

Sovereignty and Melancholia: Israeli Poetry after 1948

Michael Gluzman

ABSTRACT

The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 has had a major effect on Hebrew literature's self-image. From the Haskalah onward, the Hebrew writer perceived himself as "watchman unto the house of Israel," a prophet seeking to voice the national aspirations and concerns of the Jewish people. After sovereignty was established, the writer's national role became superfluous and the literary world was gripped by a sense of melancholia over its diminished role in the newly established state. Nathan Zach, the leader of the younger generation of poets who began writing after 1948, expressed this melancholic stance by questioning the very necessity of poetry. Zach's focus on the individual's personal experiences is usually read in celebratory terms, as signaling the rejection of the collectivist ideology of the 1940s. In contrast, I read Zach's stance as one of mourning and melancholia over the fate of literature itself in the wake of statehood.

Keywords: sovereignty, nationalism, melancholia, statehood generation, Nathan Zach, Yehuda Amichai, modernism

How did Hebrew writers react to the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948? How did Hebrew poets perceive their role in the wake of much-coveted Jewish sovereignty? "Reading Hebrew poetry chronologically," Benjamin Harshav writes, "one would be hard-pressed to find a single reference to the founding of the State of Israel."¹ Exaggerated as it may be, Harshav's reflection may help explain why critics have tended to describe the transition from pre-state to Israeli literature as continuous and uninterrupted. Hannan Hever remarks that "Israeli literature is ordinarily perceived

Michael Gluzman, "Sovereignty and Melancholia: Israeli Poetry after 1948," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 18, no. 3 (Spring/Summer 2012): 164–79

as the direct successor of its pre-state forerunner. Conventional historiography . . . obscure[s] what the project of national independence involved, namely the struggle over Israeli territory.”² However, 1948 marked not only a struggle over territory but also an epistemic rupture that produced profound changes in the structures of Hebrew culture, including a gradual yet palpable change in the role and function of poetry in the newly founded state. Although these changes transpired throughout the 1950s, 1948 is nonetheless a symbolic juncture, the threshold of a new epoch in which Hebrew poetry gradually relinquished its national role.³

The war had officially ended in July 1949. The initial euphoria and excitement that marked the establishment of the state had given way to the void of “the morning after.”⁴ This feeling, which I wish to term the melancholy of sovereignty, is aptly described in a 2008 essay-cum-memoir by Benjamin Harshav, one of the *Likrat* circle whose members—among them Nathan Zach and Yehuda Amichai—became the most prominent poets of the statehood generation:

Once statehood was achieved, a deep sense of social depression overcame Israeli society. It now became clear that the thousands of casualties we sacrificed in the War of Independence . . . were individual victims each and all. No solace could be found for the pain felt over each individual loss. The “morning after” brought about a system of government based on bloated, petty bureaucracy that dominated both private and political life. It also brought tent camps for tens of thousands of newly arrived immigrants. . . . Members of the younger generation hung around in coffee shops: “When Zionism was put in quotation marks”—that is how they described that moment in history. . . . “Zionism” became a term for hollow ideology and empty speech. . . . The hypocrisy of grand public pronouncements was exposed for what it was; and emerging center stage were the individual’s private, intimate experiences.⁵

Harshav’s diagnosis of postwar social depression finds support in Anita Shapira’s account of the ideological crisis experienced by Israeli youth returning from the battlefield—those “Zionists turned cynical,”⁶ as they were dubbed at the time:

They abstained from intimate conversations and especially recoiled from any topic of discussion that might compel them to reveal their feelings. The cynical veneer worn by the combatants of 1948 was part of a mindset designed to help them cope with grief over the loss of a friend, with bereavement. They were in the process of reorienting themselves to a new state in which many of them could barely find their place. Repressing disagreeable emotions was part of the process of recuperation.

[165]

*Sovereignty and
Melancholia*

●
Michael
Gluzman

Psychologically, their suppression of the memory of the expulsion [of the local Arab population]—part of the mechanism of recovery and re-adjustment—resembled to some extent the suppression of traumatic memories by Holocaust survivors.⁷

Even though Harshav and Shapira describe different social milieus—the former focusing on Jerusalem’s student community, the latter on soldiers returning from the battlefield—both seem to portray the “morning after” in traumatic terms of uncontrollable and insufferable pain. They offer brief yet gripping accounts of the emotional and cultural climate that simmered under the surface in a state populated by Holocaust survivors, wounded war veterans, new immigrants from Eastern Europe and Arab countries, and veteran immigrants grieving the deaths of relatives and friends.

