

The image of the ‘living-dead’ in Nathan Alterman’s poetry: from archetype to national symbol

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This article traces the motif of the living dead in Nathan Alterman’s poetry, beginning with *Stars Outside* and through *Ten Plagues of Egypt* to *The City of the Dove*, indicating the way in which Alterman’s literary symbolic structure was gradually replaced by a historical literary one that reflects the influence of historical events – the two world wars, the Holocaust, and the War of Independence. With the wiping out of Jewish existence and literature, the Jewish hero became the Jewish victim and national symbol who in sacrificing himself ensured the life of the nation.

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On revisiting Nathan Alterman’s first volume of poems (*Stars Outside*) with an eye to the young poet’s independence, one is struck by the double meanings with which they are imbued. Alongside their symbolic, jeu-de-mots character marked by dualistic, oxymoronic, dichotomous paradoxes they also reflect a system of idealized romantic values. This type of reading being precisely that which facilitates the writing of symbolic literature, its appearance should come as no surprise. While this is not the romanticism of Haim Nahman Bialik – the romanticism of ‘By Flickering Sundown’, ‘Radiance’, or ‘Take Me Under Your Wing’ – its presence places Alterman, rather unexpectedly, far closer to Bialik than to Avraham Shlonsky.

One of the most prominent romantic motifs in these poems is that of the ‘good brother’, an image that, in the literature of the subsequent decade, comes to exemplify the person prepared to sacrifice himself, who is ‘walking in the fields’. The ‘good brother’ part of the broader ‘brothers’ motif belongs to the set of motifs that structure the volume, a framework that has long been recognized in the scholarly world.¹ This brother is unattainable, he belongs to another dimension – either death, as represented by the good brother slain by his sibling in ‘Letter’, the concluding poem of the first chapter: ‘For in me your only son / Whom you loved / Upon whom my hand lay in the field / Is dead’, or the brother who dies before the eyes of his waggoner-siblings who come to visit him in ‘The Song of the Three

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Brothers': 'And we came / And brought the cluster of grapes / And the sighing of the trees in blue / For we said: Our brother is closing his eyes / And they loved these'.

In 'The Song in the Forest Inn', it is the good brother who dies – the one better than his siblings, with whose introduction the poem opens: 'Let the day be told in calmness and wisdom / About our brother who rests wrapped in a cloak'. His death not only constitutes direct contact with the world: 'No man's hand was upon him, in a dark bliss / the fear of death found him in the forest', but also marks his distinctiveness and superiority:

We all,
 In the light of the overseen conflagration,
 In a withering herd until our memory is no more.
 We have only learnt to fall together.
 Our brother knew how to – alone.

The third brother in the 'The Third Mother' is similarly unreachable: 'Who shall weep when he comes if I cannot see? / I do not know where he finds him'. These are the older brothers – the good, eternal brothers in the poem that opens the fourth section: 'Provisions to bring for my older brothers, / in the light and space of our father's fields'.

Alterman's first volume of poetry still clearly manifests the romantic yearning for the good brother who lies beyond reach in one way or other – a longing that cannot be quenched even by the fact that he belongs to death. In the poems dealing with contemporaneous political events, the acceptance of death turns into identification with the struggle to found the state that was embraced and cultivated by an entire generation (the 1948 generation) of Alterman admirers.² The dubious nature of death – one of the strongest forces in the world, joining the forces of nature and historiosophy – is revealed in his later collections, such as *The Joy of the Poor* and, most prominently, *The Ten Plagues of Egypt*.³

The 'living-dead' is a central motif throughout Alterman's whole oeuvre, reaching an impressively broad scope in his first volume, *Stars Outside*. Like other motifs in this volume, it is frequently juxtaposed with other recurrent themes. Two of these are alluded to in the phrase itself: the brothers motif – which is associated with duality, binarism, and perhaps even the idea of the 'many' hidden in the epithet 'living-dead' – and death (the deceased), the puller of the strings of this collection, whose romantic symbolism affirms death not only as necessary but also as a choice. These two motifs lie at the heart of Alterman's poetic project – a constant presence both throughout his lyric poetry up until *Summer Festival* and in his topical poetry, such as *The Seventh Column*.

