

The Love of a Dog: Melancholia in David Vogel's *Before the Dark Gate*

NOAM PINES

The biography of David Vogel reflects a life of marginal existence, in part deliberately pursued, and in part a result of unfortunate circumstances. Born in 1891 in Satanov, Russia, he was orphaned at a young age and began a life of wandering at the age of thirteen. In 1910 he arrived in Vilna, but left in 1912 after being arrested for avoiding the army. He eventually settled in Vienna, but at the outbreak of World War I was arrested as a Russian enemy alien. A famished pauper, Vogel was actually glad to be arrested, because that meant he would not have to worry about food for as long as he was in prison.¹ Upon his release in 1916, he settled in Vienna and got married, but contracted tuberculosis from his wife. In 1923 he invested money in the publication of the only volume of poetry that would be released during his life, *Before the Dark Gate*.

The publication was a complete financial failure and was rejected by prominent Hebrew poets and critics. The hostility of the Hebrew literary establishment was incurred mainly due to the individualistic nature of Vogel's poetry and to his use of Hebrew as a "socially detached language," adapted to "an internal monologue by a subtle, drifting intellectual," as Benjamin Harshav noted.² Like his literary predecessors Uri Nissan Gnessin and Avraham Ben-Yitzhak, Vogel represented a trend in modern Hebrew literature that entailed a commitment to Jewish identity through the use of Hebrew, while at the same time rejecting any national aspirations or overarching historical narratives and religious themes. Vogel's poetry was part of what Robert Alter called "an authentically European Hebrew fiction"³ that shared thematic and stylistic tendencies

¹ Aharon Komem, *Woe and Wonder: David Vogel's Poetry and Fiction* (Hebrew; Haifa: Haifa University Press, 2001) 13.

² Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 64.

³ Robert Alter, *Invention of Hebrew Prose: Modern Fiction and the Language of Realism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988) 71.

with other Central European modernists such as Georg Trakl and Else Lasker-Schüler.

In contrast to prominent Hebrew writers of his generation, such as Abraham Shlonsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg and S. Y. Agnon, for Vogel the decision to write in Hebrew had nothing to do with a commitment to a Zionist ideology or to a linguistic-national revival.⁴ His use of Hebrew was not an embodiment of a nationalistic ideal, but a profound expression of *telishut*, the characteristic homelessness associated with the figure of the diasporic Jew. The term *telishut*, as Eyal Chowers pointed out, “could be translated as disconnectedness and being apart. Literally, it means being separated from something, as when a leaf is detached from a tree. *Telishut* is the Hebrew word most resembling homelessness, but it does not evoke directly the idea of home but rather being apart, alone, disconnected, nonembedded; it is more all-engulfing than homelessness.”⁵ *Telishut* was the outcome of failed assimilation, ascribed to individuals who could not find a place for themselves in either Jewish or Gentile societies. It implied not only a loss of a native land, but also a lack of a clear sense of national and individual identity.

Vogel’s life was emblematic of such a state of *telishut*. After spending some years in Vienna, he divorced and moved to Paris in 1925, remarried, and in 1929 he emigrated to Palestine. However, he left a year later, bitterly disappointed. After traveling to Warsaw, Vienna and Berlin, he eventually returned to Paris in 1932, where he lived until the outbreak of the Second World War. He was then incarcerated in French detention camps, this time as an Austrian enemy national. After the capitulation of France in 1941, Vogel was released and lived in Hauteville near Lyons. There he was arrested by the Nazis in February 1944 and shortly thereafter died in Auschwitz. Although he died in obscurity, Vogel was later discovered by new generations of Hebrew writers, who hailed him as an important pioneer of Hebrew literary modernism. Over the last fifty years a considerable body of critical literature has dealt with various aspects of Vogel’s poetry and fiction, with his uneasy relationship with Zionism and modernism, and with his unique use of the Hebrew language. He is now widely recognized as one of the most important Hebrew writers in the 20th century.

⁴ As Chana Kronfeld observed, “for Vogel ... the very decision to become a Hebrew poet was an act of self-marginalization and self-modernization.” See *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 160–161.

⁵ Eyal Chowers, *Political Philosophy of Zionism: Trading Jewish Words for a Hebraic Land* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 150.

