"I manured the land with my mother's letters": Avot Yeshurun and the Question of Avant-Garde

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I manured the land with my mother's letters and all of a sudden they stopped. At once. Like Pompeii.
—Avot Yeshurun (unpublished draft, 1964)

Abstract   Although historians of the avant-garde have noted the double requirement for innovators to dramatize a provocative verbal action that experiments with form, the interaction between the ideology and poetics of avant-garde poetry has been largely neglected. Recent studies point to the contradiction between avant-garde poetry's stance of rebellion and its inevitable historicization. Less attention has been paid to the relationship between the negated or undermined tradition and the process whereby experimentation becomes a new tradition.

In this paper I explore these questions with reference to the work of the Israeli

poet, Avot Yeshurun—in particular, how the mother tongue underlying his Hebrew writing forms a subversive tradition and, as such, fulfills new, unprecedented roles in his poetry. I discuss the ways in which the montage (of words, perspectives, languages, and cultural worlds) and the interplay between autobiography and poetics inform the gradual self-codification of his work. Of central importance is the dynamic whereby quotation montage is made to carry the transgressive force of Yeshurun's work—with ideological and historical, as well as poetic, consequences. All this leads to a reevaluation of Yeshurun's position vis-à-vis Israeli modernism.

1. Avant-Garde, Israeli Modernism, and Yeshurun

Avant-garde is a posture of defiance vis-à-vis tradition; yet, inevitably, it becomes a tradition that loses its innovative force. All successful experimental movements in twentieth-century history, it seems, have undergone such polar phases.[1] Whether the object of adversarial thrust is a prevailing artistic convention unrelated to sociopolitical values (as in Pound and Eliot) or whether the two sets of norms intersect (as in Italian futurism and French surrealism)[2], the rebellious artist—"advancing on an enemy," "jealous of his independence," and "extreme in outrage" (Lehman 1998: 287–97)—must nevertheless rely on the resources of a tradition that she or he appropriates. Israeli modernism is especially problematic in this regard. On the one hand, Hebrew culture, like such future-oriented European sociopolitical doctrines as Saint-Simonian socialism, anarchism, and Marxism, drove a continuing revolution characterized by a radical break with what it perceived as the "old world."[3] This preoccupation is evident from the 1880s until the late modern period (roughly, the 1950s). On the other hand, the very shift of the literary center from Europe to prestatehood Israel not

1. On the historical manifestations of this duality, see Poggioli 1968; for its role in the historicization of the concept of avant-garde and in the crisis of this concept in the 1960s, see Calinescu 1993: 116–25; for a theoretical perspective on this duality in relation to the history of the New York School of poets, see Lehman 1998: 283–88. See also Perloff's (1990: 1–5, 7–29) emphasis on the relations between this duality and canon formation in (post)modernist lyricism.
2. Theorists of the avant-garde offer different models to account for the relationship between politics and aesthetic concerns. For a historical outlook, see Poggioli 1968: 11–12. Calinescu (1987: 112–16) emphasizes the interaction between the two avant-gardes, while Bürger (1984 [1974]: 15–27) seeks to bridge this duality by proposing a dialectical dynamics of content and technique. Suleiman (1990: 33) anchors the idea of rupture in philosophy, aesthetics, and politics.
3. It is impossible even to allude here to the many facets of this question. For the value shift involved in the dissociation from the European center, see Shavit 1982; for the social and ideological aspects of this break, see Shapira 1988; on the role of cultural tradition in the Hebrew modernistic revolution, see Harshav 1986: 7–31; for an emphasis on the ideological aspects of these tensions, see Hever 1995: 43–44.

only involved a break with the past but also made it necessary to constitute a system and establish new norms. Thus, as Kronfeld (1996) has shown in her comprehensive study, Hebrew modernism took shape principally by adopting foreign traditions. The epigonic principle, applied in order to provide missing themes and/or formal elements by borrowing them from other systems took on new functions (Even-Zohar 1969–79; 1971). Accordingly, while European and American modernists manifested the avant-garde militant posture against tradition (Poggioli 1968: 30) when appropriating the literary past (e.g., in *The Waste Land* or the *Cantos*), Israeli poets, until the 1960s, generally adopted rather than undermined canonized lines. The high modernists (such as Nathan Alterman, Avraham Shlonsky, and Leah Goldberg) adopted the traditions of Russian and French symbolism, while the statehood generation (Zach, Amichai, and Rabikovitz) made use of the traditions of German expressionism and, especially, Anglo-American classic modernism. The rules of traditional prosody and autonomous poetic language in the first models, and the emphasis on order, hierarchy, and aesthetic distance in the second have in part determined what I view as the moderate, and even conservative, nature of Hebrew modernism.

At the same time, from the provocative assault on lyric convention in Uri Zvi Grinberg's (1928) *Clapei Tish'im Vetish'a* [Against ninety-nine], to Shlonsky's and Alterman's campaign for the functional autonomy of language, to Natan Zach's (1960) experimental use of speech rhythms and citation in *Shirim Shonim*, Israeli modernists have also developed new models in order to shape the very nature of the poetic medium. On this scale ranging from the conservative to the new, Avot Yeshurun (1903–92), whose deviation from the canon of Hebrew modernism spans almost the entire century, appears to be closer to the new end.

Yet, like the phenomenon of avant-garde itself, the later Yeshurun is clearly not the same poet he was in the fifties and sixties. The days of the "labour movement," when strict codes of behavior led outraged readers to mock the political positions of the eccentric dandy who wore pink (unheard of in the Israel of those days) have long since passed.[4] After the publication of his *Syrian African Rift* (1980), Yeshurun achieved semimythic status and received long overdue recognition, as manifested in the 1992 award of the Israel Prize. However, until his death at the age of eighty-nine, he was read primarily by a minority of poetry lovers and writers.[5] His long struggle with

4. For a thorough documentation of the reception of Yeshurun's works, see Zoritte 1995.
5. On the relative silence of the critics in regard to Yeshurun's work, see Oppenheimer 1997. Quite exceptional in this sense were Miron's (1954, 1955) favorable reviews. However, his emphasis on Yeshurun's attempts to bridge gaps, both linguistic and thematic, between his own present moment and ancient Jewish history, provide evidence, paradoxically, of the domi-

the literary canon lagged behind at least three successive waves of Hebrew modernism: the Ktuvim period (Shlonsky, Alterman, and Goldberg), the statehood generation (Zach, Avidan, Amichai, Rabikovitz), and the generation of Tel Aviv poets active in the 1960s and 1970s (Wieseltier, Wollach, Hurvitz). Some of his early poems were published in *Turim* (1934) and in the literary supplement of *Ha'aretz* (1936), both then edited by Shlonsky, a leader of the Ktuvim poets. However, the critic Lakhover, considered a literary authority in his time, openly rejected Yeshurun. Yeshurun later became a favorite poet of *Siman Kri'a*, a journal that published much of the work of the new generation of avant-garde poets in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the context of Hebrew modernism, one could describe Yeshurun's career as a series of scandalous refusals, all of which are enacted in his poetry and most of which cost him dearly. They include a refusal to conform to both the purist Hebraism of Canaanite ideology and that of modernist symbolism;[6] a refusal to embrace meter and conventional rhyme, or the partition between lyrical and political poetry; a refusal to conform to the fashions of literary schools and their corollary ideologies of stylistic segregation; a refusal to participate in the Israeli rejection of the Diaspora that remained in Europe and the Yiddish tradition of the *Galut* (exile) but an equal refusal to accept the native Israeli's identification between the motherland and territory. He also refused to disregard the plight of the Israeli Palestinian or to join what he interpreted as a one-sided appropriation of the Holocaust, offensively questioning "our Holocaust we wept; their Holocaust we did not weep?" (Yeshurun 1997: 120). He would not participate in what he called the Shoah industry and in the cult of lifeless icons that preoccupies Israeli culture. Shocked by the murder of Israeli children by Palestinian terrorists in Ma'alot (May 1974), he refused to adopt the Israeli Left's consensus regarding the Palestinian national cause; and, remarkably, after the war with Lebanon (1983), and in contrast to his earlier radical bias, he refused to

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nant collective norms by which Yeshurun's work was otherwise excluded. Moreover, Miron's reviews can be seen as indicative of a tendency to perceive Yeshurun's early work as affiliated to Canaanite ideology (Zoritte 1995: 161).

Yeshurun's marginality is also evident from the dual perspective proposed by the poet Meir Wieseltier (1980). In his seminal manifesto and historical essay, Wieseltier presents Yeshurun as "an idiosyncratic anecdote" from the perspective of the dominant modernists, notably Zach, who provides an emulated model for the poetics of Wieseltier's own generation. On Yeshurun's marginality, see also Kronfeld 1996: 229–30 and, apropos of the 1950s, Gluzman 1993.

6. *Canaanite* refers here to a group of writers and artists who see themselves primarily as Israelis (as distinct from Jews); as such they denounce Jewish exile and aspire to rekindle their kinship with Semitic culture. Yeshurun (1995: 89–90) strongly dissociated himself from the Canaanites, attacking their priorities both in his poetry and in interviews (Harel 1992; Zoritte 1995: 110–11).

join the anti-Zionist orientation of the extreme Left. Finally, in his two last books, written when he was in his eighties, he refused to accept the paralyzing tyranny of death: "I / come out / march / utmost life," he wrote in 1987.