The brothers constitute part of the human condition of 'It is not good for man to be alone'. They are family in the sense of relying upon one another, representing the impossibility of the lone individual living alone – but resisting a human connection that will engulf his identity. This is the dialectic of dependence – attraction and repulsion, love and hatred, life and death – that suffuses Alterman's poetry from its first organized major appearance in *Stars Outside* (1983). The principal relationships in this structure, revolving

around a live group, a multitude of living beings, a live family, are the wayfarer (who on occasion – as in ‘Letter’ – is himself a double) and the brothers in their various personifications (the waggoners or the 10 brothers), the father, the son, the spinner-girl, and the innkeeper. Each unit of the family, the living group, is simultaneously a member of the supporting cast and, by virtue of his existence, a candidate for the leading role. The diverse aspects of this dynamics come to the fore in various texts within Alterman’s oeuvre.

The brothers motif is a motif of life in all its facets – the beautiful and the less wholesome, the happy and the sad, the autonomous and the artistic (life in/through art) – including death. The ‘Song of the Ten Brothers’ provides the brothers with their first ‘stage appearance’ – whence they disappear one after the other. From its first occurrence in *Stars Outside*, the motif serves as one of the constitutive components of the human drama. For Alterman, this is informed, first and foremost, by the biblical theme of rivalry and jealousy – attributes that lead to alienation and injury and even death – and later ballads and romances that share the same dramatic features. In ‘The Song of the Three Brothers’, the waggoners arrive to say farewell, ‘For we said: Our brother closes his eyes’. The jealous brother in ‘Letter’ similarly announces:

For in me your only son
Whom you loved
Upon whom my hand lay in the field
Is dead.

This drama is pervaded by biblical connotations deriving from the accounts of Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and, of course, Joseph and his brothers – as well as folklore themes and folktales and European paintings and landscapes, interwoven into the motif as it initially appears in *Stars Outside*. Alterman readers and scholars having frequently adduced the differences between this volume and later poems, it suffices to note here that, while these aspects of the brothers motif become less multi-coloured, they also become thicker – mythic – in both *Joy of the Poor* and *The Ten Plagues of Egypt*.

Death serves Alterman as a central motif with which to highlight the nature of life and art and the links between these two forms of resistance to death. The two leading lines of thought and emotion in *Stars Outside* – with which the present discussion was opened – are, indeed, the eternity of experience and that of the artistic expression that may be experienced. No other force in the world can compare with this perpetuity – death itself included. Death emerges in Alterman’s poetry as an indestructible force that yet has no power to annihilate life. This attitude is not exemplified by any single clear stance in this set of poems, a group of poems dealing with ephemerality – existential poems – thus being juxtaposed with a collection of romantic poems that address the unlimited – eternal – nature of artistic continuity. The guiding force of this volume is art itself rather than an idea that propels the poetry towards a specific conceptual goal. While death recurs in several of the poems, in none of them does it

constitute a serious element – lines such as those with which the final poem of the second section – those consisting of love poems – concludes being rare in this collection:

Behold, trembling dawn will approach our home
 And ascend the cold coil of its steps.
 We shall all rest without ourselves, my daughter
 We shall all just be time that has passed.⁴

The power that overcomes death is the conjoined force of life and art. This fact is well exemplified in the living-dead as embodied in the brothers motif – the aspect of unity/family. While one dies, the other lives, the one who murders the other thereby incorporating not only death but also life into his essence. Even if the brothers become ‘deceased’ – as in ‘An Evening in the Ancient Inn of Songs’ and ‘The Song to the Innkeeper’ – all the dead nonetheless gather in the inn, showing themselves to be very much alive in their paean of praise to the innkeeper:

Remember [we sing]
 Remember [we sing]
 My skull was decapitated.
 But God’s hand will grope in the smoke
 To deliver you
 From the menagerie of fire.

