

REVIEWS

ON ALL OF HEBREW POETRY

T. Carmi, editor & translator, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*. Harmondsworth, 1981. 608 pp. \$9.95 pb. Hardbound edition published by the Viking Press, \$25.00.

One of the most extraordinary entries in the scholarly study of Hebrew poetry is Franz Delitzsch's monograph, *On the History of Jewish Poetry since the Close of the Old Testament Canon*. Published in 1836—that is, before the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement had produced the monumental collections and studies of Hebrew verse that were to mark its high-point, before Zunz, Luzzatto, Dukes and others had even really begun to study the poetry of the Jews*—it attempted no less than a complete survey of Hebrew poetry from biblical times to Haskalah verse. Nowadays what is likely to strike one as most remarkable is that this work was written not by a seasoned Jewish scholar, steeped in traditional learning and motivated by a life-long devotion to his subject, but by a Christian student of Judaism, twenty-three years old, who in his researches had access only to the scantiest compendia of outside sources.** (Delitzsch, it should be noted, went on to become a celebrated scholar—but not of Hebrew poetry; today he is remembered primarily for his contributions to the field of biblical criticism.) Yet the circumstances of this book's origins should not so bedazzle as to blind one to the overall thrust of its argument, or to its real achievement. It conceived of an entity, a whole: Hebrew poetry. Despite the obvious influence of outside traditions in almost all periods, despite the great geographic and cultural gaps that divide different schools, Hebrew poetry, Delitzsch felt, ought to be, *had* to be, looked at as a whole, and this, at least in its broad outlines, is what he undertook to do.

Now it is important to note that in this approach he is to some extent the child of his age. Behind this book certainly stands Herder's *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*

* Zunz had already published the first edition of *Die Gottesdienstlichen Vortraege der Juden* in 1832, in which he included a survey of early liturgy and some information about piyyut. Prior to this there had been some attempts to collect texts and information, notably the work of S. J. Rapaport, S. Romanelli, and G. B. de Rossi, among others; see J. Schirmann's introduction to the reprint of I. Davidson's *Thesaurus of Medieval Hebrew Poetry* (New York, 1970), pp. ix–xxxvi, for a rapid survey of scholarship.

** Thus Schirmann in *ibid.*; cf. I. Davidson, "The Study of Medieval Hebrew Poetry in the Nineteenth Century," *Proceedings of The American Academy for Jewish Research* 1 (1930): 33–48. Davidson mentions, incidentally, "the current belief that Julius Fuerst was his [Delitzsch's] teacher" (p. 41).

(1783) and the germs of Romanticism contained therein; relevant too is that book's (and its age's) fascination with the Orient, and with the Jews as an accessible embodiment thereof. But Herder had concerned himself only with the poetry of the Bible, in which he saw not only the beginnings of poetry proper (an idea, incidentally, going back to early Alexandrian exegesis, which was vigorously revived in the Renaissance and then passed on into Romanticism) but the very essence of it: what was most poetic about poetry was most abundant in the poetry of the Old Testament. Delitzsch's self-assigned mission was to prove to "der geschmackvolle Herder" and others like him that "the Hebrew tongue has never died, but lives on in the immortal vigor of youth,"* and that its poetry, despite the fact that it was not the product of a people dwelling in a single, clearly defined homeland, was nevertheless an authentic and worthy poetry, nay, the ongoing spiritual self-expression of the world's most remarkable folk. And so, beginning with a survey of Jewish and Christian scholarship on his subject—a survey which, despite omissions and errors, is still a valuable compendium—Delitzsch went on to outline the whole history of Hebrew poetry, its subjects, themes, and genres, then its formal characteristics and their development. He did not hide from the discontinuities, but in treating his subject as he did, he made an assertion of communality and continuity which certainly was open to question, even ridicule. After all, what does Wessely's limp lyricism have in common with the didactic rhymed compendia of the Middle Ages—what in their subject, form, or language entitles them to be treated together in a scholarly work? In this day of the State of Israel we are apt to overlook the fact that their most obvious common element, the Jewishness of their authors and the Hebrew language in which they were written, was a rather frail *fil conducteur* at that time, even in the minds of most Jews.** Delitzsch's very undertaking thus was in some ways an assertion of Jewish nationalism and of the vibrancy of Hebrew, and this unmistakably quirky side of the book has not failed to impress later readers.‡

The scholarly study of Hebrew poetry undertaken since the early nineteenth century has of course benefitted from other remarkable scholars, certainly no less impressive than Delitzsch, and they have gone on to examine in greater detail and—let it be said—with a more profound understanding, individual poets, schools, and periods. The works this activity has produced, from Zunz's own *Literaturgeschichte der synagogalen Poesie* to the well-known anthologies and monographs of more recent times, those of D. Yellin, H. Brody, J. Schirmann, M. Zulay, E. Fleischer, and D. Pagis, have often explored the interrelationship of disparate compositions or groups, and have been broad and synthetic in the best sense. Yet it is striking that Delitzsch's precise undertaking—an overview of the phenomenon of Hebrew poetry and its forms, a survey of its full breadth—has not been duplicated by later scholars. One might say the reason is simply that, with the wealth of material available, such

* F. Delitzsch, *Zur Geschichte der juedischen Poesie vom Abschluss der heiligen Schriften A.B. bis auf die neueste Zeit* (Leipzig, 1836), p. vi.