Both portraits are also fascinating for how they point, almost in passing, to the linguistic turn that lies at the heart of sovereignty. Harshav’s young students scoff at the moment in which the term “Zionism” changed its meaning, and Shapira’s depiction of “Zionists turned cynical” indicates the social change embedded in this word-play. Sovereignty thus provokes a discursive transformation reflected in a crucial linguistic realignment. Two weeks after the declaration of Israeli independence, the daily *‘Al Ha-mishmar* reported that the provisional government was looking at Hebrew terms for the words “passport” and “visa” and that Hebrew words for “minister” and “ministry” had already been chosen.⁸ Not only symbols of sovereignty, however, but all areas of life were soon to be Hebraized. A day after the aforementioned report, *‘Al Ha-mishmar* published a column on the urgent need for a Hebraized legal terminology.⁹

Sovereignty required the Hebraization of all areas of life, including given and family names. It was in this spirit that Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the president of the Jewish National Council, called for “the imposition of the Hebrew language and of Hebrew names in both public and private life.”¹⁰ The poet Jacob Fichman offered similar proposals in his opening address at the thirteenth conference of the Hebrew Writers Association, the first to convene in a sovereign Israel.¹¹

The changes brought about by sovereignty—political, demographic, cultural, and linguistic—all resulted in far-reaching transformations in the literary production of the period, though, initially at least, these were largely hidden from view. The booklet *Writers’ Words: A Meeting Summoned by the Prime Minister* provides insight into the kinds of questions raised regarding the role of literature in the age of statehood. The booklet offers transcriptions of two meetings

between Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and a group of poets, novelists, critics, and intellectuals, most of them members of the “old guard” of Hebrew letters. The first meeting took place on March 27, 1949, while the War of Independence was still raging; the second was summoned on October 11 of the same year, several months after the war had come to an end. Among the participants were poets Avigdor Hameiri, Shin Shalom, Uri Zvi Grinberg, Leah Goldberg, Anda Pinkerfeld, and Hayim Gouri; novelists Yehudah Burla, Asher Barash, and Eliezer Steinman; critic Rachel Katznelson-Shazar; and professors Samuel Hugo Bergman, Benzion Dinur (Dinburg), and Martin Buber.¹² In his opening address Ben-Gurion said:

[167]

*Sovereignty and
Melancholia*

●
Michael
Gluzman

Israel, I hope, will never be a totalitarian state where those in power dictate scientific truth, literary style, and directions in art or in intellectual life. Intellectuals will enjoy complete freedom in the state of Israel; the human spirit will not be vanquished or subjugated. Precisely for this reason intellectuals bear great responsibility, a duty commensurate with their rights.¹³

The content of that responsibility, Ben-Gurion thought, was to invest “great effort in the forging of national unity.” In a front-page report published the following day in *Davar*, Ben-Gurion was quoted as saying, “We shall have to forge a new Hebrew style that could not have existed in the Diaspora. We shall have to solidify our connection with our past, [but] also to pave our way toward the messianic vision of peace on earth.”¹⁴

The participants’ responses were varied. Some proposed setting up a council (a “Sanhedrin”) of writers, establishing a national publishing house, and allocating resources for the advancement of writers. Others stressed moral concerns, especially the pedagogic responsibilities of writers in an age of mass immigration. A sense apparently shared by all present was that Israeli sovereignty and the subsequent waves of immigration had transformed the local Jewish society demographically. From mid-1948 to mid-1949, no less than 236,000 Jews (or 36.4 percent of the local Jewish population at the start of this period) immigrated to Israel.¹⁵ Consisting largely of Holocaust survivors from Europe and Jewish immigrants from Arab countries, this mass immigration was not as ideologically motivated as earlier waves of Jewish immigration to Palestine had been. As historian and Knesset member Dinur noted, “Immigration at present has less to do with the emergence in recent generations of anti-diasporic sentiments among the Jews.”¹⁶



The mental gap between the newly arrived immigrants and the members of the Yishuv came up repeatedly in the writers' conversations with Ben-Gurion. Though some of the speakers denied that writers had any special moral responsibility or social role, the vast majority agreed that it was incumbent upon them to "go to the people," in the Narodnik sense. Leah Goldberg—one of the most prominent poets in the group—favored the idea:

I do not believe that the people gathered here can do this each on his or her own, since each one is occupied with various concerns, and, besides, not everyone is equally capable of doing so. Nevertheless, we must interrupt our regular work in order to reach out to such people and start this kind of movement using such skills as we have—which, in the case of most of us gathered here, happen to be literary skills.¹⁷

To illustrate why the Narodnik imperative articulated in 1870s Russia was necessary in the newly founded state, Goldberg recounted her visit to the small settlement of Beer Ya'akov, where she saw "people from all corners of the world": "We should all realize," she said, "that what we face is not ordinary human material, but very special material whose nightmares we cannot begin to imagine but must nevertheless share."¹⁸

In the second meeting with Ben-Gurion six months later, Goldberg spoke more directly of poetry's role in the age of sovereignty and mass immigration:

I met an American poet the other day. . . . He asked me: Who is your audience? I gave several rather optimistic—and in my view well-founded—answers. He then proceeded to complain about the lives of poets in America, lamenting there was no audience for poetry there. Poets write for other poets or for their friends. When they go to a publisher, the latter says: "Give me a novel I can also turn into a film"—or else they must smuggle their poems into the radio or the theater, otherwise they cannot hope to reach the broader public. And so, poetry as a whole remains limited to intellectual circles. And the situation has become very dire indeed. He told me, for example, of the great poet Auden who used to have some contact with a mass audience, but since [poetry] became limited to very narrow circles he became increasingly isolated, until he finally descended to mysticism and retreated from reality, his poetry losing all its former potency, its fundamental meaning diminished. After hearing all this I went home, and beautiful memories came to my mind: kibbutz members attending lectures on literature; teenagers talking about poetry, . . . farmers listening to lectures. I recalled how I had visited [the agricultural settlement] Kefar Yehezkel and met a farmer

who spoke to me about “Romin Rolin.” It was a little funny, but I thought to myself: where else in the world, except Scandinavia, can a farmer, a tiller of the land, talk about Romain Rolland, garbling his name though he might? But suddenly I remembered how one Saturday night, contrary to my usual habits, I went down to the beach in Tel Aviv to stroll around and see the people. I saw masses of people who, by the look of their faces, had never read a book and will surely not read one for some time to come—an alien people, a people we do not yet know, largely consisting of recent immigrants. Some have been in this country for some time now but have yet to join the [social] circle of which we are part. We forget, that is, that the *kibbutsim* and the *moshavim* [cooperatives] are an elite, the cream of the crop. We have fostered the sense that they are the people; but in fact we are far removed from the people. If we somehow fail to reach those people I saw that Saturday night on the beach in Tel Aviv—and they were very many—we shall remain an intellectual circle within an intellectual circle; literature will atrophy and will no longer have any contact with the people.¹⁹

[169]

*Sovereignty and
Melancholia*

●
Michael
Gluzman

As Goldberg’s language suggests, she was well aware that, in a certain respect, an era had come to an end. “Beautiful memories came to my mind,” she writes in the past tense, hinting, whether consciously or not, that recent demographic changes were heralding the beginning of a new phase, one of a growing distance between poets and their potential audience.

An alternative to Goldberg’s view of the demographic change as the main cause of the emerging literary crisis was expressed by poet Ezra Zussman:

The dialogue between the Hebrew government and Hebrew writers is a new one. As long as a [Jewish] state and government did not exist, Hebrew literature was the sovereign in the realm of the spirit. But now that this spirit has been summoned to realize itself in the province of the state, a mutual exchange has begun. . . . The nation’s character will be forged in the fields, in the factories, in the streets, in public assemblies, and also, in its own special way, by literature. But this exchange between the state and the writers is also valuable in itself. Ben-Gurion has spoken of a constant, ongoing interaction. . . . Truth be told: the state’s attempts, multiplied of late, to influence literature and the arts have for the most part not been for the better. . . . Yet perhaps—and the events of this evening fill us with this hope—perhaps there is another way of speaking, of treating one another, of exerting mutual influence.²⁰

Despite his semioptimistic conclusion, Zussman was well aware of the declining status of literature in the wake of sovereignty. Almost two

decades earlier, in 1930, Hayim Nahman Bialik voiced a similar concern about the marginalization of writers in the Yishuv:

[170]