The range of these refusals suggests that Yeshurun was antiprogrammatic, suspicious of labels, and true to his own extremely personal responses to political causes. The gesture of refusal itself, so it seems, was privileged over any fixed cause. Its accumulative force indicates the resistance his poetry had to overcome and helps to explain the curious fact that Yeshurun's work persisted as a semiunderground phenomenon that lost none of its force after its initial acceptance in the 1970s. As David Lehman (1998: 287) has recently asserted, such resistance—a necessary precondition for any avant-garde—is altogether lacking in our postmodern culture; hence his "the avant-garde is dead." However, we may ask, is the antagonistic potential inherent in all Yeshurun's provocative refusals sufficient to transform poetry into a form of action, or the rhetoric of contest into compelling poetry? Irrespective of whether some of these refusals were more liberating than others, their accumulation required Yeshurun to forge new means of representation.

If refusal is the gesture that defines his position vis-à-vis Israeli modernism, breakage is the master trope that constitutes both his personal history and the inner history of his poetry.[7] The former consists of partings, departures, and amputations; and the latter, as I show in section 3, both radicalizes these breaks, which constitute his life story, and simultaneously "naturalizes" them into a distinctive poetic code. Yeshurun was born October 1, 1903, in Naskhidj in the Ukraine on Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), during the Neilah prayer. His father's family owned flour mills; his mother came from a line of rabbis. He was eleven years old at the outbreak of World War I, at the end of which he experienced a series of displacements and exiles, arriving alone in what was then Palestine at the age of twenty-two. During World War II, he seldom replied to letters from his relatives. When, after the war, he discovered that his mother, his father, his brothers, and his sister had all been liquidated, his world collapsed. From that time on, so he testified, he "sentenced them to longings" (quoted in Harel 1992).

His seven years of poetic silence (1942–49) after the Shoah, I interpret as an acknowledgment of the inadequacy of poetry and of speech. At the end of that time he changed his name from Yechiel Perlmutter to the He-

7. Menakem Perry (1974a) points out the role played by various types of breakage in Yeshurun's thematic composition. His graduate course at Tel Aviv University, "Thematic Structures in Poetry," offered when *The Syrian African Rift* had just been published, was an important station in my own discovery of Yeshurun.

brew name by which he is now known. In October 1949, the literary jour-
nal *Makhbarot Lesifrut* published eight new poems by a previously unknown
poet, Avot Yeshurun. The name literally means "fathers will see," but the
poet paraphrased it as "for the fathers mirror in us" [Zoritte 1995: 156–57].)
It took those years of silence to find the language that would emancipate
him from the constricting norms of his contemporaries. Time is a factor
both in the history of his publishing career and in his evolving attitude to
Hebrew: he was in his late thirties when his first book, *On the Wisdom of
Ways* (1942), appeared; in the last two decades of his life he published seven
books, compared with only three during the preceding three decades. In
an interview in the early seventies, he confessed that, early in his career, "I
forbade myself to speak and think in Yiddish, but at the same time I didn't
have sufficient Hebrew" (ibid.: 86). Elsewhere, Yeshurun (1997: 182) wrote,
"My Hebrew is not clean / My Hebrew (is) slap-dash and talks slap-dashish
and nonsense, because it is insufficient." In working toward a poetics that
would perform some kind of aggressive "testimony," Yeshurun combined
autobiographical writing, bits and pieces of unpublished letters, journal-
istic prose, folklike anecdotes and fractured quotations—all of which are
assembled as elaborate forms of montage and newly fused within personal
and collective rituals of memory.[8]

Yeshurun's poetics serve two ends in my argument. First, the relatively
long interval between rejection and acceptance, in his case, radicalizes the
question of the relationship between innovation and naturalization typi-
cal of any avant-garde: How did his poetry come to fulfill its function as
avant-garde, and what aspects of its internal history vis-à-vis the surround-
ing culture enable us to assimilate it to tradition? Second, due to his posi-
tion between the new and the conservative, Yeshurun's poetics illuminate
the distinction between two schools of Hebrew modernism. The first can
be traced back to Chaim Bialik (1873–1934), the great poet of Hebrew re-
vival, who provided its poetry with a modern idiom, brought to life the
various strata of the language, and revolutionized its prosody. The second
emulated Russian metrical systems and symbolist poetry. Though contem-
porary modernists strove to counter Bialik by adopting foreign literary tra-
ditions, a central aspect of Yeshurun's vanguardism was his adaptation of
the then-repressed "home" traditions (Yiddish, Polish, and Christian in-
heritances, all associated with the world left behind in Europe) and his mix-
ture of these with biblical Hebrew, Piyout, and Midrash. Responsive to the

8. See my "Work of Re-membering: Avot Yeshurun" (1995), of which a more detailed version
is forthcoming in Hebrew. A brilliant development of this, focused on a Freudian reading,
was presented by Oded Wolkstein (June 1997) at the Haefrati Memorial Conference in Tel
Aviv; see also Wolkstein 1996: 70–77.

rejected expressionism of Uri Zvi Grinberg and to the neglected motifs of Christian narratives, Arab folk music, and modernist art, he favored the line of literary, and especially cultural, outsiders.[9] Thus while appropriating foreign traditions, his poetry always draws notice to their mediation through an internal "home" language. During the late 1960s and 1970s, this new frontier was extended by the avant-garde of the Tel Aviv poets (Wallach, Wieseltier, Hurvitz), for whom Yeshurun served as a prototype. Rediscovering the romantic Bialik and attracted by his autobiographical poems— which had had little appeal to earlier Israeli modernists—these younger poets were intent on creating, out of their private worlds, countermythologies to the grand Zionist narrative. Like Yeshurun, they approached language the way a family draws on its own intonations, personal references, and special meanings.[10]

From this dual perspective—correlating internal history (i.e., the evolution of avant-garde within Yeshurun's poetics) with external history (its reception and self-constitution as avant-garde in relation to Hebrew modernism)—Yeshurun's paradigmatic value reveals itself in a meeting of two salient features. On the one hand, his poetry is the poetry of transgression in almost any conceivable sense of the word.[11] As I demonstrate in sections 2–4, the master device by which this poetry performs transgression is quotation montage. More than just a style of writing, Yeshurun uses montage to express a logic of composition (analogous to montage in film or in art) that informs his poetry both globally and in each of its minute parts. What makes his transgressive poetics scandalous, and distinctively anomalous in the Israeli modernist context, is primarily the ways montage strategies (Bürger 1984 [1974]) function on all levels of his work (phrasing of speech, composition, world, ideology).[12] The many different kinds of quoting strategies in his work enable constant shifts: for example, from one narrative voice to another (e.g., replacing the poet's or the son's by the mother's speech); from one time-and-place continuum to another (e.g., a poem ostensibly about guilt associated with the Yom Kippur War slides into an account of a Yom Kippur eve of the poet's childhood associated with an entirely different guilt complex); from one text to another (e.g., an address

9. On Yeshurun's debt to expressionism, see Oppenheimer 1997.
10. Elsewhere I describe the kinship of the younger Tel Aviv poets to Yeshurun as part of a new and emerging model of subjectivity in Hebrew modernism (Lachman 1993, 1994, 1996).
11. I refer to the notion of *transgression* as a form of denial in regard to a law, a prohibition, and a taboo that becomes a demarcation of the very limits of language, as developed by Bataille (1977, 1988). On related issues, see also Foucault 1998: 24–40; Kristeva 1980, 1982: 56–132; and Suleiman 1990: 72–87.
12. According to Bürger (1984 [1974]: 77), "a theory of avant-garde must begin with the concept of montage that is suggested by the early cubist collages."

to the poet's mother taking place in Tel Aviv in 1974 evokes a biblical-type scene of paternal blessing); from one sociolinguistic milieu to another (with dialects or registers colliding); or from one language (spoken Hebrew) to another (Yiddish, Polish, or Arabic).

All these strategies of translational mimesis (Sternberg 1981) or dialogism (Bakhtin 1981; 1986) have in common the transgression of linguistic rules and conventions of poetic continuity.[13] What is subverted is the coherence of a text, of the lyric voice, and, at times, speech itself. Such transgressions often result in a dissonance between two or more poetic strata, what Brian McHale (1987b: 22) describes as either "surplus structure" or "surplus texture" (see also McHale 1987a). McHale's effects of heterogeneity, surplus, and irrelevance appear in Yeshurun as an opposition between argument (as paraphrasable meaning and as structure) and voice (as a surplus of nonsemantic effects). In defiance of his modernist contemporaries' "organic form," the "bad taste" of a Yeshurun poem often means that a poem is simply a heterogeneous assemblage, a juxtaposition of fragments belonging to different worlds, a cacophony of voices. Moreover, as the violent reaction to Yeshurun's scandalous and often-cited 1952 poem, "Pesach Al Kukhim" (1995: 81–85), attests, such a radical break with poetic norms extended to behavior and social decorum as well.[14] Montage, as the organizing principle of both world and language, became the major vehicle for Yeshurun's breakages, as is evident even from the focus of critical attack.