** Cf. J. Schirmann, "Problems in the Study of Post-Biblical Hebrew Poetry," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Science and the Humanities* 2 (1967): 228–36.

‡ See Davidson, "Study of Medieval Hebrew Poetry," p. 42; also, Schirmann's introduction to Davidson's *Thesaurus*, p. xv.

an undertaking is no longer practicable, or desirable.* But it may also be that our added knowledge has brought an added sorrow, a new feeling of diffuseness about the whole, a greater reluctance even to treat it as a single entity. Perhaps as well Herder's pronouncements about Israel's place in "world poetry" (and Delitzsch's too) ring a bit hollow today: moreover, we are so aware of the gaps separating different Jewish cultural centers that the very notion of a single Jewish "folk-spirit" infusing all Hebrew writings now seems somehow rather quaint.

The issues raised by Delitzsch's perspective come to mind again in contemplating T. Carmi's long-awaited anthology, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*. For as the author notes in his preface, his is the first anthology that undertakes to span "the full range of Hebrew poetry, from the Bible to contemporary Israeli writing, . . . the first such collection in English, [and] more surprisingly, . . . the first comprehensive selection in Hebrew." The anthology is, as one might expect of Carmi, wonderfully done, tasteful, at times daring in its inclusions and exclusions, and as thorough as the one-volume format will permit—all in all, a very handy book to have about, and one whose presence students and teachers of Hebrew literature will doubtless be glad for in the years to come. Yet holding such a volume in one's hand, seeing how, at its spine, the prophet Isaiah beds down with Jacob Frances and David Vogel rubs shoulders with Kallir, one cannot but wonder if this enormous *inclusio* does not succeed all too well, subsuming the most disparate works under the rubric "poetry" and stringing them together as if links in a single chain. Now Carmi's is an excellent selection; and so, finding few particulars to quarrel with, the best service a reviewer might render would be to consider the undertaking itself. For there are ways, it seems to me, in which *all* of Hebrew poetry is an unwieldy item and utterly *sui generis*—indeed, ways in which even Hebrew's several parts are cut off from one another and resist all effort of conjunction.

Perhaps the most striking uniqueness of Hebrew poetry is the prominence in it of an ongoing and highly elaborated tradition of liturgical compositions, collectively known as *piyyut* or *shirat hakodesh* ("sacred poetry," as opposed to *shirat ha'hol*, "non-liturgical" or "secular" verse). Now while it is true that some European literatures also include liturgical compositions—the psalm paraphrases or Protestant hymns written by English poets in the Renaissance and later come to mind—the liturgical element in these other literatures is neither so important as in Hebrew, nor so stylized, so developed, or so continuous. Perhaps most remarkable of all, for a good part of Hebrew literary history *shirat hakodesh* seems to have been viewed as an activity apart, independent of other poetry and obedient only to its own internally generated rules and conventions.** And with good reason—in many ways it *was* a thing apart. First, its

* See on this D. Pagis, "Trends in the Study of Medieval Hebrew Literature," *AJS Review* 4 (1979): 125–41. Pagis notes: "An all embracing literary history still seems a long way off."

** On this see Pagis, *Shirat ha'hol vektorat hashir leMoshe ibn Ezra uunei doru* [The Secular Poetry and Poetics of Moses ibn Ezra and his Contemporaries] (Jerusalem, 1970); Pagis, *Hiddush umasoret beshirat ha'hol* [Innovation and Tradition in Secular Hebrew Poetry: Spain and Italy] (Jerusalem, 1976), pp. 3–4; cf. E. Fleischer, *Shirat hakodesh ha'ivrit bimei habeinayim* [Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in the Middle Ages] (Jerusalem, 1975) pp. 7–8.

