missing conflict. There is no dearth, no shortage of supplies and hence no collision of wills and consequently no need for an allocating mechanism to determine who gets what, when and how. Sadly, this is not the familiar state of affairs; actually reality is totally opposite: more and more people present an exponentially growing number of claims on a resources inventory that is increasingly and alarmingly depleting. Scarcity amplifies distress and insecurity and these, in turn, might precipitate violent clashes among competing communities for those rare commodities. These are the circumstances whereby politics is urgently desired and its function as an allocating mechanism becomes indispensable.[11]

If indeed the role of a political system is to regulate and determine who receives resources and on what basis, there is one more aspect to this definition, which augments the responsibility of decision-makers even further. The paucity of alternatives dictates to decide who gets what, when and how and *at whose expense*. This addendum reflects the grim situation of scarceness: there is not enough for all, thus anyone who is lucky enough to receive must do so on the account of someone else who didn't. How is the decision of who gets and who does not to be made? No political system is a robot and no decisions are heaven-made. They are all man-made, manifestly or latently biased and always nurtured by the interests and worries of those who steer. Accordingly, criteria are drafted by predisposed decision-makers to trim down the numbers of claimants. They outline the inclusion and exclusion delimitations from the inventory of goods of

which they are in charge. These criteria vary according to countries, cultures, historical eras and political systems. Here are some examples, made-up and real, to jolt memory and reason: all those above six feet get; only green-eyed get; only Arians get; only my guys get. Well, the idea is obvious: these are all arbitrary and represent the priorities of those at the helm. The gist of political struggles is waged on these criteria. The challengers wish to change and re-draw these standard principles whereas the incumbents indomitably try to preserve them.

Order versus justice

The inherent tension between status quo and the desire for change invokes another permanent strain, that between order and justice.[12] These two do not get along so well. Their incompatibility stems from the fact that order and justice represent ambitions of disparate constituencies, or, more bluntly, the top dogs and the underdogs.[13] Those who call for orders are generally those who govern, the rulers, the upper classes, the elites, the rich — those who benefit from the prevailing situation, and hence they would like to sanctify and freeze it. They would camouflage their selfish need for preservation in appealing words such as stability, safety and balance. Those who cry for justice are in the lower pole of the spectrum: the opposition, the non-educated, the proletariat, the poor — those who feel deprived and oppressed by the current system and thus are motivated to change it. They advocate justice and use such attractive terms as fairness, equality and compassion to stimulate their campaign. These are two contrary orientations that flair up any political strife. However, once the circumstances change due to any conceivable reason (elections, revolution, earthquake, war, economic crisis), the relativity of these two arch-rivals is exposed: those who were at the bottom suddenly find themselves at the top and their craving for justice is gone. Now they desire order or things as they are because they enjoy them. Those who were on top and were plunged down sound a different tune now: they are for justice. They protest at the unfairness of being robbed of their prerogatives and they demand it back in the name of justice, or rather, injustice. This is how order and justice become hostile and negate one another. Like two contrasting poles in a magnet, they constantly reject and push each other away in colossal cycles throughout human history. Every political confrontation, every battle and every struggle since the dawn of human existence can be traced to the feud between order and justice, between those who yearn for change and those who dread it. The expression ‘in good order’ is a lie: there is no, and cannot be, order which is good for everyone. Order is good only for those served by it and those who furnished it. Indeed, the main motivation for the struggle between the two nemeses is precisely to impose a certain kind of order upon others.

Implicit in the previous passage was the important observation that conflict is a central feature of politics. This topic will be aptly elaborated later, but it suffices now to underline that the more friction and colliding paths are formed, the more invaluable and busy politics becomes. Far beyond its initial function as regulator

and allocator, the political system and those who operate it must also possess the prudence and patience of mediation, de-escalation and creative thinking, as a shrewd and experienced politician once said 'politics is the art of the possible'.[14] That Prussian Chancellor Auto von Bismarck (1815 98), unifier of Germany, thought that politics is not about high ideologies or moral visions but a matter of practicality and efficiency based upon the skill of adjusting to swiftly changing conditions. As a means of socialization and integration, a political system convenes all members under the same rules of the game and the same norms of behaviour. Sharing them creates mutual anticipation and understanding of how to choose leaders, how to monitor and criticize them, how to devise community priority scale and relevant policies, how to allocate goods and how to develop and preserve prosperity for all. A substantial community aspires to a single and stable political system on the collective level. A plurality of contending political systems would destabilize the community and expedite its downfall.