*Jewish
Social
Studies*



Vol. 18
No. 3

I do not know, and to this day I find it hard to understand: Why have Hebrew literature and all of its writers become like beggars and uninvited wedding guests? I fear to utter the reason, but the fact remains that *ever since the rise of political Zionism, literature has been pushed aside*—first gently, first gently, and then gradually pushed not only from the center but from the periphery, and soon its place would be completely out of bounds.²¹

In another article from the same period, Bialik added:

You are familiar with our leadership's attitude toward Hebrew literature, which carries on its back the whole burden of the Hebrew revival, the trumpet calling for revival, the harbinger of revival, which had brought forth the entire Jewish revival movement. I would perhaps say: The primary in-law of the entire movement of revival [of Israel] has been forgotten and forsaken by our leaders.²²

As early as 1930, then, Bialik had already sensed the gradual decline in the cultural importance of Hebrew literature. It is widely accepted that from the onset of the Jewish Enlightenment, Hebrew literature was the prime motivator of Jewish national thought. Dan Miron has divided the evolving relationship between Hebrew literature and the political Zionist establishment into several historical stages. At the outset, in the 1880s, "there was almost no distinction between the Zionist political organization and Zionist literary activity."²³ The second stage was characterized by an "institutional bifurcation and division of labor," embodied in the charismatic figures of Theodor Herzl and Bialik, those "two stars in the skies of Zionism."²⁴ In the third stage, rooted in the Second Aliyah and spanning the 1920s, Hebrew literature evolved under the auspices of the Zionist workers' movement, nurturing a continuity (inspired in equal measure by A. D. Gordon and Y. H. Brenner) "between workers and writers, between Zionist and literary activity." The fourth stage, extending over the two decades prior to statehood, was characterized (to use Yonatan Ratosh's term) by "party-affiliated literature" (*sifrut memufleget*) of the type advocated by Berl Katznelson. In this model, writers were organized "in factions affiliated, directly or indirectly, with particular Zionist parties."²⁵

Although Miron outlines discrete historical stages, he also accounts for the continuous symbiosis between the literary and the political establishments. As Miron is well aware, however, statehood

fundamentally changed the rules of the game: “The model of ‘party-affiliated literature’ was to collapse during the first decade of statehood, crushing many who had basked in its shade.”²⁶

Though officially attained with the Declaration of Independence, Israeli sovereignty was established through a long political and cultural process that spanned the entire 1950s. Most comprehensive of all the major literary responses to the events of 1948 was *City of the Dove* (1957) by Natan Alterman, Israel’s most admired and influential poet in the 1940s, whose commentaries on current affairs in his Seventh Column poems, published periodically in *Davar*, had immense public resonance. With *City of the Dove*, Alterman wished to leave behind the supposedly apolitical neosymbolist style that had characterized his prior work. His aim was to decipher the laws of history and to articulate the poet’s tasks in changing times. In terms of Zeli Gurevitz’s distinction between “major” and “minor” temporality, *City of the Dove* was clearly oriented toward the former, toward history at its most dramatic and cataclysmic.²⁷ “Major temporality,” Gurevitz writes, “attempts to combine different periods (none of which is necessarily unified or complete unto itself) into one collective temporality, a common era.”²⁸ By the time *City of the Dove* was written, Hebrew writers had become deeply aware of the rift between poetry and reality. Although Alterman’s volume can be understood as an attempt to mend this rift, the lukewarm reception with which the book was met indicates that his attempt to glorify poetry’s national role had become outmoded. Miron writes:

City of the Dove is no doubt the most striking example of the effect of statehood on the work of a poet whose poetics had coalesced in the pre-state period. . . . Alterman demonstrates in this work an intellectual vigilance and flexibility and a poetic audacity not exhibited by any other member of his generation—though, admittedly, none of these observations entails a positive critical evaluation of the aesthetic results produced by the poet’s ability to change.²⁹

In marked contrast with Alterman’s restorative move, statehood-generation poetry was an attempt not to mend but to underscore the rift between poetry and history. The rise of the *Likrat* coterie in the early 1950s marked the stylistic, thematic, and ideological changes borne of “the morning after.” Established in 1951, the group’s undisputed leader was Nathan Zach. Other prominent figures included Benjamin Harshav (Hrushovski), Aryeh Sivan, and Moshe Dor, as well as Yehuda Amichai, who joined the group later. Zach’s and Amichai’s poetry exhibits