13. Broadly speaking, Yeshurun's poetics seem an extreme case of the dialogical, both in its radicalization of the contextual and evaluative element of language and in the central role it gives to the responsive interaction between speakers—between a self and an other. With reference to Bakhtin (1981), one may observe the extent to which Yeshurun breaks the limits of the lyric, questioning the boundaries between poetry and prose, poetry and history; but at the same time, this very poetics can serve to expose what I would call the monological fallacy in Bakhtin's argument. It is not entirely clear whether Bakhtin's fallacy is theoretically or descriptively based, or both. On the one hand, he repeats the argument that "the dialogic orientation of discourse is a phenomenon that is, of course, a property of *any* discourse" (279). On the other hand, shifting between poetry and the novel as two poles in a dialogical spectrum, he repeatedly associates the *dialogical* and *heteroglossia* with the novel (275, 278), and the *monological* as well as the *transparent* with poetry (275). Meir Sternberg's (1979) theory of translation and representation has enabled me to describe how Yeshurun uses dialogical strategies in shaping his poetics—manifested as a specific relation between history, representation, and composition. Most importantly, whereas Bakhtin's theory urges us to focus on the stylistic and compositional products, Sternberg's model of montage as a shifting relationship between inset and frame, or as an interplay between contexts of utterance, gives us more precise tools for focusing on history as change, displacement, and genesis.
14. On the violent attacks and parodies that greeted the publication of "Pesach Al Kukhim" and on its interpretation by the prominent Canaanite A. Amir, see Zoritte (1995: 160–64). A contemporary right-wing critic, Yakov Gil, published a response under the cautionary title, "Slavery within the State" (quoted in Zoritte 1995: 163), presenting Yeshurun's poem as a juncture of "Arab assimilation, moral slavery, and psychic incoherence."

One critic complained that "the world in which he lives is composed of mixtures which we can't bear. Abraham, our father, walks hand in hand with the Bedouin in the Negev, the engineer of the shtetl in Poland engages with the exotics of the Orient" (*Yedi'ot Ahronot*, 1961).

I return to some of the key violations in "Pesach Al Kukhim" in sections 4 and 5 where I argue, that, against the background of these norms, Yeshurun's transgressive references to the speech and thought of others achieve multiple effects, in particular, problematizing the exclusion of the other (be it the mother tongue, the Palestinian, the exiled Jew, or the mother herself) from language. Thus, Yeshurun uses quotation montage to represent not only a poetic world, a shifting sense of the subject, but also, inventively, a new understanding of his subject's relation to history.

Accordingly, not only can his poetics be described in reference to the techniques of montage presented by Peter Bürger (1984) as the hallmark of any avant-garde, but the universal principles of quotation montage can also help us describe his distinctive poetics (Sternberg 1982). More than anything else, his personal version of history is realized as a memory work that increasingly takes on the burden of reporting messages originally encoded in other languages and in other periods. Montage allows Yeshurun to experience time not as continuity but as difference: he interrupts language, space, and time by rearranging them, relinking events, identities, and speech fragments. As a result, the process of time itself is reshaped, and his sense of history emerges as an intertextual network relating modern Hebrew to other languages and sublanguages.

It is the intersection of these two attributes—the transgressive quotation montage that distinguishes his poetry and the crystallization of this quotation montage into a code that can be assimilated to the canon as well as to our own sense of history—that gives Yeshurun's work its theoretical interest as a corpus foregrounding the relations between avant-garde, poetics, and history.

2. Poetic Montage: Breakage and Recuperation

I begin my consideration of breakage by examining one of Yeshurun's seemingly more transparent and translatable texts, "Poem on the Guilt." Together with five other poems, it forms the cycle "Hashever Hasuri Afrikani," which opens *The Syrian African Rift* (1974); it was written during and shortly after the Yom Kippur War of 1973.[15] At first glance, all six poems appear to

15. Officially dated as finished about three months after the Yom Kippur War (signed January 1974), the sequence was published in *Ma'ariv* soon after and reprinted a few months later in *Siman Kri'a* 3–4 (1974).

be reports by a witness brooding over the events of Yom Kippur. The narrative voice is Yeshurun's own. Beginning diagnostically, he draws a parallel between prehistorical geological displacements and his own shock upon awakening from an operation; yet the opening poem ends with a shift to personal speech: "And here I am. Yom Kippur" (ibid.: 29) *Yom Kippurim* (literally, plural, day of atonements) can be linked to several frames of reference (Harshav 1984) that operate simultaneously, each introducing its own language register and its own level of reality.

The frames unfold through displacements in memory rather than through chronological linking; space is organized through leaps from one frame to another, presenting time as an aberrant movement: the Jewish Day of Atonement in a Tel Aviv synagogue (1973) overlaps with a childhood memory of the day in Yeshurun's synagogue; and the fateful event of the poet's own birthday with the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. Yeshurun contrasts two perspectives on time, one historical-journalistic and autobiographical, the other psychological, experiential, and "clinical." The temporality bearing on those who are affected by the rift/ war/ operation meets that of the subject who diagnoses the effects of this multidimensional event.

The key reflex of this duality is the *deixis*, which polarizes time and space. The present ("this day") is set against the past ("they were the big ones when we were small"), and "I"-"here" against "they"-"there." The speech event is the central frame by which Yeshurun gets in touch with this past and attempts to retrieve it: *Hinneni kaan*, *Yom Hakippurim* (Here I am, Yom Kippur). The Hebrew word *hinneni* (here I am) forcefully captures the shock of awakening into one's own self-presence. Bracketed with the colloquial and almost redundant *kaan* (literally, "here I am, here"), *hinneni* triggers the weighty biblical associations of a response to God calling one's name (*Genesis* 22:11; I *Samuel* 3:8). Its transcendental implications not only enforce the poet's sense of self-presence but also underline his personal master transgression: I am "here," but you/they/she are left behind—"there."

In this respect, the present is not designated as a space where events succeed one another. Rather, it already exists in time as the narration of the events—at once autobiographical and contrived. Yeshurun's glosses sharpen this question of time and its shaping in art. Interestingly, the very experience that is presented in the poem as impossible to sequence, and even authenticate, is partly clarified by the following account (Yeshurun 1997: 15): "One day my mother gave birth to a child. Out of fatigue she lay on the child and the child was stifled. The child was taken from her and laid in a corner. She ran like a beast, like a trapped tiger but was prevented

from approaching him. Then, for long months she lay in this place where the child had been laid until his burial."[16] Here is the poem:[17]

Poem on the Guilt

Bless mother circle your hand around my head on the night
of this day. I would have what would I have done
to Yom Kippur. Shtetls crash and you inside and for the center
of the earth your soul and the body you longed (for) and never did
    arrive.

Your father came in a dream to you.

Opened the glass cupboard. Broke you a glass. A child passed away from you
and you asked why. Your father didn't reply; went out; you meant to
    atone
and lay on the floor and lay on the child, longing to death.

What is the nature of the guilt, and whose guilt is it? From whose perspective is the guilt recalled? Is the address to the mother part of an interior monologue, or is it part of a dream left unrecounted? Who does the mother long for? Moreover, does Yeshurun perceive the fact of her death at the beginning of the poem or only in its last line? And does the poem's final phrase read as an address to her, as a quotation from her, or as a report of her death? Furthermore, what does one make of the cluster of sources, ranging from the Arvit prayer to the pièta, from the biblical paternal blessing to Rachel's lamentation to Solomon's judgment and to the miracle of reviving the Shunamit's son?

Although Yeshurun's autobiographical gloss does provide us with some material to access the poem, it deepens rather than resolves its enigmatic core. Likewise, the relationship of the poem to its allusive context doesn't readily yield a key. Framed by its title and contextual allusions to Yom Kippur (ll. 1–3, 7), the poem echoes in line 4 a well-known part of the Day of Atonement liturgy, which can be translated as "and the soul yours ['to you,' God] and the body your deed." The twist given to this bound phrase, however, counters the liturgical assertion that unity exists between soul and body, between cause and effect, between human speaker and divine addressee.

The desired effect of breakage accounts for the poem's forms of opacity about what happens, when, where, and to whom—let alone how and why.

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16. Yeshurun (1995), born shortly after the death of his baby brother, treats his own day of birth with a mixture of guilt and atonement.
17. Translated by Meir Sternberg and Lilach Lachman.

The incomplete address, "Bless mother," makes us wonder who is to be blessed. No less ambiguous is the unspecified deixis, "the night / of this day": to which of the frames is Yeshurun referring (night of the Yom Kippur War, or the Day of Atonement, or of his own day of birth)? Each of the frames alters the motivation behind the address to the mother. The elisions of main verbs, in phrases such as "I would have what would I have done; for the center / of the earth your soul," provoke further questions: I would have done what? In what form (verb) is "your soul" connected to "the center / of the earth" (its object)? There is a crucial gap in the main narrative: "you meant to atone"—for what? The pronoun is significantly unspecified in two cases: "your soul / and the body you longed" leaves open the issue of whose body "you longed" for. Given the context, it could be "your body" (the mother's) or "my body" (the son's), or the earth's body (the land, or one's burial place).