The struggle for an appropriate political system to represent the community at large resembles the struggle for historical narrative, language, culture or identity. They are essentially the same in nature and purpose: convincing your new allies and partners in the community-building effort that what you propose would be advantageous for them too. The difference here is that the fight for politics might very well be the struggle of all struggles and winning here may pave the way to prevailing on all other fronts. Recalling George Orwell's 'whoever rules the past rules the future and whoever rules the present rules the past',[15] it can be deduced that the contention for politics is really the contention for ruling the present, and thus the opportunity to manipulate the past to guarantee future goals is open. In order to persuade and win over the political system dispute, one has to garner, maintain and exert *power*.

Political poetry is one of the paths to gain political influence. Perhaps one of the more graceful, stylish and elegant paths but nevertheless it is a political statement, as much as the election speech, the opinion editorial, the TV debate or the party platform. It is a proclamation that advocates a certain stand while undermining another. Political poetry can be subtle and implicit or flagrant and belligerent; either way it promotes a concrete worldview at the expense of others. The advantage poetry has over other communication patterns to deliver political messages is the honourable and virtuous image it projects. But in an age of waning morals and depreciation of cultural values, this is a fleeting advantage. Victor Infante, one of the leading figures among American contemporary poets, wrote in his blog (2010):

> in some cultures, the words for 'poet' and 'prophet' are identical, and that in many so called primitive cultures, the role of poet and priest both belong to the shaman. This then, poets, is our mission: to speak, as they did, to the human truths of the matter. Our role here is … to stare the unfolding atrocities dead in the eye, and record their currents, to say what's truly going on: hate, fear, love, pain. This is the debt of our art, to warn the future of what we see now. Maybe this time someone will listen.[16]

Two of these shamans Jacque Prevert and Aryeh Sivan are introduced in the following sections. Their life-long work reflects the vigour and glamour of political poetry.

Prevert and Sivan – in the heat of political poetry

The two poets were born in the first half of the twentieth century three decades apart from each other. The older, Jacque Prevert, was born in the village of Neuilly-sur-Seine west of Paris in February 1900 to a lower income family. The younger, Aryeh Sivan or in his original name, Boomstein was born on the outskirts of Tel Aviv in August 1929. Both came to the world in the periphery of the big city and they both nostalgically lament the waning image of the place they once knew. They write from a pure, authentic and unpretentious, but nevertheless perceptive and critical, perspective of the common man. Prevert probes the Parisian society between the two world wars. He finds in the process of decadence and the bourgeois depravity he observes, a fertile setting for his sardonic social criticism. More subtle in his verses but no less ardent, Sivan laments the waning of the Israeli founders' generation along with their dreams and aspirations. Both poets accentuate the growing gap between what they witness and what they believe could have been. They are both fed and nurtured by the urban environment they are immersed in and react to the local experience that galvanizes them. However, their ubiquitous insight frequently surpasses their immediate milieu into the realms of society, government and god.

Jacque Prevert: the angry prophet[17]

Prevert is habitually referred to as a 'popular poet', as one who is read by the common people. Many of his poems depict the happiness or frustration of the little man and his tribulations vis-à-vis the system which is about to swallow him. Favourite targets for his scorn are the religious establishment, government corruption and bureaucracy short for the prevailing formats of authority. Their sins against the freedom of the common man are wars, dishonesty, exploitation and social injustice. Prevert's sharp pen is specifically aimed at his contemporary European dictators, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin, whom he detested. Prevert also targets the right-wing nationalistic establishment of France's Third Republic and the incompetency of the Fourth Republic. But a favoured backdrop for his contempt is the Catholic Church, in which the atheist Prevert indulges with sheer delight. All these perpetrators of greed, chauvinism and senseless militarism are equally to blame for the misery of the average man in Prevert's eyes, a notion which is beautifully captured in this poem from the book *Paroles*, first published in 1949:

'The Speech on Peace' '(Le Discours sur la Paix)[18]
Near the end of an extremely important discourse
the great man of state

tumbling on a beautiful hollow phrase
falls over it
and undone with gaping mouth
shows his teeth
and the dental decay of his peaceful reasoning
exposes the nerve of war
the delicate question of money.

