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## Beyond Thematicism in the Historiography of Post-1948 Political Poetry

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# Beyond Thematicism in the Historiography of Post-1948 Political Poetry

Chana Kronfeld

## ABSTRACT

*This article explores the limits of a thematic approach to the recovery of political modes of signification in statehood-generation poetry. I challenge, through a neo-Adornian perspective, the common view that statehood-generation poetry is either fundamentally apolitical or always aligned with normative statist/universalist positions. In the process I explore those aspects of Yehuda Amichai's early work, collected in Shirim, 1948–1962, that were perceived as revolutionary and even dangerous. Through close readings of two lyric poems, "To the Full Severity of Compassion" and "I Want to Die in My Bed," I demonstrate how biblical allusions and carefully crafted intertextual play work together with metaphor and other stylistic formations of verbal art to create a strong, if oblique or "negative," critique of bellicose nationalism and to register an unequivocal protest against the valorization of militarism and triumphalist statism.*

*Keywords: thematicism, statehood generation, nationalism, political poetry, Yehuda Amichai*

**I**n a fascinating piece of archival detective work, Rafi Man recently uncovered the minutes of two powwows held in David Ben-Gurion's Tel Aviv office in March of 1961. Among the participants were two figures who would later emerge as central public intellectuals of the statehood generation (*dor ha-medinah*), the writer Amos Oz and the historian Muki Tzur. During the second of these meetings, while the young participants were complaining to their political father-figure about the "nihilism" and "loss of values" expressed in the Hebrew literature of their time, Amnon Barzel, then the youth coordinator of the centrist-labor kibbutz movement, brought up Yehuda Amichai, saying,

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“He is an excellent poet but extremely dangerous” (*hu meshorer met-suyan aval mesukan 'ad meod*) and offering to send Ben-Gurion a copy of Amichai’s book.<sup>1</sup>

I propose that we take seriously the fact that in March of 1961 these young intellectuals, seeking access to the seat of power, felt the need to report the danger of Amichai’s poetry to the authorities. “Excellent poetry” is indeed too “dangerous” to be left alone to do its work; this forms the background for Amichai’s eventual appropriation as the national Israeli poet of celebratory and commemorative statism and to his symptomatic misreading in the United States as “the sweet singer of Israel” (*ne'im zemiroth Yisrael*), a poet of facile religiosity, digestible by Jewish American readers with their investment in *yidishkayt*-lite.

But what exactly was it about the poems that Amichai had published by 1961—collected in the volumes *Akhshav uva-yamim ha-aherim* (Now and in Other Days, 1955) and *Be-merhak shtei tikvot* (Two Hopes Away, 1958)—that made Oz insist that Ben-Gurion read Amichai not because he was important “but because he [was] expressive of something”? It is clear from the minutes of those meetings that Oz and the other would-be literati did not yet have a cohesive generational poetics resembling what we have come first to take for granted and then to critique as the distinctive poetics of the statehood generation. Thus, the participants “reported” to Ben-Gurion on a hodgepodge of writers of all ages and styles whom we associate, in hindsight, with different literary generations and trends.

No generational sense emerges from the conversations in Ben-Gurion’s office because in 1961 the statehood generation had not as yet acquired the status of a full-fledged literary trend or become fully identified with the poetic avant-garde in the Israeli “republic of letters.” Such a sense was not to be consolidated until 1966, when Nathan Zach published a series of manifestos-cum-essays and a book-length attack on the previous generation, the *moderna* poets of the pre-state period, and especially Nathan Alterman, who by then had replaced the more leftist and experimental Avraham Shlonsky as its leading figure. Zach’s pronouncements aimed, among other things, to liberate concrete and personal poetic expression from the collectivist abstractions of the past, which were associated both with the socialist realism of the 1948 Palmah generation and the heavily symbolist nationalism of Alterman’s topical poetry. In fact, what we have come to identify since the mid-1960s as the political disengagement—or in later critical reassessments, the luxury of a privileged individualism which only writers who are citizens of an established state can afford—fits perfectly the explicit poetics (but not necessarily the implicit poetics embedded in the

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poetry) of just one poet of the statehood generation, namely, the early Nathan Zach. It fits none of the other poets who have since come to be seen as representative of that literary trend (and as Michael Gluzman argues in his article for this issue, Zach's tenets may not apply even to his own poetry). Any close reading of the work produced in the 1950s and 1960s by statehood-generation poets such as Dahlia Ravikovitch, Dan Pagis, David Avidan, and even Yehuda Amichai reveals that their poetry violates not only many of the famous "Fifteen Commandments" of Zach's manifesto "On the Stylistic Climate of the 1950s and 1960s in Our Poetry" (*Le-akliman ha-signoni shel shenot ha-hamishim veva-shishim be-shiratenu*), but also the group's purported taboo on writing political poetry.<sup>2</sup> Hamutal Tsamir has already shown that this is the case with respect to Ravikovitch and other women poets of the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> I would add that before historiographical labels and hegemonic mechanisms of appropriation came between us and Amichai's work, it was often perceived as political to its very core and as having in its politics something palpably dangerous.