[171]

*Sovereignty and
Melancholia*

●
Michael
Gluzman

not only a new poetics but also a deeper realization of the changes in literature's function in Israeli culture. Already in its first manifesto, published in 1952 in stencil form, the group articulated the difference between its own members and the preceding generation of Hebrew writers, the so-called Palmah generation:

This, we believe, is the first attempt to assemble a circle of writers whose earliest works matured *after* the War of Independence, that is, in the late 1940s. Today's reality is no longer that thrilling reality of the war period which gave rise to a variegated group of novelists and poets. Our reality is grey, faded, vexed—and it is precisely in its light that our writing shall be tested and evaluated. And the test shall be very stringent indeed.³⁰

The second issue of *Likrat* emphasized the group's political noncommitment ("As a circle of young writers, we have no 'worldview'"³¹), again underscoring the melancholy realities of the morning after: "The previous generation of Hebrew literature broke its own path by dint of that holy fervor which is typical of wars of national liberation. But its values, wedded as they were to the social context in which it operated, did not stand the test of these strictly mundane times."³²

The poetry of the statehood generation has been understood as expressing an ideological rejection of the collectivist values both of the Palmah generation and of the "party-affiliated literature" of the 1940s. Furthermore, it is widely agreed that the rejection of collectivism resulted in the rise of a new poetics favoring the lyric "I." According to Hannan Hever, "the rejection of collectivist, politically engaged expression; a preference for prosaic language; an emphasis on intellectual reflection, first in poetry and later in prose; an effort to form links with European and Anglophone modernism—all these had their earliest manifestations in the work published by *Likrat*."³³ The coterie, Hever adds, developed "a new pattern of literary culture and activity, constantly striving for private personal expression."³⁴ Its poetry, Guri writes,

distanced itself from pathos, often replacing it with irony, observant alienation, prosaic, everyday language, . . . affording more room to the silences between the words, the empty whiteness around them. This was the poetry of the "second day," the day after the banners and barricades had faded. It drew closer to the distinctly personal, to individual solitude, to the minor and the mundane, forgoing all messianic impulses and standing in opposition to those "savage, grandiloquent times."³⁵

Hamutal Tsamir has challenged the ubiquitous critical view of Zach and his fellow *Likrat* and statehood-generation poets as purveyors of

personal expression and opponents of collectivist-national poetry. In a nuanced theoretical move, Tsamir disputes the personal/collective divide that informs critical discussion of Zach's poetry. In her view, the emergence of the personal is not antithetical to the national but rather a mark of nationalism's successful consummation. "The Israeli national subject emerging from the poetry of the statehood generation defines himself in opposition to, even as detached from, the collective, only to produce in turn a universalist individualism founded on an unquestioned sense of belonging to the national collective and to the national territory."³⁶ Her revisionist position notwithstanding, Tsamir continues to view Zach's poetry as centered on the individual subject.

To be sure, such readings have not emerged out of thin air. They have been influenced, of course, by the rhetoric of the poets themselves, who in a series of essays and manifestos offered individuality and selfhood as poetic credos. In a 1953 essay, Dor recommended ("for the sake of personal perfection") that poets "limit the possibility of contact with the outside world [and] make [their] poetry as hermetic as possible."³⁷ Zach's toxic critique of Alterman similarly attacked the impersonal dimensions of the latter's poetry: "Time and time again," Zach writes, "we run into that familiar inability to feel, nonverbally, a commitment to something or someone. . . . This magician of words (and Alterman is truly a master of language) has a fundamental flaw as a poet. He has a flawed ability to experience openly and sensitively the world of human beings and of things."³⁸

But precisely what kind of subject emerges in Zach's own poetry? Challenging the familiar critical parlance concerning the emergence of a private, personal self in Zach's work, Meir Wieseltier has noted the impersonality and anonymity of the speakers of Zach's poems.³⁹ In a similar vein, I wish to propose a more circumspect reading of the alleged rebellious "individuality" of statehood-generation poetry in general and of Zach's poetry in particular. The retreat from the national to the self is neither an accomplishment nor the overcoming of a flaw in the poetry of the prior generation but a *reaction* imbued with mourning and melancholia over the loss of poetry's significance in sovereign Israel. This stance is expressed not only thematically but also stylistically, through fragmentation, repetition, irony, and nonsense, which permeate Zach's language.