Most striking is the elusive inexplicitness of the pronoun in the last phrase: *vametah migaaguim* (translated by Schimmel as "died of longing" and by me as "longing to death" but which could also be translated as "longed to death" or "dying of longing"). If *metah* is actualized in the second person, the temporal discrepancy within the final series of verbs is shocking. The preceding description seems to follow a chronological logic: the father "came," "opened," "broke," "the child . . . passed away," (the mother) "lay on the floor . . . lay on the child." The series of connectives (*ve* [and]) reinforces our expectation that this event chain will either continue or come to a satisfying end. However, as the subject changes (from "father" to "a child" to "you"), the actional, along with the perspectival, design grow opaque, and the readings multiply. In line 7, does the mother ask "why" from within the world of her dream? In line 8, does she lie on the child in the same world in which she addressed the father? And in the last phrase of the last line, is she herself addressed from an altogether different perspective?

Either the speaker is consistent in his use of past tense but switches (the implicit) person from second to third, so that *vametah migaaguim* ("died of longing" or "longed to death") refers to "she"; or he adheres to the second-person address, and then *metah* should be interpreted as a participle describing a state in the present. Whichever reading we choose (and I would argue that the senses coexist), such disruption calls attention to the two-directional movement between the quoted reality (dream, past, mother's consciousness) and the moment when it is either interiorized or communicated to the reader.

The abrupt shift from one frame to another reinforces the temporal vertigo of the poem's language, effecting a whole series of breakages in the enacted world(s). In the first stanza, we have the crashing of shtetls, the

severance of "soul" and "body," and the mother's longing interrupted by something that "never did arrive." In the second stanza, the mother's dream is experienced as an invasion by her father and is further interrupted by the literal breaking of a glass, by her child's death, and by her unanswered question. Why and in what way do these series of discontinuities culminate in the image of the mother's longing, interrupted by her literal death?

The frame in which Yeshurun quotes this untranslatable image remains unclear, to the frustration of narrative intelligibility. Where we expect causal and temporal development, Yeshurun offers unexplained repetitions, or the juxtaposition of apparently random events, or violent leaps; where we expect distinct characters, he offers us disembodied voices and combined perspectives. Does "Poem on the Guilt" read as a text whose writer fails to make coherent his own history?

Beneath this "surplus structure" of breakages (McHale 1987: 22), there hides a new logic of juxtaposition and linkage. In place of a coherent narrative of his past, Yeshurun shapes a series of replacements that enact a breakage that figures as a primal scene in his poetry.[18] Metonymy is the overarching principle by which he denarrativizes this happening. Note, for instance, the metonymic shifts from effects to causes in the transition from the first stanza to the second. We move from present to past as the son's plea for blessing is inverted by the father's achievement of breaking, from past to remoter past in the particularizing shift from "crash" to "broke you," and from unfulfilled longing ("and the body you longed") to tragic fulfillment ("and lay on the child"). But analogical transitions lurk behind the metonymic ones: from the reiteration of the son's loss of his mother (in the first stanza) to the mother's loss of the child (in the second); from the echo of the son's rhetorical question ("what would I have done") to his account of the mother's unanswered question in the second ("you asked why"); from the explicit reference to the body (unmarked by pronoun and thus ambiguously related either to the mother or/and to the son) in relation to the mother's longing ("and the body you longed") to the oblique reference both to the mother's body and that of her dead child ("and lay on the child"). More globally, transitions occur between different frames: from the implicit present situation of the Yom Kippur War to what appears to be a quotation from an

18. Not, of course, in the strict psychoanalytic sense that refers to the child's witnessing, or imagining, sexual intercourse between the parents. In "Poem on the Guilt," the (grand)-father's penetrating violence toward the mother (in the dream) could be taken as the child's fantasy of a "primal scene". The connotation of *shakhavt* (meaning lay and, in colloquial Hebrew, slept), as well as the erotic sense of "dying of longing" (in the sense of craving for), encourage the reader to activate the sexual overtones of the poem. I call the scene of guilt primal because it functions as a breakage that shapes all Yeshurun's later experiences.

altogether different time-space ("shtetls crash"); from the reality of memory to a quoted dream; from this present Yom Kippur to a quotation from a different Day of Atonement ("you meant to atone"). In all these instances, what has already occurred as a breakage in the past, now recurs in a new montage (or frame).

But in the process of recollection, every rehearsal exposes incomplete knowledge or involves a delay that uncovers yet another effect or symptom of the original breakage. The heterogeneous series of breakages merge with the poem's allusive material. So the last line's *shakhavt* (you lay) echoes back to two different texts. The reference to the mother who "lay on her son" and exchanged him for the living son in Solomon's judgment (I Kings 3:19–23) serves to locate Yeshurun's personal guilt within a historical framework. The alluding text, however, shifts from the mother's perspective to that of the son. Conflated with the miracle of reviving the Shunamit's child (II Kings 4:28–37), this allusion sharpens our perception of Yeshurun's birth day as a juncture of miracle and guilt. Except that the poem's last line doubly negates the possibility of miracle. The child was not revived by the mother; nor is the mother revived by the son. Tragic irony is maintained through temporal ambiguity: *vametah migaaguim* could either be metaphorically geared to the mother's guilt, signifying that the mother is craving for her dead child; or it can relate to the son's guilt and have the contrary, literal meaning—that the mother is dead.

It is the insistent breakages that force on us their relation to phenomena outside the speaker, whereby they may somehow substitute for the unknown primary event. Like Yom Kippur itself, the substituting chain becomes a charged juncture of orientations. For the mother, it serves as an opportunity to reexperience her contact with her child, while at the same time it enacts her guilt. For the son, it provides an opportunity to enact his birth, while reexperiencing the departure from his mother. As a link between the personal and the historical frames of the cycle, *vametah megaaguim* (dying of longing) implies an erotic metaphor for the mother's unlocated death, a metonymy for the son's guilt in abandoning her. On a broader scale, it also reads as a figure for mothers' anxiety about their sons, most poignantly during the Yom Kippur War. This broadening gains point from the allusion to Rachel in the poem's last line, one that dominates the sixth poem in the cycle (Yeshurun 1980: 32).

This brief analysis exemplifies a compositional feature integral to Yeshurun's poetics of remembrance. Given the slippage between frames of reference, the reader must shift not only from the level of autobiographical narrative to history and politics—and then to the level of grammar, words, and sound—but also the other way round. Montage also allows Yeshurun

to dispense with most forms of continuity; the logic that organizes his poem, as well as the sequence, works by displacements of space and time.

Stylistically, the poetic phrase grows pliable in the access to nonnormative discourse, particularly syntactic elisions in the addressee's speech (here, the dead mother). The tension between the poetic and spoken idiom is reinforced by the juxtaposition of the formal (*niftar* [passed away]) with the colloquial (*metah* [died]); by the coexistence of biblical or liturgical allusions with idiomatic speech; and by the activation of hovering colloquialisms and slang (*ba bachalom lakh* plays on the slang idiom "ba lakh," which means "you desired," "you had an urge"; *metah migaaguim* is based on the slang idiom "to die for something," i.e., to crave it).

Moreover, the Arvit prayer is evoked along traditional lines, both as a plea and as an attempt to repair. However, located within an altogether different time frame where it acquires a new performative role, it comes into direct conflict with the sacred texts that it activates.[19] Challenging the very distinction between linguistic and real-life action, Yeshurun shapes his poem as a reversal of the blasphemous imperative "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). Using the temporal continuum to disjoin and polarize the verbs of the biblical quotation, he opens with the invocation "Bless" and concludes by actualizing "die." This betrays his desire to postpone his mother's death, except that he finds himself bringing it about even more forcefully. The poem thus reads as a semipathological perpetuation of blame but also as a modernized version of elegy or Kaddish. Moreover, the new context shifts the emphasis, and thus the role, of traditional liturgy, locating it not on the predominantly impersonal and collective level that subjects the "I" to the "Thou," but within a more personal and psychological framework in which the reader needs to figure out the set of transgressions for which the poem attempts to atone. Conversely, the breakages enacted in the poem prod us to reread the traditional prayer—not only through a new interlingual and subjective idiom but also from a modernized perspective that can aspire to the sacred only by violating it and that records history by confronting us with experiences we do not fully own.