Furthermore, the human toll of the 1948 war (the Israeli War of Independence and the Palestinian Nakba) on both Israelis and Palestinians, and more generally the perspective of the vanquished of history, is a constant presence in Amichai's first two books, albeit as a shadow of that which is no longer there. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the fifteen or so of Amichai's poems in *Shirim, 1948–1962* in which this shadowy presence is felt even on the thematic surface of the text, but a few salient examples are in order, for example, the still-untranslated sonnet "U-veyt sirah haya beli sirah" (And a Boathouse Was Left without a Boat), a sonnet in which the *absence* of the boat whose house this was (and via metonymy, the home [*bayit*] of the local fisherman) functions as an "echo of another world." This absence haunts both the place and the lovers who go through it "whispering as in a house of mourning." The ghost-like rattling of the rusty chains that lead to the boat that is no longer there is like the "empty hand of Tantalus / that hasn't come to terms / with having naught . . . and keeps on grabbing" for what has been taken from him. Unable to forget who and what was in this place before them, the young Israeli lovers in the sonnet are unable to rejoice in their sunny present even as the passing cars declare: "This time is ours."<sup>4</sup> Another untranslated poem from the same collection, "Mi-zeman lo shaalu" (It's Been a While since They Asked), starts as follows: "It's been a while since they asked, / Who lives in between [*bein*] these houses, / . . . and why didn't he flee [*lo barah*]?"<sup>5</sup> The question subtly situates the Israeli Palestinian who stayed behind, but whose house is no longer his, in that

liminal space of *beinayim*, in-betweenness, which, as I argue elsewhere, is the endangered yet sacred space of the subject in Amichai's poetry in all its phases.<sup>6</sup>

The radical political potential of Amichai's famous poem "Be-khol humrat ha-rahamim" (To the Full Severity of Compassion)—like that of many of his other poems—has rarely been observed.<sup>7</sup> This poem, which gives my book on Amichai its title, is discussed there in detail; here I will just note briefly that in this poem, the poetic subject issues a call—to the reader or to himself—to observe, identify with, and take responsibility for those people, described in the poem's first stanza, whose houses have been ruined:

### **To the Full Severity of Compassion**

Count them.

Yes, you can count them. They  
are not like the sand upon the seashore. They  
are not like the stars of the heaven for multitude.  
They're like lonely people.  
On the corner and in the street.

Count them. See them  
seeing the sky through ruined houses.  
Find a way out of the stones and come back. What  
will you come back to? But count them, for they  
do their time in dreams  
and they walk around outside and their hopes, unbandaged,  
are gaping, and they will die of them.

Count them.  
Too soon have they learned to read the terrible  
handwriting on the wall. To read and to write upon  
other walls. And the feast goes on in silence.

Count them. Be present for they  
have already used up all the blood and there's still not enough,  
as in a dangerous operation, when one is exhausted  
and beaten down like ten thousand. For who's judge and what's judgment  
unless it be to the full extent of Night  
and the full severity of compassion.<sup>8</sup>

Like so much of Amichai's poetry, "To the Full Severity of Compassion" gives voice to what Walter Benjamin has described as history's vanquished,<sup>9</sup> rather than to the universal, national subject, as some critics have claimed with regard to statehood-generation poetry in general

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and Amichai's work in particular.<sup>10</sup> The addressee or reader of this poem is commanded not to turn a blind eye to the displaced victims' desperate gaze at the heavens. Using a series of imperative verbs, the speaker commands his Israeli reader directly to "see *them* seeing" the sky through the ruined houses. Given that the poem was published in the first decade after 1948, only ideological blindness can account for a refusal to read the referent of "them" and of their "ruined houses," along with the few and "lonely" people, with whom the reader is directed to empathize, as at least *also* post-1948 Palestinian Israelis.

In another poem, "Elegyah 'al kefar natush" (Elegy on an Abandoned Village), the loss of what even Israeli Jews now refer to as the Nakba<sup>11</sup> is described from the Palestinian point of view, which in the poem's present invades the speaker's consciousness and compels him to see and hear what was there before.<sup>12</sup> Scholarly work has focused on "Elegyah 'al ha-yeled she-avad" (Elegy on the Lost Child), Amichai's famous lament for the loss of an individual child—and of childhood *tout court*—which is also the last poem in the volume;<sup>13</sup> the elegy that immediately precedes it in the book and that mourns the collective Palestinian loss has been largely ignored by scholars and critics, as has the significance of Amichai's placement of these elegies next to each other.<sup>14</sup> The title "Elegy on an Abandoned Village," in Stephen Mitchell's translation,<sup>15</sup> cannot but fail to capture the code name *natush* used for the places from which Palestinians were expelled during the 1948 war (throughout that period and beyond, this code name was closely associated with the bureaucratic rhyme *rehkush natush* (literally, "abandoned property;" also the name of the government housing authority in charge of placing new immigrants in homes that belonged to Palestinians and were "abandoned" by them in 1948). Furthermore, the term *kefar* (rural village) of the poem's title refers in the Hebrew of the 1950s and 1960s primarily to Palestinian villages, and the fragments of the cultural and agricultural landscape encountered or hallucinated by the elegy's speaker are also distinctly Palestinian. The wind reminds him of the ululating women who once raised their voices there. The ruined houses are described in the poem's opening lines as part of a sober and calculated process of destruction; in this process, the life history (*korot*) of forgotten human beings was replaced by its inanimate homophone, the "wooden beams" (*korot ets*) of romantic ruins in which Israeli lovers now sip a glass of summer wine. The fig trees and the azure paint of the rooms are unmistakable metonymic traces of the village in which, just over a decade before the poem's first publication in 1961, Palestinians lived their normal daily lives. Haunted by the past that others wish to forget or erase, the speaker asserts, in a blatant reversal of