Is not the very fact that they assemble ‘along the wall’ to laud and magnify the innkeeper who wields her own form of personal providence over them anything but a *Deus ex machina*? Is she not a living presence who transforms their singing into eternal praise?

Hereby, the living-dead as presented by the narrator within *Stars Outside* signifies victory over death, the song perpetually remaining as a ‘hymn’ and ‘melody’ – i.e., as art executed in life itself. Life that performs art is also redeemed by it. While the various elements of the brothers motif may be as everlasting as the archetypes embedded in poetry, they also embody them.

Alterman’s poetry contains pieces into which despair slinks to destroy. He thus concludes *Stars Outside* with expressions rife with desperation – from ‘How can I pass through the glare of the silent flood alone?’ to ‘Only laughter and tears will walk in our paths / Until they fall without an enemy or in no battle’. Overall, however, the motif of the brothers mediates death via victory rather than surrender or submission: the deceased is dead and the melody returns.⁵

The living-dead in *Stars Outside* thus forms the leading motif in this collection – one of the prominent themes responsible for the fundamental elements lying at the base of its lyric poetry. It appears, for example, in the second opening poem of the fourth section (‘On the Highroad’): ‘I will never breathing and gazing. / I’ll die and walk on, walk on’.⁶ It emerges again and again, not only overtly but also covertly and indirectly. Thus, for example, the first chapter of the volume’s four chapters alone refers to the dead in ‘An Evening in the Ancient Inn of Songs’, Red Riding Hood in the poem of that name, who

continues to 'pick a wild flower in the wood' even after 'the tree's crown is already dark', the primordial body and soul buried in the 'I' in the cycle 'To the Elephants', and the brother in the 'Poem About Your Face' whose face trembles and dies in the window as he is 'lit to terror by God's image'.⁷

All these bear the character of a substance that cannot be annihilated – an everlasting existence that cannot be eradicated and that is always present in the experience and poem in which it is expressed. When the brother falls alone ('We have only learnt to fall together. / Our brother knew how to alone') in 'The Song in the Forest Inn', here too the waggoner-brothers and the spinner-girl remain eternal archetypes, in the same way as the poem is eternal.

The motif's balladic distribution – permeated by an aggadadic atmosphere of living-dead – is broad. With respect to its ballad-like character, some of its aspects – as noted above – serve as plots in and of themselves, enchanting readers and audiences since their first appearance when declaimed, put to music, and recited. Such is the independent appearance of the subject in 'The Third Mother', in which the family intimacy of the living-dead is embodied in the bond between sons and mothers – the three sons in whom life competes with death, a conflict that escalates from son to son. Although the first, 'from the topmast hanging', dies, his death does not prevent his mother from kissing 'each little finger and nail'. The second, who is 'walking through the fields. He will soon be here. / And he holds in his heart a lead bullet', is the true living-dead. The existence of the third remaining undefined – 'Who shall weep when he comes if I cannot see? / I do not know where he finds him' – may be the eternal wayfarer who cannot be annihilated and whose present is perpetual: 'He measures the path of Your world, O God, / (Like a wondering monk) with kisses'.⁸

While an element of tragedy – partly cruel and partly macabre – attaches to all the living-dead, they each possess the enormous and celebratory power of poetry. In essence, the motif forms one long party to which the diverse types of sorrow embedded in it are incapable of halting.

The living-dead is the zenith of the encounter between life and death in the spirit in which each of these motifs is characterized in its own right here. He represents a clash with the forces of life rather than submission to them – or, more precisely, a flowing with them or being one with them. While he is thus a tragic figure, he is not an accidental victim of circumstances or a passive tragic casualty. No one sacrifices him or makes him be something. On the contrary, his presence serves as a type of decoration, marking him off from others and representing his direct choice (or deriving from his free will). In 'The Song of the Three Brothers', one turns to God and says, 'You have only just crushed the cluster of grapes, my God, and I have staggered towards You'. Perhaps inebriation, it is rather the existential intoxication that informs existence itself – the expiring brother asks God to 'come and console my heart that is weary of its killers' (cf. Jer 4:31). Nor is his death the end of things, for the one dying sees his presence – that of the wayfarer – lingering after him: 'Spread peace over the path, over the noisy singing / And over the wayfarer who loves it'. Likewise,