In this essay I address a theme in Vogel's poetry that has often surfaced in critical readings of his work, yet has never been sufficiently treated as a poetic phenomenon in its own right. Any reader of Vogel's work, especially his collection of poems *Before the Dark Gate*, will note its subtle mood of melancholia. Nevertheless, it is hard to point to moments in which the melancholic state crystallizes into a concrete image in the poems. To some extent, it can be argued that the melancholic atmosphere in *Before the Dark Gate* is evident in the frequent recurrence of the color black and the repeated references to darkness and night. However, such an approach would not only confine the analysis of melancholia to a narrow impressionism, but also disregard the correspondence between Vogel's figurative language and the wider cultural context from which it emerged. Given the importance of melancholia in Vogel's work, any discussion of his poetry as an expression of "an authentically European Hebrew" literature⁶ would remain incomplete without reference to a long-standing preoccupation with melancholia in Western culture – a constellation to which Vogel responds in his own work. The analysis of melancholia in *Before the Dark Gate* will show how, by appropriating this quintessentially European legacy, Vogel was able to resist the cultural appeal of Zionism without succumbing to the existential indeterminacy inherent in a state of *telishut*.

I consider the manifestations of melancholia in *Before the Dark Gate* as a cluster of concrete terms that include "twilight" (*dimdumim*), "autumn" (*stav*), "wandering" (*nedudim*) and a "bent back" (*shacho'ach*). The connection between these terms and melancholia may not be immediately evident to the reader, as they are inconspicuously scattered throughout the poems. It is only in the understudied and often-neglected poem 44 (and to some extent also in poem 43, where these terms coincide in the figure of a dog) that the link to a state of melancholia becomes apparent:

My good dog,
I kneel before the splendor of your love!
Let me – and I will lean my weary head
On your back
And let out a great and bitter cry – – –

⁶ Here I paraphrase Alter's reference to Vogel's writings as representative of an "authentically European Hebrew fiction," as "fiction" might not be understood as including poetry. Undoubtedly, the "European" trend in Hebrew literature encompassed both prose and poetry, as is evident not only in Vogel's literary production, but also in the works of his literary predecessors Gnessin and Ben-Yitshak, who produced in both literary forms. I employ "literature" as a term that nonambiguously includes both prose and poetry.

And then we shall rise,
 Silently rise,
 And walk with bent backs
 And lowered heads,
 We shall wander day and night,
 Until we reach a lonely,
 Grey stone,
 Where we shall lay our heads
 And perish, souls entwined.⁷

The reference to the dog in this poem is by no means arbitrary or accidental. Rather, it encapsulates a particular position regarding the scope and mission of Jewish literature, and Hebrew poetry in particular. It follows a certain practice, repeatedly employed in Jewish literature over the last 150 years, to represent the pitiful condition of the diasporic Jew with the figure of a lowly dog. One of the earliest depictions of the Jew as a dog in modern Jewish literature occurs in Heinrich Heine's poem "Prinzessin Sabbat" (Princess Sabbath) (1851), in which a cursed prince named Israel is portrayed as "a dog with doggish thoughts" who piddles through "life's excrement and rubbish."⁸ This figure inspired later Jewish writers such as Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (better known by his pseudonym Mendele the Book Peddler), who in 1865 wrote a short story about Shmulik the Ragman who lived as a "dog" during the week and on the Sabbath was transformed into a "prince."⁹ Hayim Nachman Bialik also invoked the figure of the Jewish dog in his poem "Igeret Ktana" (A Short Letter) (1893), in which the poetic addresser, an exilic Jew writing to his brother in Zion, pejoratively portrays himself as "a dog in a lost land;/ driven away with sticks, feeding on crumbs,/ forsaken and forgotten from heart and God."¹⁰ The figure of the Jewish dog continued to make its appearance in literature in the years leading to the foundation of the State of Israel and thereafter, most notably in S. Y. Agnon's 1945 novel *Kitmol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*), where the fate of a street dog named Balak is tied to the life of Yitshak Kumer, an immigrant to pre-statehood Palestine.

⁷ David Vogel, *Poems* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1998) 59. All translations from this edition are mine except where noted.

⁸ Heinrich Heine, "Prinzessin Sabbat" in *Complete Poems of Heinrich Heine: A Modern English Version*, trans. Hal Draper (Cambridge: Suhrkamp, 1982) 651. Translation modified.

⁹ Mendele Moykher Sforim, *Dos Vinshfingerl* (Kiev: Kooperativer Verlag, 1927) 112–113.

¹⁰ Hayim Nachman Bialik, *Collected Poems* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1976) 39.

When read against this legacy of poetic dogs in modern Jewish literature, Vogel's poem 44 appears as an attempt to stake out a particular set of national and cultural affiliations. Above all, the speaker's unambiguous identification with the dog is not only sharply contrasted with Bialik's Zionist rejection of diasporic Jewish mentality, but even seems to be significantly less equivocal than the distant allegorical perspective adopted by Heine and Abramovitsh in their depictions of Jewish dogs. In other words, Vogel appears to offer in his poem a deliberate affirmation of diasporic life, underscored by the characteristic wandering (*nedudim*) of the poet and his dog. This wandering does not culminate in an arrival to a promised land, or even in a temporary respite from a doggish existence, but in a death that possesses a distinct figurative quality. For how should the reader interpret the emblematic death of the poet and his dog on a lonely, grey stone? This death is allegorical insofar as it points to a figurative meaning that remains undisclosed.¹¹ It is precisely this unresolved death that serves here as a point of departure for a consideration of melancholia in Vogel's *Before the Dark Gate*.