speaker, in a formal sense, is not the poet but the congregation as a whole, or the *sheliaḥ tsibbur* who is their advocate, and this implies a somewhat unique poetic "I." The payyetan as an individual does not exist, nor, basically do the particular circumstances in which he or his congregation find themselves; he speaks *sub specie aeternitatis*. Moreover the genres of *shirat hakodesh* are predetermined by the service itself, and indeed their very words must at times "touch base" with standard patterns and motifs. *Shirat haḥol*, while in another way as formulaic, is spoken by the poet as an individual in a world of individuals and historical particulars. In medieval Spain, where it began to flower, its genres, indeed, its entire poetics were dependent on Arabic poetics, while *shirat hakodesh* of the same period (and written by the same poets) in some respects obeyed its own set of conventions and forms, at times even using an entirely different metrical system, not based on the Arabic-style quantitative rules but on a looser, syllabic system. The distinction between the two is thus more than one of genres or rules; it would be closer to the truth to say that they were regarded as two separate activities. As Dan Pagis has pointed out, individual authors' *ash'ar* ("poems" in Arabic, i.e. *shirat haḥol*) were collected into *divans*; however the liturgical compositions of these same authors were not included, indeed were not grouped together into collections by author at all. (This only began to be done by later editors.) Surely here is a telling detail. Also expressive of the disjunction is the fact that the age's great work on Hebrew poetics, Moses ibn Ezra's *Kitab al-muḥādara wal-mudhākara* (*The Book of Lectures and Discussions*), is given over exclusively to *shirat haḥol*. Only quite in passing does it cite a liturgical work—for *shirat hakodesh* was indeed "something else."

Shirat haḥol is, as noted, an outward-looking phenomenon. Its conventions, genres, subjects, and its whole sense of itself derive from other literatures, and while Jewish creativity rarely stooped to the merely imitative, but ingeniously adapted foreign elements to the particulars of the Hebrew language and Jewish tradition, it is nevertheless true that *shirat haḥol*'s extroverted nature makes it a bit more universal, and a bit more literary, than *shirat hakodesh*. The latter is full of strangenesses. Its immediate frame of reference is, as noted, the Jewish liturgy itself, and, as Ezra Fleischer has argued in his *Hebrew Liturgical Poetry*, *piyyut*'s very rise may represent the ongoing effort to create ever-new versions of an increasingly standardized set of prayers—versions which, while bearing the stamp of required subjects and formulations, nevertheless would go about their business in a digressive and allusive style, challenging the congregation's erudition and sometimes charming them with ingenuity and cleverness. The raw material of these digressions and allusions is the Bible itself and that rabbinic tradition of biblical exegesis known as *midrash*. In a sense, early *piyyut* is a *genre* of *midrash*, a liturgical poetry of public exegesis whose very language is infused with the conventions of rabbinic exposition.*

All of this removes it somewhat from the territory occupied by poetry in other literatures (indeed, by *shirat haḥol* in Hebrew). And in some ways *piyyut* does not *act* very poetic. As Fleischer has observed, the niceties of metaphor and simile; exalted by some as the hallmark of all true poetry, are almost entirely lacking in *piyyut* before the Andalusian period (*Hebrew Liturgical Poetry*, pp.

* Cf. A. Mirsky, "The Sources of Piyyutic Forms" [Hebrew] in *Yedi'ot hamakhon leḥeker hashirah* (Jerusalem, 1958).

104-5).^{*} On the other hand, piyyut's subjects and forms, the endless exegetical allusions borne even in its neologisms, its exploitation of biblical hapax legomena, and its *kinnuyim* (stylized appellations)—all of these make piyyut a rather specialized and unique tradition of verse. Despite the fact that in medieval Spain the development of *shirat haḥol* influenced *shirat hakodesh*—perhaps also vice versa—despite even the fact that a few poems composed as “secular” works were subsequently adapted to liturgical use, the gulf separating these two domains remains broad and impressive. And given the vibrancy and sheer bulk of the liturgical tradition, indeed its centrality in the history of Hebrew letters, *shirat hakodesh* cannot be isolated as a small or insignificant island from the mainland; if anything, it is the mainland. But in some ways the most correct formulation would be that Hebrew has not one poetry, but two—or one might say, with only a bit of exaggeration, that Hebrew has poetry and it has piyyut, the former with its origins in the contemplation of external poetic traditions, first Arabic, then Italian, German, etc., a stolid poetic citizen; the latter in some ways conspicuously alone, and maintaining its distinctness from the former in its whole stance, in its language, formal characteristics, genres—and in the minds of its authors.

A second striking feature of Hebrew poetry arises from the great discontinuities within the “secular” tradition. Indeed, here again one might even ask if there is “a” secular Hebrew poetry at all. Is it not really a collection of different poetries—Italian Hebrew poetry, Russian Hebrew poetry, etc.—each of which, especially in the secular domain, is sometimes little more than an exercise in Hebrew translation and pastiche from the (gentile) literature that stands behind it? This is the question one loves to answer no to, and that “no” will certainly have some justification: obviously there are lines of continuity, obviously the constants of biblical models, liturgical genres, shared themes and motifs, make for a broad communality. Yet I can think of no other literature that suffers, or benefits, from Hebrew's degree of fragmentation.^{**} One feels this most keenly precisely at those lame instances of what passes for continuity: Bialik appreciating his “forebear” Judah Halevi, Tchernichowsky out-doing

^{*}He remarks: “This phenomenon cannot but be surprising, in view of the floridly metaphorical character of biblical poetry; in view of the Rabbis’ exegetical approach to biblical texts and themes, which is so well endowed in simile; and especially with regard to its style, and its constructions.”