at the end of the second poem in this cycle, following the brother's ostensible demise, he knows precisely what words to say to his younger sibling. This forms a clear introduction to the process embodied in 'The Song of the Ten Brothers'. His own choice, it contains reconciliation and assent more than acceptance. With its eternal archetypes, the poem serves as compensation and consolation for everything in these poems. No victim thus exists here – either in the usual sense of this term or even in the sense of sacrificing or forfeiting the one who is better.

In the earlier poems in *Stars Outside* – as noted above in 'The Song of the Three Brothers' ('I have staggered towards You') – there also exists an existential element in the sacrifice of the dead brother. His 'fall' is due to his authenticity – his direct touching of life. The good brother who 'falls' is described in 'The Song in the Forest Inn' as both authentic and primordial. His lone state is the solitude of one such as this:

And perhaps he is still, my land, the one that breathed in
 The ire of your isolation and the strength of your heavens.
 And perhaps he still even remembered the names
 Of the fathers of the giants – the light and water.

Whoever touches life is also worn down by it, completely altered by it: 'From their great voice / His ears grew heavy / And his eyes also grew wide'. Such a powerful touch not only erodes but also 'caresses' – helps the 'self' to find itself. The final lines of the verse quoted here conclude with the words: 'Only to the stutterer / Only to the humble does our mother give a flower'. The one who recalls the Creation, the names of the fathers of the giants, is thus both humble and a stutterer – whose existence is affirmed by the mother's bestowal of the flower. This is very much in the spirit of similar words spoken by the brother in , 'Letter', the poem that twins 'The Song in the Forest Inn' at the end of the first chapter: 'To my land I say / Remember my touch, / I am the hand that was extended towards your heart'.

Due to present space constrictions, the discussion will focus on the two poles of the living-dead figure, firstly in *Stars Outside* and then in other poems from the same period, concluding with an examination of the motif in *The Joy of the Poor*. As many of Alterman's readers have long noted, the multi-coloured elements in *Stars Outside* are extinguished by the pervasive gloom that infuses the story of Bilhah.⁹ There, too, the living-dead thus constitutes a key figure – perhaps playing an even more central role in this work than in Alterman's previous collection. Herein death constitutes a significant element of life, 'For no dead have forgotten their dwellings, all dwellings mourn somebody dead'.¹⁰ The relationship between the world of the living and the world of the dead is not merely one of mutuality, however, but also one wherein the world of the dead is more powerful than that of the world of the living – precisely from the perspective of the author's expectations. Although the living-dead does not choose death, only in the other world is the hope of life realized:

Joy will yet come, my child
 And we shall have our portion.
 Lowered to me on a rope,
 You will drop to my earth long promised.
 Not all is vanity, child, not all vainsglory and folly.¹¹

Despite not choosing death, this being his place death also serves as an element of life, continuity, and hope. One way or the other, the world of death is thus essential for the realization of the needs of the world of the living, constituting an inseparable part of it. The life–death mutuality continues to exist—but from the viewpoint of death.

Menahem Doron's criticism of Dan Meron's endeavour to divide Alterman's work into early and later and his determination that Alterman's monitored historical outlook accompanied him from his youth rather than crystallizing at some point in his forties appear to me to be correct assessments.¹² Their truth may be discerned, for example, in the early poems of *The Seventh Column*, first published in *Davar* in 1943.¹³ At the same time, a change of attitude is evident precisely at this juncture, both in the lyric poem *The Ten Plagues of Egypt* and in the current-affairs poems he began to write and publish in February 1943, collected as *The Seventh Column*. The twin voices can be heard in Alterman's poetry right from the beginning, in fact. While the current-affairs and historical voice appears first alongside that of the archetypal voice, however, the historical voice gradually gains power, eventually drowning the symbolic romantic myth, the living-dead thereby turning from an individual and archetypal motif into an individual historical one. In this new guise, it also takes the form of the victim—at this point assuming the dimension of a national symbol.