The critic Baruch Kurzweil noted in 1964 an ever-growing distance between statehood-generation poets and the general public: "Beyond limited circles of adherents—many of whom are the young writers themselves—our young literature has failed to attract a significant audience—qualitatively or quantitatively—and thus to secure its influence

[173]

*Sovereignty and
Melancholia*

●
Michael
Gluzman



in our intellectual lives.”⁴⁰ The trauma and melancholy left by the demise of the connection between poet and audience, speaker and addressee, is traceable, I believe, in poems such as Zach’s well-known “I Sing unto Myself,” which can be read not (only) as expressing a withdrawn subjectivity celebrating its own solipsism but (also) as deriving from this crisis of address following poetry’s divorce from its political-cultural role. Statehood-generation poets were thus not only active agents recasting Hebrew poetry in an individualist mold but also interpellated subjects responding to their cultural marginalization. The hostility with which their poetry was met throughout the 1950s and early 1960s indicates how distanced they had become from the readership of their time. It is to this kind of distance that Walter Benjamin referred to when he noted that “[t]he greater the decrease in the social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public.”⁴¹

With poetry’s declining social significance in mind, I turn to a closer reading of Zach’s poem “I Sing unto Myself”:

I sing unto myself.
The wind/spirit will fall and break.
Another will take the poor man’s lamb.
What has been ordained will not be rushed.
I sing unto myself.

I sing unto myself.
What was will never be.
Never will it be.
He who hates gifts will not live.
I sing unto myself.

I sing unto myself.
Yesterday I saw a leaf fall.
A man poorer than all and all.
A wind sweeping grass and sand.
I sing unto myself.

The poem comprises three stanzas, each line a short, discrete sentence. In the absence of enjambments, the curt phrases form abrupt lines, devoid of logical or causal continuity. What could possibly connect “The wind/spirit will fall and break” with the consecutive “Another will take the poor man’s lamb,” or either with the next line, “What has been ordained will not be rushed”? The relationships between the phrases seem arbitrary in the extreme, and the poem’s overall logic remains unresolved. Only the refrain “I sing unto myself,” which opens

and closes each stanza (for a total of six repetitions), ties the poem's disparate utterances together, justifying the text's reiterations and contradictions. The entire poem seems to convey a sense of annihilation and ruin: "The spirit will fall and break," "What was will never be," and so forth. As is typical of traumatic discourse, however, the origin of the speaker's sense of anguish remains inaccessible and hence unfathomable. The poem is rife with sound repetitions, rhymes, and anagrams, such as the play on *shar* ("sing") and *rash* ("poor man"). Essential to the poem is its complete disregard for the possible presence of an addressee and its fundamental solipsistic negation of the very possibility of communication.

The poem's second line, "The wind/spirit will fall and break," is a play on the Hebrew idiom "his spirit fell" but also on the multiple occurrences of the word "spirit" in the biblical account of Ezekiel's initiation into prophecy. In the biblical story, God says to Ezekiel: "Son of man, stand up upon thy feet, and I will speak unto thee" (Ezekiel 2:1). And Ezekiel recounts: "When he spoke, a spirit entered into me and set me on my feet" (Ezekiel 2:2). This *communicative* episode reaches its dramatic climax with the eating of the scroll, marking Ezekiel's acceptance of prophethood. In Zach's poem, by contrast, the wind/spirit, far from setting the speaker on his feet, simply breaks, signaling the speaker's inability to address others. This failure is further clarified in the following line, "Another will take the poor man's lamb," which alludes to another biblical prophet, Nathan (2 Samuel 12:1–14). But whereas Nathan denounces King David's taking of the poor man's lamb, Zach's poem presents the larcenous act as inevitable. In this broken world, devoid of divinity and righteous judgment ("What was ordained will not be rushed"), all the speaker can do, stripped as he is of his prophetic role, is sing to himself.

The closing stanza offers a deliberately impoverished account of the poet, limited to his report of what he saw the other day (with one object of his observation, the falling leaf, an intertextual reference to Zach's own poem "I Saw a White Bird"). Having left the exterior world behind, the poet can only report on his own singing. The reference to a man "poorer than all and all" may be self-referential but may also refer to real poverty in the material and political world. Yet the poet's inability to act within that world, to combat and rectify its evils, produces an intratextual equivalence between momentous (and avoidable) social injustices (exploitation, poverty) on the one hand and trivial (and inevitable) natural phenomena ("the wind sweeping grass and wind") on the other. This equivalence is formalized by the uniform length of the poem's one-line phrases and by the single oc-

[175]

*Sovereignty and
Melancholia*

●
Michael
Gluzman

currence (with the exception of the refrain) of each of the phenomena described.