^{**}The one that comes closest, it seems to me, is Latin, with the stark stylistic disjunction between the classical period and what immediately followed, the yawning gap that separates, say, early Church hymnody from classical prosody; yet at the same time the love of Jerome, Augustine and later writers for classical style; indeed, the simple linguistic gap between medieval and classical Latin, and the Latin styles of various medieval authors, in which elements of different native speech patterns are sometimes submerged; Latin's role as a language of educated discourse even after it ceased to be a spoken tongue; finally, the rediscovery and resurrection of classical forms, and the forging of a new high style in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance—all these make for striking similarities. It is therefore all the more noteworthy that here anthologists and historians are rather more timorous about breaking through temporal, geographic, and generic boundaries to take on “all” of Latin literature.

Immanuel of Rome, etc. Here there is something so polite and distant, two third-cousins-twice-removed chatting on a trans-Atlantic phone call; whereas elsewhere literary relations display more of the nuclear family's ways, the mad-eyed parricide Blake readies Milton's corpse for desecration. Ah, that's togetherness! Hebrew poetry is so often being written by and for those who are relatively unfamiliar with "other" Hebrew poetry, but who are keenly aware of Arabic poetry, or Dante and Petrarch, or Goethe, or modern Russian verse.

All this makes for great discontinuities—and causes difficulties for later generations of readers. Thus, nineteenth-century critics used to treat classical Andalusian norms as the standards by which other poetries, specifically those of the later Spanish period and of the Italian Renaissance, were to be judged (and quite naturally they concluded that Hebrew poetry "degenerated" after the Golden Age). This mistake is, in part, the result of a misreading of later writers' deference to the greats of the past, but I suspect only in part. One reason modern critics were misled, here and elsewhere, is that they overlooked the thunderous changes of which the poets themselves were all too aware: the cultural backdrop of Hebrew poetry had shifted, new writers and readers had a whole new set of standards and of (non-Jewish) literary forebears to imitate, build on, outdo. What need was there to say all this, to convince readers and fellow-poets to join the new movement? *Almost none whatsoever*.^{*} For the coup d'état had already taken place, and everyone agreed that the new government (*dolce stil nuovo*, German Romanticism, Russian Futurism) was long overdue. Of course they could afford to be deferential toward Judah Halevi—poor fellow, you had to blow the dust off him! In other words, the willingness of Hebrew poetry to act as if nothing had changed when everything had is, I think, symptomatic of the lack of continuity.

Another side of the same observation: Who was there, in a nineteenth-century England that had seen Blake and Wordsworth and Coleridge, Byron, Shelly and Keats, who was there after all that was still writing neo-classical couplets in the tradition of Pope and Dryden? History, or at least literary history, does not record his name. It is simply inconceivable that an English poet could ignore (or be ignorant of) such a thorough-going upheaval in poetry. In Hebrew, because of geocultural isolation, this happened all the time: thus, chronologically the *payyotanim* of eleventh-century Italy come after a century of revolution in Golden Age Spain, but stylistically they belong before it, a continuation and development of classical *piyyut*. This phenomenon not only makes the writing of Hebrew literary history (and the chronological ordering of poems in an anthology) a vexing problem, it shakes the structure's very timbers. Again, is this one poetry? The constants of the Hebrew language, of a shared Bible and rabbinical canon, and even that somewhat more elusive constant, *la condition juive*, are not sufficient in my mind to make the answer to this question an easy yes. Hebrew literature is so often one whose left hand merrily continues to play in G major while its right hand has modulated into D, or even started another piece.

^{*} The rare exceptions, like Abraham ibn Ezra's attack on Kallirian *piyyut* in his commentary on Ecclesiastes or the *kulturkampf* over the introduction of quantitative meters into Hebrew, do not disprove the generalization.

But perhaps the most remarkable uniqueness of Hebrew writing is its sheer size. I do not quite mean by this its bulk, although that too is impressive. (The four hefty, oversize, volumes of Israel Davidson's *Thesaurus of Medieval Hebrew Poetry* are instructive in this regard. I daresay the entire corpus of medieval English or French poetry would fit snugly in the same number of pages; but Davidson's is not a collection, or even a selection, of works; it is simply an index, an alphabetical list of different poems indicating where they are to be found. Even given his generous definition of "medieval," this should provide some measure of Hebrew's comparative magnitude.) But it is in chronology that Hebrew's size is to be most significantly compassed. The oldest parts of the Bible may go back more than three thousand years, and as best one can now judge, there has not been a significant period since that time when the Hebrew language has not been employed as the idiom of one sort of literary endeavor or another.