The new shape the living-dead takes in Alterman's current-affairs poetry is directly influenced by World War II, the Holocaust, and the ethos of the 1948 generation (the Palmah and War of Independence). Here, it much more closely approximates to reality, its solely literary and poetic features now being supplemented by an altruistic sense and a Zionist purpose. Thus, for example, in the 'Silver Salver' (in *The Seventh Column*), the world the living-dead populates has a new stage—an encounter with the nation between heaven and earth. Opposite the former stand 'a youth and a lass' who inform it: 'We are the silver platter / On which the Jewish State has been given to you'.¹⁴ While this may be discerned as reflecting the change experienced by the author himself, suffering from that to which everyone else was also exposed, this topic is also linked to Alterman's closer proximity to the political cultural centre the more he came to be identified as the 'national poet'.

Two of the first poems in the *Seventh Column*—'From All Peoples' (written in 1942) and 'Menahem Mendel's Letter'—embody this new attitude.¹⁵ The first addresses the plight of Jewish children 'under the shadow of the scaffolds', the second Shalom Aleichem's famous literary persona. For Alterman, both of these were 'offspring' of the living-dead, corresponding to him in their eternity but differing from him in their clear historical/political/cultural identity

that contrasted so starkly with the symbolic, archetypal universality of their 'begetter'. Alterman's endeavours to deal with the Holocaust removed him from the closed-off world of symbolism, transforming the character of his archetypal poetry.

In order to better understand the poem 'Our Children' that appears in 'From All Peoples' their groundedness in the living-dead and their dissimilarity from him alike we must first examine the living-dead child, who figures infrequently in Alterman's early symbolic poetry. The broken child who 'still wished for / Still wished for a marble monument / The mother and her broken child' ('The Fire') is a theatre-child from the figurative landscapes of *Stars Outside*. While he 'plays no function' in this framework, in *The Ten Plagues of Egypt* he assumes a leading role, becoming a suffering, instinctual, and cogitative figure in the world of the living-dead in this collection, whose death turns the latter the father and the maiden in 'Blood' into historiosophical figures.

No time interval intervened between the writing of 'Our Children' in 'From All Peoples' and 'The Son' in *The Ten Plagues of Egypt*. 'Our children in the shadow of the scaffolds' adduces the motif of the child who turns the figure of the child apparently during the period in which the plague poems were written into a reality more terrible than any poetic imagination. These children are not saved from the shadow of the scaffolds. No miracle occurs not even, as noted above, the poetic miracle that takes place in Alterman's early poetry.

The spirit of the poem nonetheless exhibits traces of divine, religious providence, the children declaring:

God of our forefathers . . . we knew
 That You have chosen us from all the children
 You loved and wanted us
 That You have chosen us from all the children
 To be killed before Your holy seat.
 And You gather our blood in jars
 For no one gathers it but You.
 To You it smells like the fragrance of flowers
 and You gather it in a handkerchief,
 And You will ask it of the killers
 And of those who did not speak out.

Even if they are not eternal, their blood and their revenge are, the never-ending historical-historiosophical account to be paid in the place where they no longer exist. Their eternity is transferred from the poetic-symbolic dimension to the historical-symbolic dimension, the historical outlook transforming the dead child whose existence is alive (another form of the living-dead) into a victim whose death must be avenged.

The attitude towards God in the historical-historiosophical shaping of the children under the shadow of the scaffolds is very interesting, becoming either the accused or the symbol of revenge in the name of providence or the one who demonstrates to Bialik that 'avenging a small child' is also one of Alterman's historiosophical powers, in contrast to the person whose shoes he fills. After *Stars*

Outside, Alterman makes very little recourse to God, the divine absence being particularly striking in *The Ten Plagues of Egypt*. When he does appeal to Him, his request has altered. As we have seen above, in *Stars Outside*, he pleads for poetic authenticity: as 'our mother' holds out a flower, so does God, ('hold out to us a flower' ['A Sudden Day']), or He tramples the cluster of grapes ('You have only just crushed the cluster of grapes, my God, and I have staggered towards You' ['The Song of the Three Brothers']).