Hamlet's command to Horatio, "The rest is *not* silence. The rest is a scream."<sup>16</sup> The poem ends with a surrealistic depiction of the ruined Palestinian quotidian as a ghostly apparition that will not go away. In a characteristically dry, scientific image, Amichai describes it as part of the water cycle in nature: "And still / girls are hidden among the wash hanging in the air / which will also turn into rain."<sup>17</sup>

This elegy insists—via an intertextual dialogue with Rilke's modernist rearticulation of the genre and with the Jewish tradition of the collective, often female-centered *kinah* (lament)—on the obligation to acknowledge the truth of that which is "half-destroyed." Such an acknowledgment is the condition of possibility for the subject having any epistemic claim or retaining the option for an ethical inner life: *Ki rak be-harev le-mehetsah navin* ("For only in [or by means of] the half-destroyed do we understand").<sup>18</sup>

But since this difficult modernist elegy—in the Rilkean style—does not articulate its ethical message via a linear, realist narrative, it has been easy enough for critics either to ignore or to universalize it. Amichai himself insisted, however, on the specificity of the poem's reference. He reminded his readers, in an interview given over a quarter of a century later, during the first Intifada, that in the wake of the 1948 war he "was writing poems about abandoned villages [*ke-farim netushim*]."<sup>19</sup>

The elegy constructs a subtle but unmistakable analogy between the immigrant speaker's loss of his homeland, left behind in the distance, and the Middle Eastern wind (the feminine term *ruah*) that must be hired as a professional mourner (traditionally a role reserved for women) for Palestinian loss and displacement; the hot summer wind<sup>20</sup> stands in for the "ululating women."<sup>21</sup> More than any other aspect of this poem, this analogy between Jewish and Palestinian displacement, expressed most radically and consistently in the poetry of Avot Yeshurun (1904–92), had to be disavowed in the process of Amichai's critical canonization.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, when politics "reentered" the Hebrew poetic scene in the late 1970s—as the normative historiographical narrative goes—and a new generation of poets and critics would from time to time accuse Amichai, by then fully appropriated as "the national poet," of not being political enough, he would respond by saying that from the very start he had always been a political poet. In an interview with me, Amichai situated himself explicitly in opposition both to the collectivist nationalism of the Palmah generation and to what Hamutal Tsamir has termed the universalizing statism of the statehood generation: "In the fifties, when everyone was enraptured with the soil of

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the homeland or with ‘The Wooden Horse Michael’ [Nathan Zach’s paradigmatically ‘apolitical,’ universalist poem], I was already writing ‘I Want to Die in My Bed.’”<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Harshav, a founding member of *Likrat*, the literary group that was the kernel of statehood-generation poetry, corroborates Amichai’s focus on “I Want to Die in My Bed” as a paradigm for the political critique and *refusenik* sensibility that inform his early work: “If the poem were written in the framework of political discourse, it would be a call for desertion from the army.”<sup>24</sup> In the English version of the same article, Harshav goes on to describe “I Want to Die in My Bed,” published in 1958, as a poem that was “memorized by a generation.”<sup>25</sup> It must be noted that during that first decade of statehood, both the actions of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in battle and the expulsions of the Palestinians were still subject to open debate, and the left wing of socialist Zionism with which most statehood-generation poets were affiliated or associated led the opposition to these actions from the floor of the Knesset.<sup>26</sup> Those who recited the poem by heart would most likely have been Jewish—but perhaps also Palestinian<sup>27</sup>—Israelis, members of the post-1948 generation, for whom these words were “expressive of something,” to recall Amos Oz’s charged comment to Ben-Gurion. But expressive of what, and where might we find “it”?

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In reading “I Want to Die in My Bed” and theorizing its political workings, I propose to inquire about the limits of *thematicism* as the sole—or even the major—criterion for the poem’s expression of the political, especially as it is articulated in post-Nakba Hebrew poetry. Direct thematic engagement with the Nakba in the Hebrew poetry of the period seems to be the criterion for inclusion in Hannan Hever’s anthology, *Tell It Not in Gath: The Palestinian Nakba in Hebrew Poetry, 1948–1958*.<sup>28</sup> Let me first acknowledge the unparalleled importance and political courage manifested in Hever’s anthology project. This anthology, along with Hever’s insightful introduction, gives voice to a variety of Hebrew poetic reactions to the Palestinian Nakba, including poetry by marginalized women, Israeli Palestinians, and communist poets, which few Israeli readers have been aware of until now. The anthology juxtaposes these poems with Palestinian testimonial writing inserted at crucial points in the text. But the anthology project also rightly exposes the scarcity in the canonical Hebrew poetry from the first decade of statehood of a direct critique of the catastrophe that the 1948 war and its



attendant expulsions wreaked upon the Palestinian population. It is my understanding that the anthology was compiled by a systematic perusal of Hebrew literature and periodicals published between 1948 and 1958. The question I wish to pose, as part of the dialogue between Hever's work and my own, is, what were the criteria for inclusion in this anthology? The significance of this question, I argue, is not limited to the technical parameters it addresses, nor does it simply express my own investment in reinscribing Amichai—who is absent from the anthology—as a political poet, although that is clearly part of my agenda; for the question engages a central theoretical issue of where—not just what—the political is in lyrical poetry. In other words, what does it mean for the Palestinian Nakba to be “in the Hebrew poetry”?