The naïve and helpless protagonist is represented in Prevert's poetry by children and animals, most recurrently birds tiny, fragile and persistently at risk. Their perpetual quest for refuge and survival fascinates Prevert and stimulates his rhymes as well as his pity. Being the voice of the common folk, Prevert uses lively and whimsical 'street language' rather than pompous or boastful language, which he disdains. His poetry is highly visual and visceral. Influenced by his younger brother's occupation as a film director, Prevert wrote several scripts and even directed a few short films himself. Some of his poems have a cinematic quality, with imaginary touches and movie-like compositions, which defy the usual realistic setting Prevert's poetry emanates from. This filmic magic along with the sarcasm and dark humour characteristic of Prevert's work is a direct corollary of the profound impact surrealism had on the poet. Prevert had an enduring attraction to surrealism and he became a close friend of the charismatic Andre Breton, a leading figure of the movement. After falling out with Breton in the early 1930s Prevert joined *October*, a radical theatrical avant-garde troupe, as well as being hired by his brother Pierre as a script writer and an occasional director's assistant. There he met some of the leading filmmakers of the time, Jean Renoir and Marcel Carne among others, who enriched his imagination and inspired his vision. These influences prodded his empathy for the sufferings of the simple man and his proclivity for social activism through poetry.[19]

In December 1930 the Parisian reading audience made its first acquaintance with Prevert's scandalous political poetry. Two of his early works appeared one after the other in two popular but controversial venues: the outrageous 'Family Souvenirs or the Prisoner-Guard Angel' ('Souvenirs de Famille ou l'Ange Garde-Chiourme') in the periodical *Commerce*, and 'The Attempt to Describe Dinner of Heads in Paris, France' ('Tentative de Description d'un Dîner de Têtes à Paris-France') in the radical publication *Bifur*. This was a confident and audacious political proclamation from a fearless writer. While the former was a long and brutish illustration of the Parisian bourgeoisie, the former was a direct acerbic assault on the Catholic Church. In this famous stanza from the poem, God is depicted in worldly terms as a self-possessed boss drooling over the enterprise he created:

Comfortably seated on a cloud admiral,
God the Father,
of 'God the father and son house Holy Spirit and Co.'
pushes a huge sigh of satisfaction,
once two or three small clouds burst with obsequiousness
and subordinate God father exclaims:

'What I Be praised, my holy name be blessed,
my beloved son to the cross, my house is on![20]

Two other role-models for Prevert were Francois Villon (1431 74) the proletarian-criminal poet and Charles Baudelaire (1821 67), the decadent-symbolist. Prevert developed his mastery of parsimonious eloquence from these two and his sympathy for the downtrodden and the riff-raff of society from his friendship and affiliation with his contemporary playwright Jean Genet (1910 86).[21] Genet's heroes were all maverick rebels, marginalized trash and pathetic underdogs, who still exhibited some aura of human dignity, like the guy in this magical Prevert poem:

'Lost Time' ('Le Temp Perdu')[22]
Before the factory gate
the worker suddenly stops
the good weather has seized him by his coat
and as he turns back
and looks at the sun
all red all round
smiling in its leaden sky
it twinkles its eye
familiarly.
Say, my friend Sun
don't you find
it's rather silly
to give such a day
to a boss?

Prevert's texts were always communicative and harmonious. He continuously claimed that he did not want his poems to be eternally stranded in the pages of his books. Consequently, he habitually granted his consent for his poems to be set to music and sung. This was the best way, he believed, for his work to be accessible to all. He abhorred labels and categories and was horrified to be termed 'a poet'. Prevert defied classifications and disciplines because he feared they would limit his appeal to his readers. Thus, his books deliberately exhibit a mélange of styles and genres from feuilletons, short stories and essays to poems, sonnets and anecdotes.