3. Poetic Montage: Autobiography, Self-History, Identity

The breakages we observed in the microcosm of the poem can be traced to a larger principle shaping Yeshurun's work. Viewed against the slow evo-

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19. For comparison, see Kronfeld's (1996: 114–40) analysis of modernist intertextuality. Unlike the central functions of modernist allusion (deflating the sacred source and emptying it of meaning), Yeshurun's allusions operate primarily as forms of action and world construction.

lution of his style, which becomes distinctly his own as late as the 1970s, his career-long preference for montage demands special notice. This principle refines his options for linking incompatibilities. In the first poem he wrote in Hebrew in 1937 (1995: 9–13), the figure of the mother brackets Holy Mary with Mary Magdalene. In *Thirty Pages of Avot Yeshurun* (1964), he contrives a montage between fragments of unanswered letters from his family (sent to Yechiel Perlmutter) and their new contextual framing (thirty pages, thirty days of mourning ritualized by Avot Yeshurun). The story of his own identity, recorded in *The Syrian African Rift* (1974) is composed of both the "fathers' name" (Avot) and the mother's speech (the Yiddish *tatalakh*, from which Avot derives). In that collection and elsewhere, Kransistav (in Poland) and Tel Aviv are brought together in a single memory thread.[20] Finally, his long poem "The House" (or "The Home"), which appeared in *I Have Not Now* (1992), devises a montage between a literal house on Berdichevsky Street, whose repair work he observes, and a metaphorical home that, he "refuses to get renovated" and "is all the time being destroyed" (ibid., 33).

But let us return to the very earliest case, the "Ballad on Miriam Magdalene and Her White Son" (written in 1937). This Kaddish (mourning) ballad, begun in the pioneer settlement of Magdiel in 1932, anticipates the death of his mother and already encapsulates the structural features, dominant themes, and scenes of violence that would characterize his later work. To enact the son's separation from his mother and to generate his separated self as a poet, Yeshurun deploys the dialogic resources of the ballad.

The conflict between the son's need to victimize his mother and his struggle to repair this victimizing motivates the stark juxtaposition of seemingly disparate materials: New Testament allusions, biblical echoes, historical fragments, local topography, quotations from the mother's speech, and his own response to parting from his mother, on the one hand, and encountering the new land, on the other. The construction of the poetic world accordingly involves multiple, competing frames of reference and perspectives. The text switches from the mother sacrificing herself to the son sacrificing his mother; from the narrative of the son's birth to that of the mother's own birth; from a folktale of a goat giving birth to a kid to a New Testament Gospel tale; from a symbolic reading of both the landscape and its name, whereby the *shefelah* ("plain" or "lowland") is made pregnant by the mountain, to the personal son-mother relation; from the ancient New Testament past to the more recent abandonment of the mother in Europe and to the

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20. Yeshurun employs the same principle in *Kapela Kolot* (1977), *Entrance Gate, Exit Gate* (1981); *Homograph* (1985); *Master of Rest* (1990); and *I Have Not Now* (1992).

present of recollection. Within the composition as a whole, each frame is plausible by itself. But fusing the temporally or spatially discontinuous elements into a new life cycle so that the beginning and end of a life or history coincide with those of the ballad defies not only conventional intelligibility but also our very concept of a fixed identity.[21]

This constant frame shift is especially disturbing in view of the title, the narrative frame, and the rhymed ballad stanzas—all of which intensify our generic expectations. The ballad form leads us to expect a narrative line, but the poem exhibits radical incoherence. Not surprisingly, a prominent critic commented: "I found everything in the poems, except poetry" (Zoritte 1995: 80). Nor is it surprising that the poem was left out of Yeshurun's first book, *Al Khochmot Drachim* (1942), which was published under his original name, Yechiel Perlmutter. It was later published in *Re'em* (1961) with seven additional stanzas,[22] which only complicate efforts at integration by adding three new broken frames: a surrealist image of a cloth (*begged*, a pun on betrayal) slipping off the hanger, alluding to the descent from the cross; a literal narrative of a bitch separated from her puppies while still breastfeeding them; and oblique allusions to Jesus ("Him"). Unlike the later "Poem on the Guilt," in which the odd spatiotemporal mixtures are motivated by the invocation of an absent addressee or by recollection or dream, no such realistic device unifies the breakages of this early piece. Yet, in opening the poem with a montage image—the coat slipping off and the bitch's milk dripping away—the revised version does invite us to account for the incongruity by appeal to the speaker's memory process.

Even though the method of montage is not yet perfected in the early ballad, it anticipates the pivotal collection, *The Syrian African Rift* (Yeshurun 1980).[23] In it, montage as breakage, which has since almost become Yeshurun's signature, is manifest on a broader scale. The Hebrew word *shever* in this title is much richer in meaning than the English *rift*; it stems from the verb "to break," and the noun can mean a break (breach, rupture, disaster) or a broken piece (fragment, scrap). Breakage is itself the experience that Yeshurun wanted to explore in every detour and return in his work. The juxtaposition of separate discourse events, introduced in the early poem as part of the ballad convention, now emerges as an operative principle on all the levels of Yeshurun's poetry: from its thematics, its choice of reality

21. See Tamar Yacobi's (1988) illuminating analysis of Pagis's shapings of time.
22. On the delay in publication and the poet's failure to explicate the poem to the editor, including his attempt to translate one stanza into Yiddish "in order to clarify for himself the poem's hermetic language," see Zoritte 1995: 84–85.
23. See, for instance, Perry's (1974) editorial reference to *The Syrian African Rift* as a powerful cultural and political paradigm.

details, to its composition, its syntax, and its use of quotation as a major
strategy. The frequency of the root *sh.v.r.* and its synonyms in *The Syrian Afri-
can Rift* reveal that, for Yeshurun, all images—a nest at the side of the road,
a row of houses, even the concept and materialization of poetry itself—are
encoded in this field that includes *destroying, chopping, scratching, cracked, cut,
slice, cleaving,* and *splitting.* The poetics of breakage we detected in "Poem on
the Guilt" emerges as his master narrative in a prose excerpt included in
the same collection:

> How does a man become Avot Yeshurun? The answer is—from the breakings.
> I broke my mother and my father, I broke their home for them. I broke their
> good-nights. I broke their holidays, their shabbat days. I broke their self-worth.
> I broke their chance to speak. I broke their language. I despised their Yiddish,
> and their holy tongue I took for everyday use. I made them despise their life. I
> left the partnership. And when the dead-end moment descended upon them, I
> left them inside the dead-end. So I am here. In the land. I began to hear a voice
> coming out of me, being alone in the hut, on my iron bed, a voice calling me in
> my home-name, and the voice from me to me. My voice coming out of the brain
> and spreading all over the body, and the flesh shivers, a long while longer, then
> I began looking for a way to escape and to change the name and the last name.
> In time I succeeded in Hebraicizing the names. It had the value of defense. In
> the presence of the voice, I awoke. I was afraid to fall asleep.   (1997: 124)

This iconoclastic narrative of personal and poetic initiation can be read as
a belated, metapoetic statement on the process of identity formation, with
a focus on the role of breakage.

The power of this account consists in placing negation at the basis of
identity and poetic vocation—"How does a man become Avot Yeshurun?"
The verb *sh.v.r.* is repeatedly yoked with objects (parents, nights of rest,
holidays) that resist its literal understanding. The passage rather invites the
reader to activate multiple senses of the word, plural signifiers of breakage
from which both the name and the identity, *Avot Yeshurun,* derive. Behind
the passage we thus hear the echoes of Hebrew idioms such as *shvirat kelim*
("breaking of the vessels," which, according to Jewish mysticism, denotes
an injury to the process of creation itself); *shvirat lev* (heartbreaks); *shvirat lu-
chot* (denial of sacred things); but also *lehashbir* (to bring to pains or to crisis;
i.e., to birth).

Sh.v.r. also triggers intertextual patterning with the evoked sacred texts
and the traditional archetypal scenes of breakage, featuring Abraham
(Bereshit Raba 38:13) and Moses (Exodus 32:19).[24] In those two stories, the

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24. For the repeated analogy drawn between their lives and Yeshurun's own poetic autobi-
ography, see, for example, *Collected Poems* (1995: 85, 161, 279–81) and *Homograph* (1985: 43).

breaking of an earlier order clearly presupposes the covenant between God and the individual, while in the text alluding to it, it goes with betrayal and becomes almost an end in itself.[25] Yet, rather than negating the message or the tone of the evoked texts, Yeshurun gives them a new role. In this respect, his reversal of breakage looks back to Isaiah 66:9 and its announcement of birth. Such uses of allusion differ from those modernists, who mobilized the biblical text in order to reinforce the Zionist narrative, and from others who deflated it to ironize the divine word. Yeshurun associates the story of Abraham's departure not with a Zionist message but with exile from home and with giving birth.[26] While Zionism absorbed religious meanings and relegated them to an historical context in the service of the collective, Yeshurun employed communal Judaic values to accord the individual a revolutionary historical meaning.

In the above passage, the speaker does so by means of a double move. He undergoes a process of denial, whereby he negates his own history and drains it of its most precious values. The devaluation of everything familiar culminates in abandonment and separation ("I left the partnership"). Additionally, the process of claiming his own identity ("So I am here") culminates in "Hebraicizing the names," thereby justifying his new poetic identity. Accordingly, the root *sh.v.r* (repeated seven times), the accumulation of negative semantic aspects ("broke," "despised," "parted"), the style that equalizes the breakages, and the rhythmic repetition that ritualizes them—all appear to reinforce the eradication of the poet's earlier identity while simultaneously creating a powerful self-constituting voice. Paradoxically, the disavowal of past identity comes not from annihilating the past but from recognizing its power. The poet's new voice is in fact a displacement of the old one: "a voice calling me in my *home-name*, and the voice *from me to me*") (1997: 124).