A brief theoretical aside may help contextualize these questions for the contemporary interrogation of the politics of cultural production. In an article about Yitzhak Laor's thematically blunt political poetry, Shaul Setter nevertheless insists that even here, in this much later, post-1982 “action writing” (Laor's term<sup>29</sup>) or “*J'accuse* poetry” (Dahlia Ravikovitch's term<sup>30</sup>), the question should be, “[H]ow is this oppositional stance inscribed within the *language of poetry*, namely as a position *of the language of poetry*?”<sup>31</sup> As Theodor Adorno argued in his 1957 lecture “Lyric Poetry and Society,” “*language* mediates lyric poetry and society in their innermost core.” In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno famously claimed that what is socially determinant in works of art is “*content* that articulates itself in *formal structures*.”<sup>32</sup> Lyrical poetry and verbal art in general “reflect” history and social conditions only as a *negative mimesis*. Adorno uses the term “negative” (with a typical but rarely acknowledged playfulness) both in the oppositional and in the photographic sense. Years earlier, Adorno offered a cogent and moving example of the negative critical capacity of verbal art in his “Notes on Kafka,” wherein—riffing on the photographic sense of “negative”—he suggested that what we have in Kafka's texts is “a *cryptogram* of capitalism's highly polished, glittering late phase, which he excludes in order to define it all the more precisely in its negative,” scrutinizing “the smudges *left behind* . . . by the *fingers of power*.”<sup>33</sup>

Among the first critics to reclaim Adorno for a new reading of modernism was Astradur Eysteinnsson, in his notable 1990 book, *The Concept of Modernism*, a study that helped reinscribe the social and the political in discussions of modernist stylistics, launching in the process what has since come to be known as the New Modernist Studies.<sup>34</sup> In a more recent vindication of the political in Adornian aesthetics, Robert Kaufman focuses on the connection between lyric's expression and the question of critical agency (Amos Oz's “expressive of something”).

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Kaufman exposes what he sees as the erroneous collapse of the aesthetic and the *aestheticist* in postmodern progressive ideology critiques and rejects the mobilization of Frankfurt School critical theory (in particular the work of Benjamin and Adorno) for a wholesale “critique of aesthetic ideology” à la Frederic Jameson.<sup>35</sup>

In another recent Adornian study, C. D. Blanton explores the formal and stylistic articulations of war in English modernism, constructing a hitherto ignored lineage that leads from T. S. Eliot to W. H. Auden and from H. D. to Louis MacNiece. Blanton zeroes in on a negative form of intertextuality that he refers to as the poem’s “shadow text.” In my readings of Amichai’s poetics, I propose to adapt Blanton’s concept of the “shadow text” to the formation of radical allusion typical of his poetry and, I might add, of the intertextual practices of statehood-generation poetry and prose fiction from Amichai to Amalia Kahana-Carmon. In many cases, the crucial component of the text that an allusion evokes is omitted, relying on the reader’s familiarity with that which is not quoted to do the poem’s political work. This negative intertextuality is central, I believe, to the articulation of poetic and political resistance in the early poetry of Yehuda Amichai. For, according to Blanton, only through this shadow text can contemporary history—which the high modernists supposedly ignored, just as statehood-generation poets were later said to do—enter the text without being replicated by it.<sup>36</sup> It is, therefore, in its complex verbal art and in the workings of literary form that his poetry’s politics speaks, rather than in slogans and direct statements. “I Want to Die in My Bed” is the most salient example from his early poetry of the political function of lyric stylistics, from intertextuality and metaphor to contemporary idiom and slang.

### **I Want to Die in My Bed**

All night Joshua’s army had to climb  
To make it to the killing fields on time.  
Deep in the ground, the weft and warp of the dead.  
I want to die in my bed.

Like gunslits on a tank, their eyes took a narrow view.  
They are the many and I am always the few.  
Let them question me. I’ll have to say what I said.  
But I want to die in my bed.

O sun, stand still at Gibeon! Your light  
Sees fit to shine for warmakers who murder all night.  
I may not even see my wife struck dead,  
But I want to die in my bed.

Samson's a hero, thanks to his long black hair.  
I had to be taught to bend the bow, to dare,  
They made me a hero-on-call, they sheared my head.  
I want to die in my bed.