Prevert was a political animal and was regularly attentive and responsive to current affairs. He was a frequent guest on actuality shows and wrote articles and letters to the editor in various publications. Unlike other intellectuals of his generation, who attempted to distance themselves from the vulgarities of mundane politics, Prevert relished voicing his opinion on every salient issue. In 1950, he vehemently defended Henri Marten, a conscientious objector to the war in Indo-China, and during the Algerian war of independence from French colonial rule, and in his 1966 book Fatras and in his 1966 book *Fatras* he furiously attacked the use of torture by the French Special Forces (OS Organization Secret) against the Algerian insurgents. In the tumultuous days of May 1968, Prevert extolled the bravery and heroism of the students' rebellion in two new

books: *The Open Life* (*La Vie Ouvriere*) and *The Defiant Ones* (*Les Entages*). In the early 1970s, Prevert expressed sympathy for freedom movements in the Third World and their struggle against the yoke of Western imperialism. In his last book to be published in his lifetime, *Things and Other Things* (*Choses et Autres*) from 1972, one poem is dedicated to Angela Davis, the Black Panthers' activist, who was labelled a terrorist in the US. The poem 'The Human Effort' ('L'Effort Humain') captures the essence of Prevert's political criticism and his denunciation of the status quo. It is a roaring declaration against a political ethos that glorifies monuments and statues for the aggressive pacifier or the great liberator[23] while the genuine human effort is to be discovered elsewhere:

> The human effort wears a truss
> and the scars of his struggles
> amidst an absurd and ruthless world.
> The human effort doesn't have a home
> he can truly call his.
>
> His wages are thin and so are his children.
> His age is not the 'age of enlightenment'
> His age, is the age of barracks,
> the age of prisons and detention camps,
> the age of churches and factories,
> the age of guns and tanks.
>
> And he, who has planted all the vines everywhere and has tuned up all the violins,
> he must feed upon bad dreams and drink the bitter wine of resignation,
> and, like a large drunk squirrel, incessantly, he turns, round and round,
> without end, inside the constricting, unfriendly, dusty old cage.[24]

Prevert is purposely obtrusive here. He wishes to rattle French public opinion into action. He is alarmed by the public's apathy to the reality around them and he tries his best to be provocative and incendiary to elicit a response. Religion and the bourgeoisie — the two major culprits that preserve and propagate the status quo — bear the brunt of his reproach. In 'A Well-Knit Family' ('Une Famille Bien Unie') from 1955, a tour-de-force of ridicule and farce, Prevert advances a portrayal of an average Parisian family including incest, adultery, dishonesty, exploitation and chauvinism.[25] His opinion of religion is painfully clear in this line from *Things and Other Things* (*Chauses et Autres*): 'Revolution [is] sometimes a dream; religion always a nightmare'.[26] But with all his political bravado and committed devotion to social causes, he felt most at home with his craft, poetry. In *Hebdromadaires* (1974), Prevert reveals his attitude towards poetry: 'poetry is what we dream. It is everywhere as much as god is nowhere. Poetry is one of the real and most useful nicknames for life'.[27]

Aryeh Sivan: the diffident prophet[28]

Sivan is branded in Israel with the distinguished seal of the founders' cohort poets. His poetry is labelled as indigenous and germane to its time and place. As opposed to universal and cross-cultural themes in the work of other Israeli

poets, Sivan's poetry is perceived as firmly established in his proximate surroundings. This context is mainly the urban centre that is Tel Aviv, its gloom, ugliness and mesmerizing allure:

The graceful hour of summer,
The hour of merciful wind
Is not to be found
In the clock this alley.
An alley of unrequired warehouses,
of shops that display layers of barren dust.
Only a madman's scream
bound to this alley by a faraway force
brushing against the blistering stones.[29]

But Sivan was never a mere 'Tel Avivian poet'. His poems carried him to broader and deeper pastures. Like Prevert, he is curious and inquisitive. His scrutiny often penetrates the public domain, and as a thorough iconoclast he refuses to take things for granted and constantly challenges the most consecrated of Israeli images, concepts and assumptions. In these bold efforts Sivan was supported by his colleagues at the *Towards* group, composed of critical young poets and novelists like him in the early years of statehood.[30] A recurring theme in his poetry is casting doubt on the dominant Zionist narrative and the mythology of Israeli nation-building. Such heretical thoughts re-emerge in almost every poetry collection he published. He wonders, for example, to what extent compliance and conformism, which he believes suffuse Israeli society, paralyse , paralyse and coerce dissidence into submission, as is the case with the intelligence agent representing the establishment:

The Intelligence Agent
knows everything,
this is why he is so indifferent.
Hence it is so surprising how come
a shrewd intelligence agent suddenly
Vomited in the middle of the road.[31]