Hence, the notion of breakage shifts from the realm of identity ("How does a man become Avot Yeshurun?") to the realms of words ("I succeeded in Hebraicizing the names"), with a corresponding shift in the role accorded

25. For instance, in the first stanza of the early ballad discussed above, Yeshurun foregrounds the roots *b.g.d* (betray) and *m.a.l* (embezzle, misappropriate). Again, he has explicitly called the act of writing in a second language an act of betrayal: "Whosoever attempts to betray his mother tongue and writes in another language, particularly in poetry, will suffer vengeance until his death . . . and if when death approaches, he thinks that he has managed to escape such vengeance and has made for himself a building separate from the mother's language teats, he is wrong. Whosoever betrays, whoever abandons his mother tongue, woe unto him" (Yeshurun 1982-1983: 95).
26. In Yiddish and in folktales, exile from home is a major theme. See, for instance, "Lekh Lekha," the last chapter in *Tuvia the Milkman* by Shalom Aleikhem; and compare Yeshurun's analogy between Arab and Jewish exile in his own "Lekh Lekha" (1995: 161).

to the subject with regard to history. The changed name, as in the case of
Avra(ha)m to whom this narrative alludes, thus becomes the paradigmatic
expression of the creation of a new identity. The enlargement of identity
shows both in the plural form of the first name (*Avot*, "fathers") and in the
double meaning of the surname (*Yeshurun*, "will see," but also "Israel"). Vital
for institutionalizing the breakage as transgression and as appropriation of
the father(s), the new extended identity still keeps in touch with the being
from whom it severs itself ("a voice from me to me"). The exile is charged
anew with the rituals of home, while the new identity assumes a living cor-
respondence to the old.

According to Yeshurun, this identity rests on leaving home, abandoning
father and mother, rejecting Yiddish, and negating the Exile (*Golah*). His
name change sanctifies this separation. It reads as a double betrayal: the
break with the parents and the breakage of the mother tongue. The sev-
erance is embedded in the father's surname, *Perlmutter* (mother-of-pearl);
but also in the pseudoname *Avot* (fathers) which echoes, even in number,
tatelach (the Yiddish endearment for *father*). Yet these breaches are necessary
in order for the "I" to father itself as the surrogate for its father. The birth
of the Avot Yeshurun identity thus forms a poetic process that is mediated
by Yiddish (the exiled mother tongue) and by Hebrew (the foreign tongue,
which the speaker reconstitutes as a father-mother tongue). The process of
self-fathering traceable to "Poem on the Guilt" is the strongest gesture of
this poetics, a gesture that, as shown in the preceding section, is meant to
function as a repair but in fact once more triggers the original trauma as-
sociated with betrayal, hence provoking further guilt and remorse.

4. Breakage: Ideology and Language

This self-history was predicated on the notion that both poetry and identity
could be totally reinvented. Throughout his work, Yeshurun reassembles
the fragments of his shattered world, redefining his own history. In his
search for an adequate form by which to represent his past and its "voices"
from the perspective of his present, montage becomes not just the form but
the instrument and material of his poetry. From a theoretical perspective,
Yeshurun's master narrative, his use of montage to render breakage, accords
with the double requirement of any avant-garde: that a provocative verbal
action, mobilized with a view to achieve some ideological thrust, should
challenge traditional means of representation and explore new possibilities
(Poggioli 1962, 1971: 1–5; Bürger 1974, 1984: 15–27). Yeshurun's triple break-
age of history, identity, and language is the nearest example in Hebrew

poetry of the twin revolutionary projects of the avant-garde: the transfor-mation of the world through the transformation of language.

Yeshurun's three major breakages are also precisely those he considered to have been repressed by Israeli modernism. To appreciate them fully, we must, therefore, shift from Yeshurun's self-history to its historicization: How did his master narrative develop into a distinct ethos that opposed the priorities of Israeli modernism?[27] This difference can be described by reference to Georges Bataille's (1988) notion of *transgression*, the "inner ex-perience," in which an individual or a community, driven by profit, pro-ductivity and self-preservation, exceeds the bounds of rational, everyday activity. Transgression replaces these acts with the play of limits, which Ba-taille regards as the sole path to the discovery of the sacred in modern cul-ture. The process of identity formation through such free play is central to Yeshurun's poetics on each of the following axes of breakage and, corre-spondingly, montage.

4.1 The Historical Axis

Yeshurun crosses the limits between the past and the present, between the Exile and Israeli Tel Aviv. He refuses the Zionist premise that it is possible to recover the Jewish existence broken in the course of history and restore it to ancient wholeness. Moreover, he accepts neither the messianic-historical conception that assigns this *tikkun* (repair) to a future golden age nor the so-called Canaanite drive to reunite ancient Hebrew with modern Israeli culture, so erasing the intervening history of the Exile.[28] Instead of striving for a national cultural solution based on historical continuity, Yeshurun's poetry rehearses the traumatic events that broke this continuity.

Acting as a self-historiographer, the poet is himself continually tossed by the force of events from the past to the present and future: from "Jacob lifted his legs and went to the land of B'nei Kedem" to "Plump a door opens. A Soldier pulled a reservist outside" (1980: 33–35). At every moment, like Walter Benjamin's "Angel of History" (1978: 257–58), he situates himself

27. The dynamics of how the literary republic has been interpreted and partly determined by the dynamics of Israeli culture is an issue too complex to explore here. Correlations between modernist canonization and the collective spirit of the era are abundant. For the sociopoli-tics of such correlation, see, for instance, Almog 1997. In literary criticism, see Miron's (1987: 116) identification of Shlonsky and the modern poets of the prestatehood generation with the revolutionary Zionism of the third Aliyah, or Bartana's (1985) association of the statehood generation with contemporary westernizing nihilism. From another angle, the weight of con-sensus in Israeli culture can be illustrated by the simple fact that it was not until 1974 and the Yom Kippur War that Israeli society underwent a change of government.
28. On Yeshurun's "rift" as an act in history, see Calderon 1980: 11.

anew in the debris that piles up before him. The ruined backyard, which, according to Benjamin, the entire past inhabits, is transposed by Yeshurun into the present.

This passage between past and present is achieved predominantly by means of quotation montage. Quotation is his central tool for combining two or more discourse events: "that in which things were originally expressed (said, thought, experienced) by one subject (speaker, writer, reflector) and that in which they are cited by another" (Sternberg 1982: 107). In this context the "rift" that informs Yeshurun's history can be viewed as an extended quotation montage that fuses spatiotemporally and thematically at least two separate events or parts of events. The past event appears as an isolated moment or as a repeated situation, whereas the present speech act (a memory, prayer, blessing, or curse) serves as a frame that drives the uniqueness of that past experience home to us. The very fact that the past, especially the Holocaust, has not been assimilated by him, entails specific restrictions on the manner in which he chooses to represent it, including the nonnarrative nature of that representation. Replacing the unspeakable aspect of the past by its remnants is, therefore, central to Yeshurun's quoting strategy. In his metapoetic "The Collection" (1980: 3), for example, it is not violence and destruction but the traces of human beings, or the effects of violence that surround them, that Yeshurun's poet-collector silently witnesses: "A key without legs / A multitoothed nail," "leftover bones," and "lessened flesh from car lust." The apparently random accumulation of scraps of junk leads us to an "earlier world" by way of metonymic transformations.

Hence the intrusions, amputations, partings, and births acquire a privileged status in a version of history that foregrounds the surface flow of recollection and oblivion, rather than the continuity produced by narrative. A soldier in the synagogue on the eve of the Yom Kippur War, a break in an old stone wall in Tel Aviv, the poet himself undergoing surgery—each of these involves not the flow of time but its arrest.

4.2 The Axis of Self and Other

Yeshurun's subversive history and distinctive poetic situations are often structured as a process in which the speaker confronts an other whose existence he recognizes, across the difference necessary for acquiring one's own identity: "With me you've been as one, for opposites", confesses the mother in his 1937 ballad "Mary Magdalene and Her White Son" (1995: 9–13). Yeshurun destabilizes the subject by lending voice to precisely the other repressed in Israeli modernist poetry: the exilic Jew, the Israeli Arab, Jesus

and Mary, and (in his late work), the "Master of Death."[29] Poetically, his mother's voice and, by way of metonymic extension, the mother tongue (Yiddish), become the paradigmatic examples of these others.

In all these instances, transgression traces the line by which the poetic speaker either differentiates himself from or strongly identifies with the other. The instability of this line fits the Bataillian crossing of limits, which Michel Foucault (1998: 28) likens to "a flash of lightning." Ironically, the metonymic displacements by which the others and their language are invoked can only serve the poet(ry)'s self-preservation: the excessive play upon the words *breaking*, *betraying*, *tearing*, *plucking*, *leaving*, *abandoning*, and *longing* enables the poet to measure the distance from the other.