I've learned that one can manage anywhere,  
Even the lion's maw, with room to spare.  
So what if I die alone. That's not what I dread.  
But I want to die in my bed.<sup>37</sup>

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By 1958, the tightly constructed intertextual collage had already emerged as the hallmark of Amichai's most radical rhetorical practice. But intertextuality does not equal equivocation. The poem unambiguously depicts the IDF's battles as "killing fields" (*sedei ketel*) and the army as engaging in "murder" (*retzah*); the speaker repeatedly expresses his refusal to die "a hero's death," both in the refrain and through his choice of allusions. The poignancy of the political critique is not achieved here through the propositional content of direct assertions about 1948 but rather by choosing to map the battles of 1948 onto those biblical narratives that were most frequently appropriated for the institutional discourse of the early state: the book of Joshua as a model for the conquest of the land and the Samson story as a model for the new, muscular image of Jewish masculinity. Stanzas 1 and 3 allude to two parts of the story of Joshua's war on the Amorites at Gibeon (Joshua 10:9, 12–13); stanzas 4 and 5 allude to two different parts of the Samson story (Judges 16:17–22—Delilah and the haircut episode—and Judges 14:5–20—the encounter with the lion's carcass). Rabbinic Judaism, and the Jewish folklore and humor that emerged from it over the ages, unlike Zionist political discourse, saw neither Joshua nor Samson as particularly heroic figures. Thus, in turning them into the poetic subject's intertextual countermodels, Amichai lines up his critique of the nationalist appropriation of Joshua and Samson with the very rabbinic tradition that Zionism rejects, a tradition that often expresses disdain for these figures of brute force and national power.

In a stylistically revolutionary move, Amichai opens the poem with a graft of the then-new bureaucratise of IDF Hebrew (*ve-'ad bi-khlal*, "from x to y, inclusive"<sup>38</sup>) onto two verses from Joshua 10, thus linking the contemporary battles of the recently institutionalized Israeli army<sup>39</sup> with the biblical ones:

Joshua ascended from Gilgal, he, and all the people of war with him,  
and all the mighty men of valor. . . . Joshua came unto them suddenly,  
and went up from Gilgal all night. (Joshua 10:7, 9)<sup>40</sup>

This intertextual graft makes the agency of the aggressors entirely unambiguous. By the logic of the analogy with Joshua's army, the IDF's battle orders, echoed in the jargon of combat missives in the second line, are to make it to the killing fields, "inclusive" (*ve-'ad bi-khlal*, here translated as "on time"). In other words, the killing fields are both the geographic and the strategic goal of the campaign. The shadow of the omitted part of the biblical text looms large here: the chapter goes on to describe in emphatic detail how Joshua's army "slew them with a great slaughter at Gibeon, and chased them along the way that goes up to Bet-Horon, and smote them as far as Azeqah and Maqqedah" (Joshua 10:10–11). It is clear who is killing and expelling whom; but to understand the reference, the reader needs to be familiar with the unquoted parts of the biblical text, as contemporary readers would have been from school, often with modern "parallels" provided in official statist interpretations. The battle, which for Joshua is the miraculous episode at Gibeon in which the prophet manqué briefly resembles Moses, becomes—via Amichai's radical rewriting of the biblical intertext and its contemporary political appropriations—an ethically corrupt act enabling large-scale murder to take place. Amichai subtly changes the biblical text: *shemesh be-giv'on dom* ("Stand still, o sun, at Gibeon") becomes *shemesh dom be-giv'on*, so that a simple inversion of word order turns the verse into a modern IDF command to the personified sun as enlisted man to stand at attention (note the use of the rare masculine for *shemesh*): literally, "Sun [masculine singular], stand at attention [masculine singular imperative; military lingo] at Gibeon."<sup>41</sup> Finally, by grafting Joshua onto Samson, the heroism of both—as well as that of the IDF soldiers—is explicitly denied, though again this is clear only via activation of the biblical intertext. The portmanteau *gibor hovah* (literally, "compulsory hero") links the "mighty men of valor" (*giborei hayil*) of Joshua's shadow text with the IDF's *sherut hovah*, the common term for compulsory military service, critiquing both in the process. Again, Amichai follows the logic of the biblical text in adducing what the refusenik speaker learns from the book of Judges. He refuses to accept Samson as a model for becoming a good, new, muscular Jew and heroic Israeli (the 1948 commando unit Shu'alei Shimshon [Samson's Foxes] comes to mind, so named by poet and partisan Abba Kovner in one of his battle missives).<sup>42</sup> Instead, the Samson analogy teaches the speaker that what emasculates the Israeli male is precisely his induction into the army, where his hair is cut off. Boldly, radically, the shadow text goes one step further, to suggest that the very structure of the biblical analogy compels us to see the IDF, not the Palestinians, as taking the place of the Philistines, the cause of Samson's undoing:

the army as an institution is out to get him (inverting the nearly sacred statist slogan *me'atim mul rabim*, “the few against the many”); it is out to get everybody—as Yossarian argues in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. Thus, the formulaic opening of David’s lament for the death of Saul and Jonathan on Mount Gilboa (“to teach the children of Judah to use the bow,” 2 Samuel 1:18) inserts itself into the Samson allusions, adding the shadow of death in the line “I had to be taught to bend the bow.”