As a keen and conscientious observer of reality, Sivan has qualms even with the most grounded norms around him, as in his poignant inquiry 'what is a poet to do, if he suspects his king is a demon?'.[32] Such expressions of non-identification, even defiance and protest, are salient in the powerful 'Paran', the opening poem of the book *Cape Slingshot* published in 1989, during the first intifada, the Palestinian uprising. Sivan admits to being 'one of the convoy', obeying strict laws and preserving group solidarity. Each member was entrusted with the responsibility of being the lifeline of the convoy and therefore they cannot defect. But the poet has misgivings; he seeks 'to find the scrub where Hagar laid down her son Ishmael when they were sent to the desert'. Using the biblical image Sivan suggests that he might quit the caravan of conformity to reach out to the expelled Palestinians.[33] This is a brazen and subversive message that a poet must venture, as Sivan confesses: 'the poet is the first to feel', and then what is he

supposed to do? What is his duty and obligation as a man of words? And he answers: '[he should] sit down and write a good poem in which he expands, enriches and improves his testimony'. But the poet is not the one to lead the revolution, clarifies Sivan. He is the one who awakens the consciousness and this is where his role ends 'it wasn't the poet who exposed the hoofs of Asmodeus'.[34]

Scholars identify five major themes in Sivan's poetry: childhood, coming of age, love, Tel Aviv and political.[35] The last theme sets Sivan apart from his cohorts: it is blatant and surmised, direct and allegorical, diagnostic and prognostic but always upsetting, accurate and shocking:

A land cultivates

A
A land wildly cultivates
Memory ripen bunches of grapes
Unquiet land falls asleep
All covered with skies
And in winter with a thick clouds' blanket.

B
From the cellars of consciousness
like shadows from a well emerges anxiety:
shepherds strike shepherds fighting
for waterholes in the desert
and the strong vanquish the weak,
banish them out
to seek water and life
if and where it could be found.[36]

Thus, within this lyrical gracefulness, Sivan encapsulates the essence of the Israeli Palestinian strife. Not by rage or disdain but through lucid and compelling observation, the poet imbues his readers with his insights about the lingering conflict. What emanates from Sivan's references to the protracted feud in the Middle East and the consequent fragility of Israeli society since its inception is a sense of dejection, of glumness, a realization of the gap between what occurred and what might possibly have been. This is also Sivan's quiet protest against the Zionist narrative that sanctifies and extols the achievements of the Jewish National Movement and supplies the exigencies of reality with comforting explanations. Sivan is not one of the so-called 'New Historians' among the Israeli intelligentsia, who claimed to challenge the dominant narrative of Zionism.[37] He was never an iconoclast but the clarity and precision of his words and his keen perception penetrate and tantalize more than the vociferous remonstration of others.

In a special volume of *Iton* 77 (Journal 77), one of Israel's leading poetry journals dedicated to the Zionist ethos, Sivan contributed two moving poems that juxtapose the 'what happened' and 'what could have happened' and the elusive collective memory that is supposed to bridge them. The two poems are written analogically under the shared title 'Ancient Country' and they underline the

misgiving left after the experiment of building or rebuilding a homeland and the ability to preserve one's values in the process.

Ancient Country[38]

1. There Once Was A Sea

There was once,
one hundred and fifty million years
ago the Thetis sea covering the entire
Land of Israel
ironing rocks that wrinkled when
the fire in them died.
A land of shelly stones
and skeleton layered mountains
serene, not oppressed
like rain clouds the wind carries
more and more ships
of immigrant pioneers.
Even if she had some memory left
it is highly doubtful
if she could remember
all those who fought for her.

2. A Peoples' Return

A Peoples returns to its homeland
a wandering cloud
over lands and seas
charged with fumes and smoke.
A Peoples returns to its homeland
always cherished as a young lover.
A Peoples returns to the land
to blow away its ashes and relive
the romance, like a blind courtesan
not bothering to ask whether
she is comfortable in her soft sand
like an old lady in a seniors home,
it is highly doubtful
if she would able to tell the difference
between all those
who lust for her.