4.3 Language

The main agent in Yeshurun's (1997: 127–28) version of history as a series of breakages and limit crossings is language. "Language for a writer is like a toy for a child," he comments. "Language is in the hands of a creator—he doesn't feel it until he has broken it; and when he throws it down, he hears the voice of language, the language that is his." Contrary to Zionist and Israeli modernist resistance to polylingualism (especially to the fusion of canonical Hebrew poetry with Yiddish or Arabic), Yeshurun envisages a symbiotic relationship between Hebrew and Yiddish, one modeled on his own relationship to his mother's speech. This, in turn, becomes a model for all polylingualisms, all crossings between Hebrew and its speakers' mother tongues.

By analogy to identity building, the appropriation of "his own" language involves a double violation. First, this language represents the denial of his mother and her tongue. Second, by reenacting this breakage, he desecrates, and thereby defamiliarizes, the *loshn koydesh* (i.e., Hebrew seen from the viewpoint of the Diaspora Jew: the "holy tongue," a designation parallel to Latin as the language of liturgy and of the learned elite). Paradoxically, therefore, only by repeatedly breaking Hebrew can he compensate for his transgression and address the other voices who come back to us as peculiar speech. By extending the limits of the new language to include the old one, he strives to redeem the initial breakage. At the same time, his poetry constantly reminds us that every attempt to atone by playing with his mother tongue, employing it to desecrate pure Hebrew, will only reenact

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29. "If you say one word / I'll say another word" (Yeshurun 1997: 95). In "Master of Rest" (1990) challenging, yet half courting Death's presence, Yeshurun takes the dialogical logic to its extreme: "Will I my heart stop / or will I shut thee up?"

the original betrayal. Yeshurun liberates himself from this circular trap by the variety of ways in which his poetry materializes the word. This point leads us from an analysis of his stand on history, identity, and language to his poetics of translation.

5. Translating the Mother Tongue

How does the principle of translation come into the multiple play of limits delineated above? For Yeshurun, translation is determined by the intention of transgressing and making others transgress the bounds of identity. By analogy to his own identity, change, the very effects that seem to signal hermetic style and jeopardize self-preservation, become pointers to a dialogue between texts and cultural systems. Just as *Yechiel Perlmutter* is silently inscribed in *Avot Yeshurun*, so Hebrew becomes a vehicle for the evocation of other languages and an echo of the transformed mother's speech. As so often in Yeshurun, transformation implies rehearsing as well as changing. The "lost" mother tongue is therefore not altogether lost: animated as an "inset language" (Sternberg 1982), it can be combined with a new language, condensed, disseminated, covered up, transported.

So, while Yeshurun confesses to have broken his mother tongue, its role as a translated inset language within his poetry is vital to his construction of identity. The closer he comes to his differentiated identity—not least vis-à-vis the new Israeli society—the more does his choice of language for self-representation reflect his debt to his mother tongue. In his autobiographical narrative, I read (in accord with Freud) Yeshurun's renunciation of the mother and interiorization of the father; whereas, from the standpoint of his poetics—let me emphasize—he defies paternal authority and legitimizes his mother tongue. By emancipating the Yiddish that "sold hot doughnuts in Warsaw's streets" and spoke to him "in the voice of *Shekhinta de Galuta*" (divine presence in exile), he declares war on the new "father's" idiom.

Reenacting the initial transgression, he in fact reverses the denial of his mother tongue: "I broke their chance to speak . . . their holy tongue I took for everyday." In this essay I have advanced the thesis that, however urgent and all-compassing breakage may have been for Yeshurun, retrospectively it can be reinterpreted as a struggle for construction. The following mapping of his translation principles may clarify the logic that underlies the seemingly mad polyphony in his poetry.[30]

30. I adapt principles developed by Sternberg (1981) in his account of the main procedures of translational mimesis (Sternberg 1979).

5.1. Quoting the Original Discourse as It Was Uttered, or Is Supposed to Have Been Uttered, by the Speaker

This strategy is deployed throughout his work, from the earliest ballad (see section 3) to his very last cycle of poems, "Where-there-there it is" (1992: 76–86); it also coheres with the priority of realistic accuracy in his early phase (1952–1964). Here, scraps of phrases in Yiddish, Polish, and Arabic operate primarily as a kind of mimetic synecdoche to heighten our sense of the authentic. So, in his 1952 poem, "Pesach Al Kukhim" (1995: 81–85), the quotation of foreign words—*Brangines* (eggplants in Arabic) and *sardines* (sardines in Yiddish)—gives a sense of foreignness amidst local usage. A different effect is achieved in the use of the forgotten Arabic name for a Hebrew settlement, or the Polish appropriation of an Arabic name (*Zablavi/Zvlavi*, for the suburb Yad Eliyahu). In such cases, the inset elements forge a connection between the poet and his new reality.

Those bits of foreign speech may signify an inability, or perhaps a refusal, to assimilate (translate) the self or the other (whether Israeli Arab or Diaspora Jew) into a homogeneous perspective. This is especially true when the translations are foregrounded. Just as Yeshurun glosses the village-name, Migdalit (which the newcomer to Palestine probably knew as Magdaleine) by substituting its Hebrew form, Magdiel, so in later poems he often glosses in the opposite direction, alerting his Hebrew readers to the foreignness of familiar names such as Alterman or Berl Schlosser. Punning becomes a form of translation, implying hidden connections between Hebrew and Yiddish or Aramaic, suggesting by a character's name the situation that characterizes him. Despite, or because, of such glossing, Yeshurun's use of proper names reinforces their untranslatability.[31] For a native Israeli like myself, no amount of glossing will unify Gianikolo with Zamoshetz, or with Grabli or Um Guni. Readers of his generation may have been able to read in the foreign name—even without aids—the familiar signals of a home that once was but is no more, or the signals of a new home that is equally the home of another. In either case, a defamiliarizing effect arises. The name of the ship that brought him to Israel, the name of his mother's village in Poland, the word for an eggplant in Arabic—all appear as foreign entities when seen from Israel and the perspective of Hebrew.

In "Pesach Al Kukhim" (1952), "Ruach Baarbe" (1952), and later in *Thirty Pages of Avot Yeshurun* (1964), what appears to be accurate reproduction, purely mimetic, from a literal perspective, often involves a sharp breach of

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31. See Suleiman's (1996) fascinating analysis of the role of the foreign in the Holocaust memoirs of emigrants; see also Adorno's "On the Use of Foreign Words" (1992).

aesthetic conventions and cultural norms. In a satirical response to those who attacked "Pesach Al Kukhim," Yeshurun turns mimetic translation montage into perspectival account. Playing on *rekhush natush* (a Hebrew idiom meaning "abandoned property") and its near-homonym and Arabic mispronunciation, *khushmantush*, he uses the signifier with its divergent sounds to allude to conflicting attitudes on the issue of "abandoned property." *Rekhush natush*, left behind by Arabs in 1948, sounds to Eastern European ears like *kush mein tush* ("kiss my arse"). Likewise, *Palestin* and *Palestina Hochhoch*, *Palestin* and *Canaan* are close synonyms that challenge the notion of one homogeneous view of the land.[32] Notably, the formal elements of the poem orchestrate that perspectival dispersal. Hence, we hear new collocations and daring rhymes. *Fatima* echoes *Ima* (mother); *dabeshet* (hump) evokes *Besht* (an acronym formed from the initials of the Ba'al Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism); and *Aravi* (Arab) reminds us of *avi* (my father). The rhymes, made perceptible by the ballad stanza, juxtapose different local ethnic groups, thus offending propriety. What from one point of view is a quotation of the other (an Arab boy, mother, father, a rival poet, an ethnic minority) is from another a perspective "a montage of quotee and quoter" (Sternberg 1982), which draws attention to parallels and distinctions between self and other. Early readers, judging such tactics by the prosodic norms of Alterman and Shlonsky, considered such puns to be poor or unfeasible rhyming and were revolted, by the yoking together of incompatible cultural poles (Zoritte 1995: 159–64).

5.2. Superimposing on the Translated Quotation a Variety of Features Distinctive to the Source Language but Unacceptable in the Target Language

This feature of Yeshurun's work is noticeable in his almost literal translation of his mother's letters from Yiddish into Hebrew in *Thirty Pages of Avot Yeshurun* (1964) and operates more consciously and accessibly in *The Syrian African Rift* (1974) and *Chapel of Voices* (1977). In them, Yeshurun's attempts to translate his mother's literal speech to trigger in Hebrew the insolent joy of the foreign. A concrete example is the awkward phrase, "How much more there's still time when one can see you," which recurs in four different poems (Yeshurun 1995 [1964]: 198; 1997 [1977]: 152, 161; 1990: 128).

From the 1960s on, when his "failed" attempt to render his mother's speech in the target language became a conscious principle, Yeshurun allowed himself to displace prepositions and particles, to remove articles, to implant alien emphases by means of unnatural word order or by means

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32. Gluzman (1993) reads "Pesach Al Kukhim" as an initiation journey recounting the poet's maturation and his disillusion with Zionism.

of mispronunciations and orthographic idiosyncrasies. By transposing the mother's speech into Hebrew, Yeshurun radicalizes the tension between source language and target language.[33]

What is the role of this jarring effect? From the point of view of the reader, it indicates how much the text is anchored in real (although lost) speech and in a reverberating (but absent) world. In a foreign intonation and in the breakup of syntax and rhythm we are given the impression that we have heard the utterance before, in a different form or in another language.