This does not make Hebrew unique merely in the rather mechanical sense that it is the tallest fellow in line. What is significant, and in some ways problematic, in this span is the fact that during the course of those three thousand years, ideas about literature, expectations, tastes, and standards, have undergone drastic changes. How does one confront the gap between contemporary literary tastes and those sometimes quite different standards that governed poetry written centuries ago? This question is of course not peculiar to Hebrew literature, but it is worth raising, and is often raised, in regard to Hebrew only because over so great a span the problem is so much more acute than elsewhere.

It may require a bit of introduction for a modern to acquire a taste for Herbert's devotions, perhaps even for Wyatt's amours; Shakespeare needs footnotes; Chaucer, sometimes, translation. Despite these impediments, there is, I think, more common ground between the modern English reader and his classics than between a modern Hebrew reader and, say, Moses ibn Ezra, or Kallir. After all the introducing and footnoting, the English reader will, I think, at least know *what to do* with his Wyatt or Shakespeare; it may take some explaining before he is caught up in the sweep of things, but he will eventually be caught up. I do not think the same certainly attends the Hebrew reader's strivings. Here of course the footnotes may be voluminous: he may know Hebrew, but he does not come close to having the knowledge of the Bible requisite for an appreciation of the "mosaic style" (*shibbutz*) of Moshe ibn Ezra's poems, or those of his contemporaries. The same lack will set him adrift in Kallir, where it is compounded by his ignorance of midrash and an inability to decipher the text's very words. But even after these points have been encountered and patiently explained, our reader will be left with something he stills does not quite feel at home with, because the most basic assumptions about what it is for and how it is to be appreciated are foreign to him.

Again, it is not that this problem does not exist to some degree elsewhere, but that in Hebrew the degree is more severe. It is precisely the lack of shared standards and assumptions that often puts the modern "literary" reading of the Bible on shaky grounds: we end up "appreciating" things utterly foreign to the world of the Bible's creation, and projecting our own conventions and tastes onto it. The same phenomenon operates, though somewhat less grossly, in a

"New Critical" approach to the classics of medieval literature. In reference to some practitioners of this approach, Dan Pagis has observed that they

denied the relevance to literary analysis not only of medieval poetics, but also of historical perspective in general. They proclaimed that each poem, regardless of its period, was either timeless as literature or not worth the trouble. . . .

The problem should now be redefined, and distinction made between tools for analysis and norms for evaluation. We can analyze a medieval poem by examining texture and structure, themes and tone, tradition and innovation, regardless of our own literary taste. Even though the results of the analysis may not conform to our taste, because the specific style examined is remote from present day concepts, we understand the text and the poetic theory which it implies. ("Trends", p. 139)

But understanding the text and its theoretical underpinnings does not end the question. For, as Pagis goes on to note, the concept of a poem as ornamented speech or cunning artifice is incompatible with the concept of a poem as inspired self-expression. Readers who are moved, sometimes to the depths of their being, by the unfolding of the latter in modern works, and who disdain among modern writers precisely all that smacks of mere cleverness, will have to change more than their "tools of analysis" to enter the world of at least some of these poems.

When one's own starting-point differs so drastically—in its presuppositions of form, but also of genre and diction and style; in its attitude toward imitation and originality; in its most fundamental notions of the purpose and workings of poetry, its concept of authorship and of the poet's identity—from that which underlies some of the compositions of yesteryear, one must risk either seriously distorting the latter by reading them as if they belonged to our world, or else so removing them from ourselves as to make the connection between today's poetry and *that* poetry merely terminological and formal. To put the question more concretely, how are we to read the first third of Carmi's anthology? It seems to me that, for example, to remove Chapter 1 of Isaiah from the whole context of the institution of prophecy and of the cult, and to offer it up to readers of an anthology of Hebrew *verse*, is to invite a certain kind of misreading. The same is true, in a different way, of others of Carmi's early selection, the fragment *וְלֹא יָדָעוּ רֵו* from Qumran, *בְּעֶקְבוֹת מְשִׁיחָא* and other "poems from the Talmud"; and even of the Hekhalot Hymns of the Merkavah mystics. The gap that separates our own experience and expectations of poetry from such works is not, I think, comparable to that which separates us from Milton. I do not say there is a difference in kind here, only that the disjunction is considerably greater and therefore more of a problem.

In *The Idea of Biblical Poetry*, I have tried to show that the Bible has no concept (or word!) that quite corresponds to our notion of poetry, and the use of this word—its imposition, really—has led to some misunderstanding of biblical genres and of the Bible's rhetorical scheme generally. For biblical style is not even clearly polarized into two camps corresponding to "poetry" and "prose."