This is existential romantic authenticity, which in some of the poems the speakers hope to realize despite their inability to do so – or its realization ends in death or the living-dead condition. Despite the enormous disparity between realization and non-realization – or between death and the living-dead – whenever the situation is not positive this cannot be blamed on God. In 'The Song of the Three Brothers' He is even called upon to console in just such circumstances:

I shall lie on the lone iron bed
Come, clothe me with a cloak.
Come, comfort my heart weary of its killers.
For the maiden, the songs, and the path.

Or in 'The Song in the Forest Inn': 'Our brother has gone down to the damp valley. / God has illuminated his eyes with a candle / And regarded him as upright and good'.

This is the God of romanticism. As we have remarked above, in *The Ten Plagues of Egypt* God is concealed behind the skirts of historiography. Only in 'At Our Children's Cry' – i.e., in the historical dimension – does He alter His figure, just as the living-dead transforms himself.¹⁶

Just such a type of historical accounting as presented in 'At Our Children's Cry' also occurs in another poem in *The Seventh Column* with respect to one of the most prominent figures in Jewish literature in the generation preceding Alterman – namely, Shalom Aleichem's Menahem-Mendel. This is the symbolic figure of Rabinovich, Shalom Aleichem's pseudonym, who is identified with the author and a well-known literary symbol in his own right. Menahem-Mendel is the *perpetuum mobile* of Jewish existence in Shalom Aleichem's Jewish literature, who himself bears several of the characteristics of the living-dead, tragi-comically embodying the proverb: 'Seven times the righteous man falls and gets up' (Prov 24:16). Just as he is never eternally saved, so he is never eternally lost – his whole existence being a myth-ethos of everlasting return, a 'never-ending tale' in the name of one of his other stories: a constant oscillation between falling and getting back on his feet.

Although Hebrew and Jewish literature in Europe began to disappear between the two world wars (Shalom Aleichem himself emigrating to the United States), it was totally wiped out by World War II and the Holocaust, these events bringing it to a 'final solution' politically, spiritually, and physically. Alterman's treatment of Menahem-Mendel in 'Menahem-Mendel's Letter' appears to constitute his summary of European Jewish existence and Jewish European culture – an

indirect hint (and more than a mere hint) at the fact that the centre of activity had shifted to Eretz Israel as the subject matter of the literary miracle. Changing the guise of the Menahem-Mendel archetype, he transformed him into a national symbol.

Keeping faith with Shalom Aleichem's literary vision, as it were, though another chapter in the cycle of Menahem-Mendel's letters, Alterman's poem is addressed, like them, to his wife Shayna. Its three opening verses say everything:

My Shayna Scheindel, my beautiful wife, the moon shines through the clouds.
My Shayna Scheindel, through night and storm / You touch my dreaming head.

The night wind caresses my coat and my hat tilts to the back of my head.
Thus I have walked alive, thus I lie down dead
Because my image so they say is eternal.

My Shayna Scheindel. White snow is falling.
There is no one here. Everyone has gone. Understand.
Tevye is dead
And Mottel son of Peysi.
The precious man Uncle Pini is dead.

The circumstance of which Menahem-Mendel speaks in the poem also corresponds to the symbolic system of Alterman's earliest poems, in which the living-dead is stretched out whether on his death bed ('the lone iron bed' of 'The Song of the Three Brothers'), in the forest ('The Song in the Forest Inn'), turning to his wife from his grave (*The Joy of the Poor*), or the son lying on his bed (*The Ten Plagues of Egypt*). Menahem-Mendel is located in a place that is both physical and literary-symbolic once again exactly like the living-dead in Alterman's early poetry: the brother amongst his waggoner-brothers in the balladic landscape of *Stars Outside*, the living-dead who speaks from his grave in the macabre episode in *The Joy of the Poor*, or the son on his bed in the literary-historiosophical Noh-Amon in *The Ten Plagues of Egypt*. Unlike *Stars Outside* or *The Joy of the Poor*, in the latter the physical situation takes historiosophical-literary shape, indicating the direction in which Alterman guides the living-dead during this period and henceforth. Metamorphosed into the national symbol, closing the archetypal circle, the Jewish hero becomes the victim. Jewish culture is dead but it still continues in Alterman's Eretz-Israel Hebrew creative work. The victim is the hero, the living-dead giving life.