Contrary to standard readings of this poem, I believe that through the negated intertextual models and the biblical shadow texts, the refrain “I want to die in my bed” does not simply express an individualist, liberal-humanist desire to be left alone to die in peace; rather, it gathers radical valence as it recurs from title to last line and becomes, as Harshav has suggested, a speech-act of resistance and refusal—albeit one that takes place within the limited agency of the interpellated national subject. At the same time, the refrain articulates a bold rejection of the national ideal of dying a hero’s death. In Giorgio Agamben’s terms, within the new theological status that the sovereign state grants itself over its subjects (“the state of exception”), the poem’s speaker-as-subject has very little choice in how to live his life, restricted to turning the proverbial lion’s maw that is Israel into a home in the final stanza.<sup>43</sup> Language provides the only arena wherein the interpellated speaker can exercise his right of refusal: the refrain is thus a speech-act expressing the wish (to be able to choose) not to die in battle but rather to die in his own bed (a bed that—as we have just been reminded—is part of the furniture he has had to fit into the lion’s maw, since he has “no other place”). Note that by the constitutive rules of the speech-act of wishing—and by the historical conditions that govern the speaker’s existence—he is by no means sure or even likely to be granted his wish; yet its very expression is a consequential act of protest. Powerless about his own life, the poetic subject, as Amichai’s poetry reminds us, can fantasize only about having the choice of how to die, since the choice of how to live has been irrevocably vitiated.<sup>44</sup>

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In a 1987 review of Dahlia Ravikovitch’s book *Ahavah amitit* (True Love), Ariel Hirschfeld commends the section of thematically explicit political poems in the book for expressing an understanding

that a protest poem must—not “can” or “had better,” but must—reach its addressees . . . directly, without requiring analysis or leafing through

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concordances. . . . And most of all, that it must not primp and adorn itself, nor bat its eyelashes at its own peacock tail like that “Typical NO Poem” by Nathan Zach. For what in another context would be self-adornment or wit, here it would be more than a miss, it would constitute a betrayal.<sup>45</sup>

Hirschfeld himself would probably disagree with this assessment today. In any case, against this call to give up all artistic mediation, I find that it is precisely this “leafing through concordances” that makes lyrical poetry poetry and not mere harangue. Thematicism as the sole criterion for the political is at best reductive in the extreme. It is in this sense that political poetry as verbal art—and not as mere direct thematic statement—continues to be the mark of Amichai’s oeuvre to the very end and is not restricted to his early reactions to 1948.

I am painfully aware that a call such as Hirschfeld’s results from the horrific pressures of a reality that, since the call was issued in 1987, has only continued to deteriorate both politically and ethically in ways that are catastrophic for both Israelis and Palestinians. Furthermore, it is very easy for me, from the comfort of my Berkeley cocoon, to plead for a rehabilitation of the aesthetic in general and of verbal art in particular in discussions of political poetry. However, retheorizing the political lyric through Amichai’s oeuvre and with Adorno and his recent reinterpreters would suggest that a crassly thematic criterion for the political runs the risk of implicitly accepting the very same presuppositions about the lyric held by bourgeois liberalism. I suppose I still have a great deal of faith even in the most appropriated forms of “excellent but extremely dangerous” poetry. I believe that now, more than ever, we cannot afford to ignore its art.

## Notes

This article, like my forthcoming book on Amichai’s poetry, could not have been written without close dialogue with Shaul Setter and Eyal Bassan.

- 1 Rafi Man, “Amichai hu meshorer metsuyan aval mesukan ‘ad meod,” *Haaretz*, Oct. 20, 2010, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/1.1226386>.
- 2 Nathan Zach, “Le-akliman ha-signoni shel shenot ha-hamishim veha-shishim be-shiratenu,” *Haaretz*, July 29, 1966, pp. 10, 13.
- 3 Hamutal Tsamir, *Be-shem ha-nof: Leumiyut, migdar ve-subyektiviyut ba-shirah ha-yisraelit bi-shenot ha-hamishim veha-shishim* (Jerusalem, 2006).
- 4 In the sonnet cycle “Ahavnu kan” (1955); included in Yehuda Amichai, *Shirim, 1948–1962* (Tel Aviv, 1967 [1963]), 42–43.