Certainly its songs and sayings are not organized according to any system for which the term meter is appropriate: what distinguishes them from other parts is, first of all, their relative terseness of expression, and, beyond this, a rhetorical flourish somewhat inaccurately called "parallelism." But the dividing-line between what is "terse" and "parallelistic" in the Bible and what is not is a ragged one, and whole chapters of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, etc.—even parts of the Psalter—sit squarely in the middle, refusing definition. Furthermore, even if one were to deal only with the extremes of terseness and parallelism or their absence, one would come up with a generically strange pair of boxes, having to include in the "Poetry" one such unpoetic compositions as genealogies, blessings, curses, prayers, snatches of conversation in narrative, proverbs, etc., and in the "Prose" box some songs and psalms, perhaps even the un-terse Song of Songs.

This question is important for an undertaking like Carmi's, not for the relatively minor reason that it is misleading to ascribe meters to Isaiah 14, David's Lament, etc., and certainly not because he does not have the right to call these or other passages poetry. But this whole anthology (and much more than it) operates on the tacit assumption that there just always has been something called Hebrew poetry. The truth, it seems to me, is a bit more subtle. Hebrew slid into our kind of "poetry" gradually, that is, little by little it assimilated foreign ideas about genre and rhetoric, then slowly bent the native tradition until it began to fit them. This process notwithstanding, the biblical scheme of things, in which a very flexible, parallelistic "high style" embellished to various degrees songs, sayings, oracles, speeches, and other lofty pronouncements, persisted long after the close of the biblical period. (A model for its transition into our poetic norms might be sought in an event from later literary history, the moment when Italian Jewish poets like Immanuel of Rome began to write their "split personality hendecasyllables," lines which, while superficially observing the old rules of meter inherited from the the Andalusian School, at the same time obeyed the rules of syllabic Italian verse. After a time the Andalusian system began to be disregarded entirely in favor of the undisguised Italian system. In the same way, biblical style survived for a time even after the introduction of rhyme, meter, and later refinements—both sets of norms were observed simultaneously.) Some contemporary studies of early piyyut are insensitive to this "slide" not only in their metrical speculations, but in the broader act of connecting the appearance of piyyut with biblical antecedents: poetry is poetry. A more nuanced approach, it seems to me, would be to regard the earliest liturgical compositions in the light of the free-flowing biblical scheme, which then only gradually tightened into more rigorous forms, "verse" proper.

Carmi's selections from the postbiblical period pose this question most acutely. He is right to include among rabbinic "poems" simple *berakhot* (such as "Elohai, neshamah shennatata bi," said upon rising, or the brief prayer recited after the *'amidah*, "Elohai, netsor leshoni mera")—right at least in the sense that *berakhot* are the stylistic and generic heirs of their parallelistic biblical forefathers.* But are we to regard these *berakhot* as *poems*? Is that what generations of

* Rabbinic prayers have generally been passed over by anthologists of Hebrew poetry, though historians—including Delitzsch—often connect them with the growth of post-

pious Jews have been doing as they get up in the morning, reciting poetry? The Apollonian garland sits uneasy atop the gemara-kop. Now it seems to me that here Carmi is doing nothing more than following through on the stylistic norms of "biblical poetry" as they have been defined by previous generations, and in particular the practice of equating everything terse and parallelistic with "poetry." But the dissonance that results from labeling rabbinic (and even later) prayers as poems is, I think, instructive.

The same problem of distance expresses itself in the medieval period, in subtle but nevertheless significant ways. It has often struck me that no translation of the secular Hebrew verse of medieval Spain is ever quite adequate. Curiously, translations which (like Carmi's) basically shrug their shoulders work the best: straight prose, with an explanatory footnote here and there when unavoidable. This is preferable to either the rhymed versifyings popular earlier this century or, somehow still worse, those rather modern-looking, unrhymed versions found in more recent collections. But all of these are inadequate not for the truistic Robert Frost reason, "Poetry is what's lost in translation," but more concretely because they all fundamentally misrepresent the texture of these poems, that tinkering, allusive, and overwhelmingly clever activity which is *shibbut*s, and still more profoundly, the attitude which underlies it, a glorying in descriptions of flesh-and-blood friends and quotidian situations and ideas in a language which is both distant and familiar, not one's mother-tongue but distinctly one's own, the lofty idiom of Scripture which one memorized as child. To capture this most basic "given" of such poetry (and of a good deal more in Hebrew) is not only impossible in translation, but moreover is misrepresented, glossed over, buried, by the mightiest acts of trying. The reason why Carmi's translations are to be preferred is precisely because they bury the least. And those that distort the most are, significantly, those that take the equation poetry = poetry most seriously and produce "equivalent" English verse.