The most well-known poem in which the living-dead takes the form of the national symbol in the guise of the life-giving victim is the 'Silver Salver'. Here, the living-dead motif undergoes numerous changes in light of historical events. The 'brothers' or 'waggoners' have been replaced by 'a youth and a lass' a couple who recall above all the fighters of the Palmah. The lass is no longer the romantic maiden one of the incarnations of the noble lady, to whom the speaker, in endeavouring to explain the distance necessary between them (her elevation so that she becomes eternal and unattainable), says, 'I feared your death in my eyes' (if I see you too close, perhaps you will lose significance for me).

This 'lass' is on a par with the 'youth' in the new Eretz-Israel generation, precisely according to the idea of equality presented in 'Sabra'. Nor do they die without meaning but are 'shot' – battlefield victims of the war for independence which gave birth to the State of Israel.

If previously death was not the end of the story, here too it is not 'conclusive'. Where formerly it comprised part of the romantic-symbolic system, however, in which another existence continues that which has been cut off, now it is part of the historical-symbolic system, wherein another existence similarly continues that which has been severed. According to the new Zionist interpretation, 'The Glory of Israel does not deceive' (1 Sam 15:29). The scene of the spectacle has shifted from the balladic romantic landscape of *Stars Outside* and *The Joy of the Poor* via the historiosophical landscape of *The Ten Plagues of Egypt* to the mythic landscape, the landscape of cultural symbols within which 'The Silver Salver' and 'Menahem-Mendel's Letter' take place – just as eternity is transferred from the poetic to the cultural dimension, as indicated by the final line (whose biblical connotation is clear): 'And the rest will be told in the annals of Israel'.

The transition from the living-dead as archetype to national symbol occurs in the period of the 'Palmah generation', befitting the image of the Sabra as one prepared to sacrifice himself not in any negative sense but as an altruistic act that forms one of his characteristic qualities. This relates to the motif of the victim in the literature of this period – a person not to be spurned or ashamed of but the secular Zionist substitute for sanctification of God's name (martyrdom). While this is not the place to discuss whether Alterman contributed to this concept or was influenced by it – or both process simultaneously – when one looks at the dead who are alive in Haim Gouri's 'Here Lie Our Bodies' (Gouri regarding himself as one of Alterman's disciples) and who justify themselves by claiming that they died without managing to sacrifice more than they did, one hears the echoes of the Palmah fighter who sacrificed himself freely, fearing only that the act might be not sufficient. This is the living-dead who dies fighting for the establishment of his homeland and lives through its creation.

The summation of the theme and its peak emerge in the poem 'Dialogue', which opens *The City of the Dove* following the 'Opening poem' that prefaces the collection. Herein, the various aspects of the figure of the living-dead are brought together: it is dual, it is a youth and a lass (both genders), it is dramatic and balladic, it is historiosophical, and deals with the period and battle: 'Where are you, Michal? We were a knife in her hand / In an unforgiving night sortie', 'Where are you, Michal? In the evening of a fateful battle / I left, but told you: I will come back tomorrow'. It exists, in macabre form, as in *The Joy of the Poor*, when the two speakers are already lying 'amongst the clods', serving as a precondition, as in *The Joy of the Poor* and onwards, for the existence of the living world – the living, historical Jewish world. Here, the process reaches its pinnacle: the two speakers, Michal and Michael (who converse with themselves rather than address the nation as in 'The Silver Salver'), represent life, the nation,

and literature. Were it not for them, there would no nation and no literature. Via the theme of the victim, the living-dead hereby assumes his full national identity.