- 5 Ibid., 167–68.
- 6 See Chana Kronfeld, “‘The Wisdom of Camouflage’: Between Rhetoric and Philosophy in Amichai’s Poetic System,” *Prooftexts* 10 (1990): 469–91.
- 7 Ibid., 219.
- 8 Translation here by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, in *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, ed. Robert Alter (New York, forthcoming); Amichai, *Shirim, 1948–1962*, 219.
- 9 See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1968), 253–64. Amichai may also have been familiar with this concept through the works of Bertolt Brecht, who was in dialogue with Benjamin and who was a model for the Israeli leftist intelligentsia during the 1950s and 1960s. See the allusion to Benjamin in Brecht’s acerbic statement, “Always / the victor writes the history of the vanquished”; Bertold Brecht, *The Trial of Lucullus*, in *The Collected Plays of Bertolt Brecht*, 8 vols, ed. Tom Kuhn and John Willett, trans. H. R. Hays (London, 2003), 4: 386.
- 10 Though note that women poets are an exception.
- 11 Characteristically, as soon as the Israeli parliament in 2011 placed legislative restrictions on the use of the term Nakba, its use gained a special cachet and became much more prevalent, especially in intellectual and academic circles.
- 12 Amichai, *Shirim, 1948–1962*, 275–77. The poem was first published in the inaugural issue of the avant-garde journal *Yokhani*; Yehuda Amichai, “Shirim ‘al kefar natush,” *Yokhani* 1 (1961): 14–16.
- 13 See, especially, chapter 4 of Boaz Arpali, *Ha-perahim veva-agartal* (Tel Aviv, 1987), 85–100.
- 14 An important exception to the critical marginalization of this poem is the detailed analysis of Haggai Rogani, *Mul ha-kefar she-harav: Ha-shirah ha-‘ivrit veva-sikhsukh ha-yehudi-‘aravi, 1929–1967* (Haifa, 2006), 197–202. Arpali discusses the poem briefly in terms of narrative point of view in *Ha-perahim veva-agartal*, 155. Yochai Oppenheimer goes out of his way to deny the elegy’s political protest because, according to him, “an aesthetic point of view” and a poetic voice that maintains a “distance” cannot be truly ethical or political. This is precisely the problem, as I argue below, with the reduction of the political to the thematic in discussions of poetry in general and of Amichai in particular. Suffice it to say at this point that by Oppenheimer’s criterion, all of Brecht’s oeuvre should be denied political and ethical meaning, since critical distance and *Verfremdung* (the alienation effect) are two of its key principles. See Yochai Oppenheimer, *Ha-zekhut ha-gedolah lomar lo: Shirah politit be-Yisrael* (Jerusalem, 2003), 274.
- 15 Yehuda Amichai, *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, trans. Chana Bloch and Stephen Mitchell, rev. ed. (Berkeley, 1996), 42–43; Mitchell translated the selections from Amichai’s early poetry and Bloch those from his later poetry.

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- 16 Amichai, *Shirim, 1948–1962*, 176; my translation; emphasis added. Mitchell’s translation minimizes both the ethics of protest and the Shakespearean allusion by rendering the line as follows: “The rest is not simply silence. The rest is a screech”; Amichai, *Selected Poetry*, 42. And see Rogani for an analysis of this allusion, along with other radical allusions to Bialik and Ezekiel in the poem that help define the Palestinian experience in terms of the Jewish history of loss and displacement; Rogani, *Mul ha-kefar she-harav*, 200–201.
- 17 Amichai, *Shirim, 1948–1962*, 277. This haunting presence brings to mind Celan’s poetry in its depiction of the spectral existence of “that which was.”
- 18 Amichai, *Shirim, 1948–1962*, 277.
- 19 Yehuda Amichai, interview by Dalia Karpel, “Mekaveh le-Nobel,” *Ha-’ir*, Mar. 11, 1989, n.p.
- 20 Probably the hamsin, the hot, dry wind of the local summer. The first line of the poem describes the lovers drinking *yein tamuzim*, translated by Mitchell as “the wine of August” (Amichai, *Selected Poetry*, 42), a translation that neutralizes the unusual use of the plural of the Hebrew month Tammuz. The odd plural revives the ancient Near Eastern reference of the month’s name to the Babylonian god whose cyclical death in the heat of summer is mourned by women (see Ezekiel 8:14).
- 21 Although Mitchell’s translation de-Arabizes the mourners, rendering *yelel nashim* as the more universal “the wailing of women,” it acknowledges their status as professional keeners with the verb “hire.” Amichai, *Selected Poetry*, 42.
- 22 An extreme but symptomatic case in point is Nili Scharf Gold, who describes the poem as one of Amichai’s greatest achievements only to deny its political valence. She starts her extensive discussion with an acknowledgment that “in the 1950s the word ‘kefar’ (village) was almost exclusively used to describe Arab settlements—small Jewish communities were dubbed kibbutz, *moshav*, or *moshava*.” Moreover, she admits that “Amichai’s choice of the word *natush* recalls the term’s post–War of Independence usage in the expression *rekhush natush*, which denoted property that had been abandoned by Arabs who had either escaped the country or been driven away.” See Nili Scharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel’s National Poet* (Waltham, Mass., 2008), 315. All of this does not prevent Gold, however, from rejecting the poem’s analogy between Jewish and Palestinian loss, immediately after stating that the poem’s language asserts that loss. The rest of her reading simply erases the poem’s ethical and political focus on the Palestinian Nakba and argues instead, on the basis of a love letter by Amichai from 1948, that the abandoned village (kefar) is an evacuated Israeli kibbutz at which he stayed for a few days during a military assignment. Gold argues that Amichai’s claim that the poem is about an abandoned Palestinian village rather than a kibbutz is part of his “attempt to prove his political correctness,” which required