[176]

*Jewish
Social
Studies*



Vol. 18
No. 3

In an ironic inversion of Ezekiel's account of the divine spirit permeating him and generating his prophecy, the poem's penultimate line—"the wind sweeping grass and sand"—robs the wind/spirit (both denoted by the Hebrew *ruah*) of any meaningful effect. Thrust into a world in which everything is irreversibly and irredeemably "swept" and "ordained," in which "what was will never be," as if by laws of nature both inexorable and Heraclitean—faced with such meaninglessness, all the speaker can do is speak to himself.

In his study of the prophetic mode in Hebrew poetry, Miron has memorably portrayed "One Moment," the poem that opens Zach's *Various Poems*, as an epitaph of sorts for the prophetic tradition. Tsamir has similarly discussed the figure of the prophet in statehood-generation poetry as "the living dead"—repeatedly negated, only to return time and time again. Although I am indebted to their readings, I wish to emphasize the innate failure of the prophetic mode in Zach's poem. The poem implodes, unable to address a community, thereby resorting to self-reflexivity, to *ars poetica*. This renunciation of the poem's communicability turns its language into a form of traumatic speech imbued with mourning and melancholia. Thus, the repeating line "I sing unto myself" does not signify the speaker's assured self-sufficiency. Instead, it marks the poem as a soliloquy, a futile and anachronistic form of self-address.

Needless to say, laments about the end of poetry or of poetry's traditional role are hardly unique to Hebrew literature. The theme is a staple of modernism, common throughout European literature, especially after World War I. It is instructive to recall in this context the remarks made by the Jewish Viennese poet Abraham Ben-Yitzhak. In her "Meeting with a Poet," Leah Goldberg recounts a conversation with Ben-Yitzhak in which the revered poet spoke of German poetry of the turn of the century:

In literature, in poetry, [Ben-Yitzhak] always looked at the big picture, at expressions of the fortunes of entire epochs and nations. We once talked of Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. He said: "Do you remember Nietzsche's poem "On the Bridge"? The poem ends with the words: "Hörte mir jemand zu?" ["Has anyone heard me?"]—whereas Rilke's first elegy opens with the line: "Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich den . . ." ["Who, if I cried out, would hear me . . ."]. It is as if a temporal arc united those two poems, one at each end. And here this culture comes to an end. Poetry seeks an echo but no longer finds it. The question mark that follows this

cry remains unanswered. *Here devastation begins. Language has done its deed, and behind it there is nothing.*⁴²

Ben-Yitzhak's words point to the crisis of modern poetry. In the 24 years separating Nietzsche's poem (1888) and Rilke's (1912), he claims, the devastation of language had been completed. Poetry had reluctantly become an address to no one, a soliloquy performed by a speaker hearing nothing but the echo of his own voice. Consequently the poet ceases to believe in poetry's efficacy, political or otherwise, or doubts that there is a community anticipating and beseeching him for his words. Whereas European modernism witnessed the crisis of address around the turn of the century, in Hebrew this crisis surfaced belatedly, only after 1948. As long as Hebrew poetry was the mainstay of the national idea, a fundamental affinity was maintained between poets and their readership. With the establishment of the State of Israel, this cord was severed. The melancholy of Zach's poetry can thus be read as literature's encrypted response to sovereignty.

[177]