For Yeshurun, the features of dialogue he uses to lend speech to the absent voice create a close equivalence to his losses: "My Hebrew is a human being, it's not a language" (1982–83: 98–99). But, paradoxically, in order to legitimize his mother's idiom, he marks it as language. Here, for example, by developing his unique vowel-less script, he calls attention to the dissonance between Yiddish vocality and Hebrew orthography. In this regard, his style is similar to Hebrew translations of familiar phrases from sacred texts.[34]

Theoretically, the relationship between the translated inset and its absent context (lost with the original utterance) clarifies the representational force of the quotations. First, their "represented object" (the mother's words, her nonverbal gestures, and the mother tongue) "is itself a subject with expressive features: verbal, sociocultural, thematic, aesthetic, informational, persuasive" (Sternberg 1982: 108). Second, the quotations from the mother, and her linguistic milieu, acquire the status of parts from a different whole that is imported into this poetry. Rather than being mere bits and pieces, or mere stutterings, the fragments stand for an other language.

Their relationship in turn illuminates the broader interplay among cultural contexts in his poetics. His destandardization of Hebrew, initially intended to accommodate the intonations and rhythms of its speakers and to revive the life contexts they left behind, evolves into an explicit dialogical principle in *The Syrian African Rift* and *Chapel of Voices*. Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981:) relative, Galileo-like language consciousness expands into a mad polyphony in which every language is a foreign language: "And when he casts it down—he hears the voice of a language, the language that is his. From the living, from the dead, from the inanimate it is gathered. From those who break up Polish, as a way to speak Hebrew, from those who drive Hungarian, German, Yiddish crazy" (Yeshurun 1997: 128).

He shows a striking consistency in maintaining the foreignness of the old

33. For the flexibility of Yiddish as a "storehouse of texts and expressions" and "a language of fusion" capable of drawing on the resources of its component languages, see Harshav 1986: 5–45.

34. See Perry's (1981) analysis of the reverse strategy in the autotranslations of *Mendele Mokher Sforim*.

context to the new. And, again, as in his mimetic strategies, what at first operates on the microlevel of language, develops into a compositional principle. The distance between oneself and the other (including, in his last two books, us as readers, as well as his own memory images, from which he is separated by his anticipated death) is crucial to the shaping of his world. What begins as a failure to assimilate the new culture is increasingly presented as a metahistory that evolves with his attempt to translate it. Like the translator in Benjamin 1978, both the poet and the reader must explore their differences in order to find what is translatable in the original and transportable to the new context. To exchange the present for the absent, he at first replaces the abandoned, exiled Jew with the banished other of Palestine. Significantly, in his last two books, his living and present addressees (i.e., we, as readers) stand for his dead and absent ones.

5.3. Adopting the Underlying Sociocultural Norms and Semantic Mappings of Reality That Are Associated with the Foreign Code

The adopted norms of the inset language ground his revolutionary challenge to the modernist model of Hebrew poetry. There are many linguistic features that lack equivalents in Hebrew and that Israeli modernists considered inappropriate for poetry. The various shifts from the norms of modernist Hebrew to his mother tongue form a system I call the *mother-code*.

1. Intimate address ("Grief I have, Mamma") and stylistic-emotive markers (e.g., repetitions, rhetorical questions, elisions, popular idioms) are very common in Yiddish and were almost unheard of in canonical Hebrew poetry before the 1960s.

2. Yeshurun also makes abundant use of political idiom ("A lot I'd give / to mediate between the lines"); food semantics ("compact pita," "vegetable soup," "our slices of bread and half an apple"); kitchen jargon ("the white plate," "the big fork"); clothing items ("a padded winter coat / the lining inside out"); body gestures and body language ("touches his weewee like plucking his soft," "as you bruise a testicle"). These verbal fields, all prevalent in Yiddish but somewhat alien to modernist priorities, can be viewed as a metonymic extension of the mother figure.

3. Yeshurun often draws attention to the surface structure of the poem, where features of pseudoaction and emotive markers are concatenated by mere phonetic associations: for example, *ha-guf hit-ga-gat hi-gat ga-a-gu-im*. Sound patterns do not point to a logical meaning relation among the constituents. The same is true for the chain of gutteral sounds, *akh* and *ekh*, that reinforce one another in "Poem on the

Guilt." Internal rhymes, off-rhymes, and local sound patterns form the poem's own physical texture, thereby also slipping toward gesture, toward the emotive plot the words fail to denote.

4. Yeshurun privileges performative and other speech-acts (such as the oath, lullaby, spell, prayer) common in the mother tongue. Starting in *The Syrian African Rift*, these usages organize the entire composition or parts of it. Remarkable examples are "Acriman" (1980: 97–102), which is based on the need to free the poet-rival (or the reader) from a spell, and "Master of Rest" (1990), in which speech operates to postpone the arrival of Death or to help the self come to terms with his power.

5. In Yeshurun's poetry, there are signifieds that do not have Hebrew signifiers. An example would be *Yahandes*, which he glosses (1995: 90, 94) as his mother's word for "Jewish conscience and for compassion in Polish Jews." *Yahandes* thus reads as a metonymic expression of the ethos from which he derived central features of his art.[35]

These mutually reinforcing norms are at such odds with the system of modernist Hebrew poetry that their cumulative effect recalls what information theory might designate "noise." Those "interferences" and "obstacles to communication" change statuses and roles within a new system that interacts with the mother language.

5.4. Stylized Mimesis of Form

There is a distinction to be made between translation montage that looks like quoted raw material—a reproduction almost unchanged by the poet—and the stylized form that not only bestows new meaning on inserted material but also employs that material in reshaping the world. The attempt to evolve a form out of mimetic translation starts with the fictive letters to his relatives in *Thirty Pages of Avot Yeshurun*. However, from the 1970s onward, montage as the mimesis of form operates in a more conscious and readable way. In *The Syrian African Rift* (1980), Yeshurun began to define the narrative of breakage and to develop his own version of historiography as reported quotations. In 1978 he established a paradigm of assemblage (*Chapel of Voices*), and one of his last poems ("The House") revolves around actual

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35. This is an excellent example of what Bakhtin (1981: 270–75) describes as heteroglossia ("different speech-ness"), which denotes the general conflict between the official and unofficial discourses within the same national language as well as its specific manifestations on the microlinguistic scale. Both these senses apply to "Pesach Al Kukhim." Robert Alter (1994: 4–5) describes polyglot pressures on modern Hebrew as an extreme case of heteroglossia.

repair work. In all these instances, his world(s) emerges from a metonymic or related variants of translation montage.

Does this all-pervasiveness of the principle of translation in his work—from local mimesis, through interaction of features and codes to the shaping of the world—leave room for the poetic subject? Recall his stunning neologisms, foreign phrases, mixed registers; his wild leaps from one language to another, his realistic references to the physicality of the body—all intolerable to contemporary modernists. Observe also, his switching-off of a voice that has largely expressed itself to quote another voice, text, or time; and his recurrent use of dreams, anecdotes, and allusions to photographs and diary entries. It would seem that his translational motive so challenges the most fundamental lyric conventions that the poetic subject itself is in danger of being effaced.

But quite the opposite occurs: transgression enacts the discovery of the self by what it excludes. It is precisely translation montage that reassembles the fragmented self. In the constant changing voices across the boundaries of language, the reader is carried to the limit of his own identity, so as both to recognize the other and to differentiate himself. The disruptions, elisions, silences, phonetic associations, and opacities that mark his poetry again acquire a new role. Far from changing from readable to "noise," they amount to the "pulsational pressure" Kristeva (1984 [1974]) associates with the semiotic. Kristeva's theory of the subject in relation to French avant-garde male writers, her sense of the text as a "mosaic of quotations" and an enactment of transgressions, her view of verbal and poetic disruptions as a return of the body to language—all offer a dynamic concept of subjectivity and language that can help us contextualize Yeshurun's strategies of translation as an alternative to contemporary modernism.

Finally, the relation between his Hebrew poetry and the quoted mother speech is not just one of signifier and signified, or of image and object. First, the mother tongue, by virtue of its perceptible and dominant role as an inset language, indicates the gaps as well as the junctions that enable Hebrew to converse with its own foreignness. Second, it legitimizes the Yiddish speech that "sold hot doughnuts in Warsaw's streets." Third, it challenges the authority of Hebrew as the central source of imagery and allusions that preserved the continuity of canonical Hebrew poetry throughout its long history and wide geographical dispersal.[36] This continuity, which Yeshurun contests, was arduously preserved by poets as diverse as Alterman, Shlonsky, Amichai, Zach, and even Uri Zvi Grinberg, the poet Yeshurun emu-

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36. In this controversial sense, the real father of Yeshurun in modern Hebrew literature is *Mendele Mokher Sforim* (cf. Perry 1981). See also Even-Zohar 1986.

lated in his orchestration of resonances from the language of the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, and the Hasidic masters.

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