Prevert and Sivan: two gadflies

Two poets with distinct styles, who combine personal, sublime lyrics with extrovert, powerful exclamations, Prevert and Sivan are the quintessential exemplars of what political poetry can, should, and must be. Despite the disparities in time, place, culture and language, the similarities between them outweigh the differences. Both use a narrative, story-telling style of poetry and prefer accessible and down-to-earth symbolism. Their language is rich but not pretentious, imaginative without being overbearing. They both demonstrate broad general knowledge with eclectic areas of interest, on which they rely when invoking images and associations from history, politics, art, literature and cinema. Mundane examples and everyday references are frequent in their poetry. Both Prevert and Sivan depict their immediate vicinity, their close environment and their living experience of the here and now. They flourish in Paris and Tel Aviv respectively, though they occasionally venture into other terrains: 'Oh lost gardens, forgotten fountains, sunlit meadows, oh suffering', marvels Prevert about *Place du Carrousel*,[39] and Sivan answers: 'Rambling the decorated streets of Jaffa, gazing at the sea, the sun, absorbing these wonders into my system'.[40]

Both poets belong to a particular literary support circle of colleagues who back them and sustain their influence. The two reference groups, the Surrealists in the first case and the *Towards* in the second, challenge and dare the socio-political and the literary status quo and cultivate a defiant genre of expression vis-à-vis the incumbent elites. This was the context in which Prevert and Sivan's social criticism and scepticism was nurtured. However, both poets steadfast and anti-doctrinarians quickly found themselves on a collision course with some of their

colleagues, especially with authoritative figures, and in the margins of the group. They continue, nevertheless, to engage in critical writing and to raise fundamental questions, occasionally infuriating public opinion as in Prevert's outrageous 'The War' or 'Family Feeling' in its original French title ('The father and mother go to the cemetery, They find that quite natural the father and mother, Life continues with knitting the affairs the war, The affairs the war knitting the war, The affairs the affairs and business, Life with the cemetery')[41] or Sivan's emotional 'Israeli Autumn' ('I am standing atop the broad and deep land of the dead: Philistines on top of Canaanites and on top of them Jews and Greeks and Arabs and crusaders').[42] While firmly grounded in their own daily environment, the two poets are stimulated and inspired by cataclysmic events that serve as the stimulus for their most uplifting works. Prevert is moved by the two world wars, the French debacles at Indo-China and Algeria, the students' riots of the 1960s and the anti-colonialist struggles of the Third World.[43] Sivan's poetry is affected by the Holocaust and the Arab Israeli wars.[44] But they express themselves in a rather disparate manner: Prevert is crude, impulsive and unruly; his poets emanate from bars and drinking parties. Sivan is chivalrous, gracious and calculated and his poems assume the respectability of libraries and book clubs. Prevert is the flamboyant and hot-blooded revolutionary who climbs barricades with the other freedom-fighters. Sivan is the cool-headed ideologue who supervises the advocates of change from the command post.

Ultimately, Prevert and Sivan are political poets because they partake in the public arena and attempt to wield influence on their readers. Their poems, like political propaganda, speeches, pamphlets, commentary or even a party's platform, are part of the stockpile of influence in a certain policy, ideology, worldview or priority list. Akin to excellent orators or eloquent presenters, articulate and affecting poets can be movers and shakers of a political power balance. According to the spatial contagion model of political dynamics,[45] every political disagreement creates a 'communication race' between the direct parties to the conflict and the attentive audience that observes the dispute.[46] The spatial contagion model links expansion and contraction dynamics of conflict and communication patterns between those involved and those watching (see Figure 1). It really means that the direct parties to a confrontation are less interested in each other and more in the possibilities of swaying the audience in their favour. The goal is to win the dispute by mobilizing the critical mass to tip the power balance in one's favour. In most cases, conflict erupts spontaneously and accidentally. This scenario renders the environment of conflict random and, hence, the audience preferences cannot be predicted. Each side invests a lot of effort, energy and skill to persuade the crowd of his or her cause. Communication aptitude along with talented 'packaging' or 'framing' of the situation and the parties' priorities might spell the difference. Each party aspires to win the conflict; otherwise it would not have been involved at all. Political poetry is a powerful factor in convincing the attentive audience to choose or shift sides. By framing the situation in a concise, dramatic and lucid description,