*Sovereignty and
Melancholia*

●
Michael
Gluzman

Notes

All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

- 1 Benjamin Harshav, "Hirhurim ishiyim 'al 'Amihai: Ha-shirah vеха-medinah," *Alpayim* 33 (2008): 129.
- 2 Hannan Hever, *Sifrut she-nikhtevet mi-kan* (Tel Aviv, 1999), 8.
- 3 For a discussion of symbolic junctures in Hebrew literature, see Avner Holtzman, *Ahavot Tsiyon: Panim be-sifrut ha-'ivrit ha-hadashah* (Tel Aviv, 2006), 494. For a discussion of *Epochenschwellen* (thresholds of epochs), see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Ursula Link-Heer, "History of Literature: Fragment of a Vanished Totality," *New Literary History* 16 (1985): 469–79.
- 4 Nurit Gertz, *Hirbet Hiz'ah vеха-boker shele-maharat* (Tel Aviv, 1983).
- 5 Harshav, "Hirhurim ishiyim," 129.
- 6 A play on the nearly identical Hebrew words *tsiyoni* (Zionist) and *tsini* (cynical), separated by a single letter in their written Hebrew form.
- 7 Anita Shapira, "Hirbet Hiz'ah: Zikaron ve-shikhehah," *Alpayim* 21 (2000): 9–53.
- 8 Yitzhak Avineri, "Me-'inyanei diumah," *Al ha-mishmar*, June 3, 1948, p. 2.
- 9 Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, "Medinah u-mishpat," *Al ha-mishmar*, June 4, 1948, p. 4.
- 10 Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, "Yahdelu ha-shemot ha-lo'aziyim mi-kirbenu," *Davar*, June 22, 1948, p. 2.

- 11 Jacob Fichman, "Ha-sofer ba-medinah," *Davar*, July 2, 1948, p. 3.
- 12 Objections to the identity of the participants were expressed in the right-wing opposition newspaper *Ha-herut*: "Most of the participants are close to the ruling party. . . it is thus not hard to imagine the tone they all share. [What we have here is] the emergence of a class of 'court writers' subordinate to the government, voicing nothing but praise for the actions of those in power. . . . Every page of this publication emits an air of sycophancy, as [authors] both young and old grovel at the feet of the ruling party"; Ariel Elitzedek, "Penei ha-sofer," *Herut*, Aug. 19, 1949, p. 5.
- 13 *Divrei soferim: Bi-pegishah she-zimen rosh ha-memshalah* (Tel Aviv, 1949), 4.
- 14 "Shituf anshei ruah be-'itsuv demutah shel ha-medinah," *Davar*, Mar. 28, 1949, p. 1.
- 15 These data were relayed by Professor Benzion Dinur at the start of the second writers' meeting on Oct. 11, 1949; *Divrei soferim*, 3.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 8.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Ezra Zussman, "Reshit ha-du-siah," *Davar*, Apr. 1, 1949, p. 3.
- 21 Hayim Nahman Bialik, *Devarim she-be-'al-peh*, 2 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1935), 1: 148–49.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 1: 170.
- 23 Dan Miron, *'Im lo tihyeh Yerushalayim* (Tel Aviv, 1987), 17.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 24–25.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 27 Zeli Gurevitz, *'Al ha-makom* (Tel Aviv, 2007), 85.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 88–89.
- 29 Dan Miron, *Arba' panim ba-sifrut ha-ivrit bat yameinu* (Tel Aviv, 1975), 69.
- 30 *Likrat 1* (1952).
- 31 *Likrat 2* (1953). According to Ortzion Bartana, the members of the *Likrat* circle presented their "non-ideology as an ideology"; their manifestos offered an "ideological void, or, in more positive terms, individualism—each individual putting forward his own personal skepticism." See Ortzion Bartana, *La-vo heshbon* (Tel Aviv, 1985), 29.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Hever, *Sifrut*, 47.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 Hayim Guri, "Shirah u-zeman ba-matsav ha-yisraeli," *Sadan 5* (2002): 36.
- 36 Hamutal Tsamir, *Be-shem ha-nof: Leumiyut, migdar ve-subyektiviyut ba-shirah ha-yisraelit bi-sheniyot ha-hamishim veha-shishim* (Jerusalem, 2006), 12.
- 37 Moshe Dor, *Kriah rishonah, kriah sheniyah* (Tel Aviv, 1970), 99–101.
- 38 Nathan Zach, "Hirhurim 'al shirat Alterman," in *Ha-shirah sheme-ever la-milim: Teoryah u-vikoret*, 1954–73 (Tel Aviv, 2011), 43–58.
- 39 Meir Wieseltier, "Hatakh orekh be-shirat Natan Zach," *Siman krian 10* (1980): 411.

- 40 Baruch Kurzweil, "He'arot le-matsav sifroteinu be-sha'ah zo," *Haaretz*, Sept. 6, 1964, pp. 20, 23.
- 41 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), 234.
- 42 Leah Goldberg, "Pegishah 'im meshorer," in *Ketavim: Prozah* (Tel Aviv, 1952), 300; emphasis added.

[179]

*Sovereignty and
Melancholia*



Michael
Gluzman