The issue of our distance from the world of these texts blends imperceptibly into the last "Delitzsch question": is there a "canon" of Hebrew poetry, and if so, by what standards has it been (or is it to be) assembled? Canonization is by all rights a tricky question; even in regard to European literatures the term is somewhat misleading, since the "canons" have no unbreachable walls that divide "ins" from "outs"; canonization is a *shakla vetarya* undertaken anew by each generation. In Hebrew things are still more fluid, with new texts, and sometimes even new poets, still now just coming into view. But each new anthology is willy-nilly an act of canonization, and Carmi's, though somewhat scant even at 430 odd pages of Hebrew-English texts, is one that is likely to play an important role for quite a while.

How does one decide on the "ins"? Does one choose that which most closely corresponds to present-day aesthetics and poetic tastes, rummaging through the tall grasses of yesteryear with a metal-detector guaranteed to go boink in the presence of our kind of beauty, wherever it happens to lie? Or does one seek imaginatively to become by turns a biblical Israelite, a Babylonian

biblical poetry. The anthology prepared by H. Brody and M. Wiener, *Anthologia Hebraica: Miḥar hashirah ha'ivrit* (Leipzig, 1922) contains a 12-page section of Tannaitic and Amoraic compositions, including "Elohai netsor leshoni mera'" used by Carmi.

master, and so on—in which case will not even “beauty” sometimes be a bit beside the point?

This question is relevant with regard to the overall shape of the canon one produces; and first and foremost with respect to the balance one strikes between *shirat hakodesh* and *shirat haḥol*. Despite the vibrancy of the latter, it is *shirat hakodesh* which is Hebrew’s most original and inventive, most highly elaborated, and most continuous tradition. The trouble is that—precisely because it is *sui generis*—it has a somewhat less secure place in the J. G. Herder Society of World Poetry. Not only is it true that, as mentioned above, piyyut only “slid” into poetry, but its aesthetics, its subjects, and its *modus operandi* are in some respects far removed from those of other poetic corpora.

To focus on the (at first glance) monotonous, hermetic, and none-too-poetic world of *shirat hakodesh* has to highlight that part of Hebrew creativity which has the least in common with European literary traditions. Past Jewish scholarship has of course gloried in the secular material—not only, one suspects, because until recently some of the early history of piyyut lay largely undiscovered among the fragments of the Cairo Geniza, but because, among those sons of the Haskalah who first championed the study of Hebrew poetry, there was some yearning to find (or invent) a Judaism more in their own image, cosmopolitan, free of the narrow-minded religiosity of the yeshiva. Yet in shaping a goodly portion of the poetic “canon” around secular verse, anthologists sometimes underplay the very elements of continuity in piyyut which do span geocultural gaps. For secular Hebrew poetry is a more imitative, local, and ultimately fragmented set of traditions.

And so another anthologist might view the secular tradition differently, thereby altering the very shape of Hebrew poetry, in effect redefining it and, in the process, redefining how it is to be compared to other literatures and how much internal continuity is to be found within it (in fact, this may in part be the effect of recent studies). It is striking how, for example, Shem Tob Falaquera’s poet (in *Sefer hamevakkesh*) essentially excludes most (all?) secular poetry from the canon—it is simply not worth reading—or how Moses ibn Habib, in his *Darkhei no’am*, writes off any poetry that is not praise of God or directed to the betterment of the soul.* These represent a rather different “canonization,” and, remarkably, one espoused by two who were close to the secular tradition.

On this whole issue of canonization Carmi himself seems at times naive, and no more so than in his explaining his anthology’s “most controversial” exclusion, that of Haskalah poetry (the book jumps from the eighteenth century to Bialik). About the Haskalah Carmi notes: “Though this is an intriguing and crucial chapter of cultural history, the poems themselves are, to my taste, lacking in literary merit,” and he goes on to enumerate possible causes for this “stroke of amnesia” in Jewish aesthetics. (They include: a “didactic, moralistic, and nationalistic bias”; the isolation of Eastern European Jewish communities from the “host cultures” [a regrettable phrase]; Jewish feelings of inferiority; ignorance of previous Hebrew verse and its “enormous storehouse of potential poetic equipment” [rrrrmm]; and the syllabic legacy of the Hebrew-Italian school.)

*See my *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven, 1981), p. 196 n.

I must confess to entertaining some doubts about this terrible swift sword, "literary merit." For is *that* really what has been portioning out the knackwurst heretofore? Is it on the grounds of some elusive, panhistoric standard (something like Longinus's *hypsos*, or the eighteenth-century concept of "genius") that those rabbinic *berakhot* can be lumped together with the obtusest of piyyutim, and these with Todros Abulafia, Israel Najara, and Yehuda Amichai? (As the toupee ads used to ask: "What do all these men have in common?" Literary merit!) Surely common sense suggests something else, an attempt to represent all periods and to use a bit of imaginative sympathy (rooted in Pagis's "tools for analysis") so as to select each age's best by its own standards, or at least to somehow reconcile its "best" with a modern reader's sensibilities. Indeed, considering the general run of Carmi's selecting, one cannot but conclude two things: that this "literary merit" is really a rather more complicated question than he implies; and that, for better or for worse, this anthology as a whole (despite its Geniza material, Hekhalot hymns, etc.) is rather strikingly traditional.