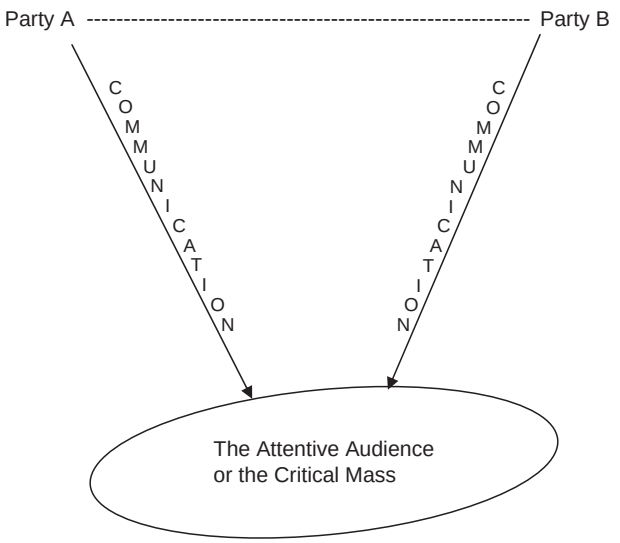

Figure 1. The spatial contagion model. Source: E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1960), 9.

political poets fortify the communication pattern and make the utmost use of it. Political poetry from Homer and Virgil to Ginsberg and Neruda becomes the ultimate orator to extol or denigrate, win or lose the battle.

Epilogue: the art of politics and poetry

Jacque Prevert and Aryeh Sivan are two politically motivated and politically inspiring poets. They express political, not necessarily partisan, views in their lyrics and they endeavour to coax readers into their perspective and understanding of the world. Even if they do not purport to convert people's opinions and attitudes, they nevertheless do so through their powerful framing and packaging of the topics they grapple with. They are both motivated by a feeling of concern and uneasiness with their perceived current situation and they seek an alternative and better reality. At times, there is a shimmering sense of despair or uncertainty, and they walk the thin line between conviction and bewilderment, but from that discrepancy emerges the keenest of wonderment and the frankest of critiques.

Poetry is an art that constantly draws its inspiration from the tumult and the commotion of life around it. A significant portion of this setting is politics. Poets cannot ignore the context they live in and politics cannot ignore its poets. Politics and poetry march hand in hand through common past and present and into a better future, and the experience of this shared march generates images, analogies and statements. They instigate, fertilize and foster one another to the extent that they may become two sides of the same human behaviour. T.S. Eliot once wrote that

'Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood';[47] this is how genuine politics should function. A complementary saying from the political side would be the aforementioned Bismarck's 'politics is the art of the possible'. In the same vein it could be said that poetry is the *possibility of the art*, and hence these two muses supplement each other.

The final words belong to a politician, who sometimes spoke like a poet, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. In one of his last public speeches, less than a month before he was assassinated, he arrived at Amherst College in Massachusetts to address a conference on the legacy of poet Robert Frost. As he managed to depart from the pressing needs of the hour, the president articulated the following words:

> When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man's concerns, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.[48]

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. Richard Finneran (ed.), *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats Volume I: The Poems: Revised Second Edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 187.
2. Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, vol. I: The Apprentice Mage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
3. Giovanni Sartori, "What is 'Politics'," *Political Theory* 1, no. 1 (February 1973): 5 26.
4. Ibid., 7. This is the reason why occasionally Plato's *politea* is confused with the notion of *republic*. Although literally *res publicum* means the public interest, or the interest of the people, the emphasis is still on law, hierarchy and obedience. A more accurate and radical interpretation of Plato might have illuminated a political society as anarchist, without hierarchy and an authoritative structure, an ideal city state of active and involved citizens, organized not by creeds and sanctions but by sheer commitment and desire for the community to prosper and survive.
5. Kenneth Minogue, *Politics: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 11.
6. Isaiah Berlin, *Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 4.
7. Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1992).
8. Daniel Dafoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002).
9. Aristotle classifies his regimes very methodically and systematically. As the pioneer of regime exploration, his categorization is simple and rudimentary: successful regimes (monarchy, aristocracy and democracy) and unsuccessful (tyranny, oligarchy, ochlocracy, the rule of the masses). Aristotle was rather deterministic in his approach: people have a very limited influence on the formation and sustenance of their regime. Regimes change in a pre ordained cycle which fatally recurs. The inherent yearning of people to be led creates popular tendencies of crowning a king. Once such a king assumes power, he concentrates too much authority and becomes a tyrant and as a result the elite depose him and take over the reins of power as an

aristocracy. When the aristocratic regime corrupts it is transformed into an oligarchy, the rule of the old and rich, which is in turn toppled by the people who bring about a democracy, which ultimately deteriorates to ochlocracy and chaos, which generates the need for a 'strong man' to take over and reinstall order.