- him to “boast” (her term) “that in the 1950s he wrote ‘anti-war poems.’” See her detailed reading of the poem on pp. 314–23.
- 23 See Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford, forthcoming).
- 24 Benjamin Harshav, “Hirhurim ishiyim al ‘Amichai: Ha-shirah veva-medinah,” *Alpayim* 33 (2008): 121–37.
- 25 Benjamin Harshav, “On the Beginnings of Israeli Poetry and Yehuda Amichai’s Quatrains: A Memoir,” in *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford, 2007), 175–86, esp. 178.
- 26 See, for example, Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947–1949* (Cambridge, Engl., 1989), esp. 162–65, 183–85, 291–92. David Avidan was the only major statehood-generation poet who remained outside the national “consensus” as a member of the Communist Youth Movement.
- 27 Thus, for example, Mahmoud Darwish describes Amichai as “the greatest Hebrew poet,” who supplied him early on with a much-needed counterpoint to the nationalist Hebrew poetry that Israeli Palestinians of his generation were compelled to study in school. Darwish goes on to say that “Amichai is greatly admired among the Palestinian elite and among the Arab elite. They read him in English, though there are some Arabic translations.” Mahmoud Darwish, interview by Adam Shatz, “A Love Story between An Arab Poet and His Land,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 4, no. 31 (Spring 2002): 73. In a posthumously published Hebrew interview by his Israeli friend Yosef Algazi, Darwish said that when he read “the Hebrew writers who exhibit excellence of form and content like the poets Yehuda Amichai and Dahlia Ravikovitch,” he got a “sort of injection of hope that there are people in the Land [*ba-arets*; the Hebrew term for Israel] who have preserved the ethical measure of understanding the Other”; Mahmoud Darwish, interview by Yosef Algazi, “Le-zikhro shel Mahmud Darwish,” *Ha-gadah ha-se-malit: Bamah bikortit le-hevrah ve-tarbut*, Aug. 16, 2008, <http://hagada.org.il/2008/08/16/>. The complex intertextual dialogue between Darwish and Amichai is the subject of a collaboration between me and my colleague Margaret Larkin, a scholar of Arabic literature.
- 28 Hannan Hever, ed., *Al tagidu be-Gat: Ha-Nakbah ha-falastinit ba-shirah ha-ivrit, 1948–1958* (Haifa, 2010).
- 29 Yitzhak Laor, “Peredah min ha-sifrut ha-ivrit,” *Haaretz*, July 7, 2007, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/literature/poetry/1.1428447>.
- 30 See Dahlia Ravikovitch, interview by Dalia Karpel, “Another Book: *True Love*,” *Ha-ir*, Nov. 28, 1986, pp. 30–31.
- 31 Shaul Setter, “‘Noshkeh yonek mar‘il lash motsets madbik’: ‘Al leshon ha-hitnagdut ha-ivrit be-shirato shel Yitshak Laor,” *Ot 1* (Fall 2010): 163–90; emphasis added.
- 32 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Christian Lenhardt (London, 1984), 327; emphasis added.

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- 33 Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 256; emphasis added.
- 34 Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990), 42.
- 35 Robert Kaufman, *Negative Romanticism: Adornian Aesthetics in Keats, Shelley, and Modern Poetry* (Ithaca, N.Y., forthcoming), 1, and see idem, "Poetry after 'Poetry after Auschwitz,'" in *Art and Aesthetics after Adorno*, ed. Anthony Cascardi et al. (Berkeley, 2010), 116–81.
- 36 C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Later Modernism* (Oxford, forthcoming).
- 37 Yehuda Amichai, *Be-merhak shetey tikvot* (Tel Aviv, 1958); included in Amichai, *Shirim, 1948–1962*, 82–83. Translation here by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, in Alter, *Poetry*.
- 38 As Daniel Boyarin reminded me, this is only one of many traditional rabbinic terms to be "nationalized" in the new discourse of statism. The most salient example is of course *bitahon*, a term that used to signify devout confidence in divine providence and came to designate state security.
- 39 The critique of bureaucratism echoes the debate in the early years of the state over the constitution of the IDF as an established, professional army rather than the 1948 folk militia, whose elite units were called the Palmah. This criticism, directed at Ben-Gurion, was captured in the discourse of the time by the question, "Lamah perku et ha-Palmah?" (Why did they dismantle the Palmah?).
- 40 *The Koren-Jerusalem Bible*, bilingual edition (Jerusalem, 1992). All subsequent biblical quotations in the discussion of this poem follow this edition.
- 41 None of these subtleties are captured in our translation and would have to be added in as a footnote.
- 42 See the article by Michal Arbell in this issue, "Abba Kovner: The Ritual Function of His Battle Missives."
- 43 Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attel (Chicago, Ill., 2005), and idem, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, 1998). "To live in the lion's maw" (*li-hyot be-loa' ha-aryeh*) was an idiomatic expression in 1950s and 1960s Hebrew for life in Israel; the meaning is roughly equivalent to that of the English idiom, "life in the shadow of a volcano." I thank Carol Redmount for her help on this point.
- 44 See, for example, Dahlia Ravikovitch, "Kemo Rachel," in *Kol ha-shirim*, ed. Giddon Ticotsky and Uzi Shavit (Tel Aviv, 2010), 155; Eng., "Like Rachel," in *Hovering at a Low Altitude: The Collected Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch*, trans. Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld (New York, 2009), 156–57.
- 45 Ariel Hirschfeld, "Ravikovitch aharei 'asor," *Yedi'ot aharonot*, Jan. 9, 1987, n.p.