One of the jarring licenses the "literary merit" doctrine permits is the right of excision, not only (as mentioned earlier) that of cutting texts free of their original purpose and *Sitz im Leben*, at times free even of consideration of the standards and conventions by which they were written and read, but also simply the right to chop things up, cutting off the beginnings and ends of texts so as to isolate the "poetic part." There goes that metal detector again, rescuing a bit of intense description from a droning Qumran *hodaya*, or spotting a "poem on the advent of spring" (Carmi dixit) in an early Prayer for Dew (*Tal*). Any anthology, especially one cramped for space, has the right to excerpt, but done in this fashion it sometimes comes close to the acts of fidgetry made famous by the "Found Poetry" movement of the 1960s, which discovered "poem" in porno novels, IRS circulars, questionnaires, etc. I think the analogy is instructive: some of these edited selections (at times cut into lines only on the basis of the anthologist's good taste) seem to be poems *malgré eux-mêmes*. "Literary merit" is an issue whose ramifications go far beyond the fate of Haskalah poetry.

And, come to think of it, what of Haskalah poetry? I find it curious in the extreme that Carmi, having picked flowers in the biblical garden, on the stony terraces of early piyyut, medieval Spain, and so forth, should suddenly find *nothing pretty* just as he rounds the bend to enter his own neighborhood. Is it not perhaps today's relative proximity to Haskalah Hebrew and and to the literary and intellectual world in which it dwelled that deprives it of some of the exotic gloss of earlier works? What of Haskalah translations? Is this really a case of aesthetic amnesia, or simply a matter of where one stands?

But enough said; an anthologist is by definition a maker of enemies. Thus far this book's outstanding virtues have only been alluded to in passing; the fact is it is extraordinarily erudite and up-to-date, the translations are excellent, sometimes even beautiful, the long introduction clear, well-written, and thorough. The result is a book that will be a pleasure to own and use, and one that can with pride take its place next to the Penguin Book of Russian Verse, Greek Verse, etc. And yet . . . there remain the foregoing questions—about the stark discontinuities and divisions within Hebrew poetry; about the great gap that separates the modern reader's abilities, expectations, and tastes from the

Hebrew works of the past; about how well the "poetic" label fits some of the biblical and even postbiblical material; and about, finally, the criteria by which Hebrew's poetic "canon" is to be assembled. Considered together, these may be sufficient to raise a doubt or two about "all" of Hebrew poetry, perhaps even to suggest other possibilities to the version of Hebrew literary history that underlies this collection.

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Rabbi Nahman and His Readers

Arthur Green. *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*. University of Alabama Press, 1979, 371 pp. Schocken paperback, 1981. \$11.95.

Arnold Band. *Nahman of Bratslav: The Tales*. With a Preface by Joseph Dan. New York, Ramsey, Toronto: Paulist Press, 1979, 325 pp. \$6.95.

Adin Steinsaltz. *Beggars and Prayers*. New York: Basic Books, 1979, 186 pp. \$8.95.

What attracts us to the figure of Nahman of Bratslav is not hard to gauge: Nahman's mystical messianism, his spiritual and psychological torments, his anxiety over God's apparent absence from the world. For the student of literature it is Nahman's narrative texts, more than his life, that exert a special, and warranted, fascination. From a theoretical perspective, the tales represent significant instances of parabolic and enigmatic discourse, a kind of discourse which, in the words of Louis Marin, raises crucial questions about "the theory of reading and interpretation, the question of textual indeterminacy and interpretive determinations." For literary history, the rediscovery of these symbolic narratives demands that we undertake a considerable remapping of the terrain of imaginative activity in Hebrew and Yiddish in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Such a rethinking would have to account for the existence in the sphere of religious literature of fictions far more complex and sophisticated than anything found in what has hitherto been supposed to be the mainstream of modern secular writing. Our understanding of Nahman's compelling tales has recently been advanced by the appearance of several new works: Arthur Green's biography, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*, and two books of translations of the tales, accompanied by commentaries, by Arnold Band and by Adin Steinsaltz.

Green's considerable contribution to Nahman studies, stemming from his application of methods drawn from the history of religions to the study of Hasidism, has been recognized already in many scholarly and general notices. Indeed, the fact that *Tormented Master* received the Smilen-*Present Tense* award for Judaica as well as the fact that the book has sold remarkably well in a paperback Hebrew version in Israel suggest the success of Green's endeavor to make sense of so complex a religious personality as Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav.

Because Green so clearly writes as a historian of religion it is perhaps unfair to address to his work questions that are essentially literary-critical in