Notes on contributor

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Notes

1. This subject has long been addressed by Alterman scholars who have noted, inter alia, the division into four chapters; the disparity between the opening and closing chapters which contain a heterogeneous spectrum of poems and the two inner chapters, each of which is arranged around a single topic (love poems in the one, city poems street markets, etc. in the other); the appearance of couplets, triplets, and groups of poems devoted to a theme that cuts across the chapters, thereby creating a series of correlations beginning with the analogy between the opening poem (the first poem of Chapter 1) and the concluding poem (the final poem of Chapter 4); recurrent images; fixed motifs that run throughout the collection, etc.
2. Haim Gouri's poetry reflects the assimilation of these values by this generation, his poem "Here Lie Our Bodies" even being appended to *Stars Outside* (Tel Aviv: Yah'dav, 1938).
3. Nathan Alterman, *The Joy of The Poor* (Tel Aviv: Mahbarot Lesifrut, 1941); Nathan Alterman, *The Ten Plagues of Egypt* (Tel Aviv: Mahnarot Lesifrut, 1944); and "The Ten Plagues of Egypt," *Ariel* 14 (Spring 2004): 43–55.
4. "Maybe the Hand Without Knowing Wants You", in Alterman, *Stars Outside*. Part two.
5. Many of Alterman's readers have long noted this element of play in *Stars Outside*, wherein life is the dominant force even when its opposite appears to be more powerful. This has recently been stated clearly by Ziva Shamir: "The introductory poem that opens with the words "Yet again the melody returns" recalls "The Turning Wheel": after the concluding nihilistic poem, the reader must go back and reread the first poem, the world returning to its pristine state and spinning the composition of a melody on its cylinder mechanism on its axis": *Sites and Situations: Poetics and Politics in Alterman's Works* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1999), 205. See <http://www.hebrewsongs.com/?song=odchozerhanigun>.
6. R. Friend, *Nathan Alterman: Selected Poems* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1978), 19. See also <http://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poem/item/3437> (accessed March 26, 2013).
7. For 'Red Riding Hood' see Ruth Mintz, *Modern Hebrew Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 204. For 'Poem about Your Face', see Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolf (eds.), *Voices Within the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets* (New York: Avon, 1980), 24–6.
8. S.Y. Penueli and A. Ukhmani (eds.), *Anthology of Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Jerusalem: Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature/Israel Universities Press, 1966), 394.
9. Boaz Arpaly, *Bonds of Darkness* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics/Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1983).
10. "The Mole," in Friend, *Nathan Alterman*, 35.
11. "Song to the Wife of My Youth," in *ibid.*, 39.
12. See, for example, Menahem Dorman, "Derekh ha Shir o mi Tor le Tor" [Via the poem: from column to column], in *Nathan Alterman: Chapters in His Biography* [in

- Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1986), 117–28: ‘The attempt by the “technological” or anti Zionist schools of Hebrew poetry to delineate two types of Alterman exhibiting two contradictory outlooks on poetry in effect is completely untenable . . . For Alterman to be able to write the poems of *The Seventh Column*, *The City of the Dove*, and *Summer Festival* . . . to be a Hebrew poet who refers to Zionism in his poetry “explicitly without quotation marks” he must have exercised the same poetic craft expressed on one occasion in “The Foreign Song” (1938) and on another in the “Footnote Song” in *Summer Festival*.’
13. This also includes the ‘moment’ poems, published in *Haaretz* between 1934 and January 1943, that form an introduction of sorts to the volume.
 14. David Roskies, *The Literature of Destruction* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1989), 608. See also <http://zionism israel.com/hdoc/Silver Platter.htm> (accessed February 26, 2013).
 15. For the former see Nathan Ausubel and Marynn Ausubel, *A Treasury of Jewish Poetry* (New York: Crown, 1957), 151–2.
 16. See [http://elizrael.tumblr.com/post/20224635483/at our childrens cry shadowed by scaffolds we](http://elizrael.tumblr.com/post/20224635483/at-our-childrens-cry-shadowed-by-scaffolds-we) (accessed March 26, 2013).