10. Harold Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: Peter Smith, 1990).
11. It is worth noting that these definitions of politics are quite egalitarian in their worldview. They usually discuss all members of the community as eligible participators in the political arena. This is certainly a late development of the understanding of politics since the majority of human chronology witnessed politics as the stage of the few, the very few. It was conducted in royal courts, within church walls, and in nobles' mansions. Politics in its popular, accessible meaning is a product of the modern age as well as people's parties, parliaments, ideologies, social movements, or protest movements. The awareness of political participation and the possibilities of change imbued in it were not in existence. The new, active understanding of politics is one of the most significant corollaries of the French revolution.
12. Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
13. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167 91.
14. Bismark uttered these words in an interview to the St. Petersburg's Zeitung in 1867.
15. George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 35.
16. Victor Infante, http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa103001a.htm, 2007.
17. William Baker, *Jacques Prevert* (New York: Twayne Publisherss, 1967).
18. Jacques Prevert, *Paroles* (New York: City Lights Books, 1965), 22.
19. Claire Blakeway, *Jacques Prévert: Popular French Theatre and Cinema* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Publishers, 1990), 35.
20. The Attempt to Describe Dinner of Heads in Paris, France.
21. Blakeway, *Jacques Prévert*, 49.
22. Prevert, *Paroles*.
23. Michael Bishop, *Jacques Prevert: From Film and Theater to Poetry, Art and Song* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002).
24. Prevert, *Paroles*, 24.
25. Ibid., 16.
26. Jacques Prevert, *Things and Other Things* (New York: City Lights Books, 1973).
27. Jacques Prevert, *Hebdromadaires* (Paris: Guy Authiers, 1972).
28. Esther Raizen, *No Rattling of Sabers: An Anthology of Israeli War Poetry* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), 144 7.
29. Aryeh Sivan, "A Heat Stricken Alley," *Gevulot Ha Hol* [Boundaries of Sand](Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1994), 8.
30. Rina Litvin, "One of the Convoy: On A Central Aspect in the Poetry of Arie Sivan," *Libra* 64 (1990).
31. Aryeh Sivan, "A Problem for the Intelligence," 1991, Aryeh Sivan, *Warranty: Selection 1957 1997* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1991), 15.
32. Aryeh Sivan, "A Poet's Dilemma," 1992; Yaron Peles, "Why Don't We Hear More About Aryeh Sivan? A Review of His Thirteenth Book," Interview in *Haaretz*, July 15, 2011, http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/cou article/item/20182/Why dont we hear more about Aryeh Sivan.
33. Aryeh Sivan, *Hollow of the Sling* (Tel Aviv: Rhythmus, 1989), 3.
34. Aryeh Sivan, *Living in the Land of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1984), 6.
35. Rafi Weichert, "Aryeh Sivan Poet Tel Aviv," *Iton 77* (May 2010): 20.

36. Sivan, *Boundaries of Sand*, 17.
37. Michal Ben Josef Hirsch, "From Taboo to Negotiable: The Israeli New Historians and the Changing Representation of the Palestinian Refugee Problem," *Perspectives on Policy*, 5, no. 2 (June 2007): 241 258.
38. "An Ancient Country", *Iton 77*, A Special Volume on the Israeli Ethos, (May 1996): 5.
39. Prevert, *Paroles*, 39.
40. Aryeh Sivan, *On Water and On Sand* (Tel Aviv: Keshev, 2009), 6.
41. Prevert, *Paroles*: 11.
42. Sivan, *Boundaries of Sand*, 32.
43. Bishop, *Jacques Prevert*, 56.
44. Jonah Guy, "Nature, Life, History and Hidotihm: Comments Poetics of Aryeh Sivan," *Libra* SB, 1993.
45. E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People* (Hinsdale, IL: Dryden Press, 1960).
46. James Rosenau, *Citizenship Between Elections: An Inquiry into the Mobilizable American* (New York: Free Press, 1974).
47. T.S. Eliot, *Dante* in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), 199 237.
48. William Safire, *Lend me your Ears: Great speeches in History* (New York: Norton, 1992), 227.