The obscure death of the poet and his dog in Vogel's poem is not without close parallels in contemporaneous Jewish literature. One notable example with which Vogel was undoubtedly familiar is Bialik's famous pogrom poem "Be'ir Haharegah" [In the City of Killings] (1903), in which the protagonist stumbles upon a gruesome scene of carnage:

And you will flee and come upon a yard with a mound in it –
 Upon this mound two were decapitated: a Jew and his dog.
 A single axe decapitated both, and onto a single rubbish heap they were
 thrown,
 And in their mingled blood pigs shall rummage and roll;¹²

The degrading death to which the Jew and his dog are subjected in Bialik's poem is admittedly the result of God's failure to render the deaths of the pogrom victims meaningful. The victims' death is not a redeeming martyrdom in which the sins of the people are absolved, but rather an outcome of brutal, arbitrary circumstance. As God himself confesses in the poem:

¹¹ In these terms the allegorical emblem may be distinguished from the symbol. Whereas the symbol would imply an intuitive clarity and unity of meaning, the allegorical emblem is burdened by an inherent, unresolvable ambiguity.

¹² Bialik, *Collected Poems*, 350–1.

forgive me, you wretched of the earth, your God is as poor as you,
 poor is He in your life and all the more so in your death
 ... and I grieve for you, my children, I pity you:
 your dead have died in vain, and neither I nor you
 know why you died and for whom and wherefore you died,
 and your deaths are as pointless as your lives.¹³

Here, too, the death of the pogrom victims is invested with a figurative quality that encapsulates a fundamental undisclosedness of meaning. Stripped from an overarching symbolic meaning, it appears as a “bare death,” a death emblematic of the natural history of the individual and the collective to which he belongs.

For Walter Benjamin this mode of death is “the form in which man’s subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual.”¹⁴ To die like a dog, then, is at bottom a consignment to nature, as the undisclosedness of meaning at the moment of death indicates the failure of the human subject to assert its sovereignty. This death debases human existence. Like a helpless animal, a human being is led to slaughter and subjected to obscure processes that lie beyond his understanding and control.

In affirming and deliberately choosing such a “diasporic” death, the speaker in Vogel’s poem 44 has renounced any claim for symbolic agency and subjective sovereignty, relinquishing himself to unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances. And just as his death is exposed in its natural historical dimensions against an obscure totality, so does the stone on which the poet and his dog perish appear as an enigmatic cipher that signals the poet’s subjection to fate. The stone, the final station in the wanderings of the poet and his dog, is invested with figurative meaning, yet it is not a locus of personal or national significance, but a fragment that remains unassimilated into a totalizing historical, philosophical or religious scheme.

The challenge that Vogel’s poem poses for the critical reader is how to liberate this fragment from its obscurity without subjecting it to such totalizing schemes. As we will see, prominent scholars of Hebrew literature such as Alter and Kronfeld have sublated Vogel’s poetic fragments to a general literary-historical trajectory precisely in an attempt to compensate for their unresolved ambiguity. By contrast, the interpretative strategy I employ in this essay is to locate the elusive emblem in relation

¹³ Bialik, *Collected Poems*, 355–6.

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1998) 166.

to an array of poetic terms that appear along with it in the poem: the dog, the wandering, the bent back and the lowered head, and the “great and bitter cry.” These terms are not arbitrarily invoked, but neither are they causally, conceptually or temporally linked. Far from being meaningless, they impose their obscure meaning upon the reader so that the poem remains disturbingly unresolved. The task of critical reading consists in retrieving the original context in which these disparate elements acquire their meaning as a group. That context is melancholia.

Melancholia is invoked in Vogel’s poem through a set of correlations whose origins date back to pre-modern cosmologies. These correlations are not directly related to the history of Judaism or the emergence of Zionism. Instead, their occurrence in poem 44 indicates precisely the appropriation of a cultural legacy that renders Vogel’s writings representative of “an authentically European Hebrew literature.” The constellation of allegorical terms found in the poem is part of an extensive chain of associations traditionally related to melancholia that incorporated elements from astrology, theology, medicine, philosophy and Greek myth. In pre-modern forms of knowledge, melancholia was associated with diverse phenomena, such as autumn, the color black, the earth, the left ear, the planet Saturn, epilepsy, lustfulness, sloth and so on. With the rise of modern psychology, the rich world of associations relating to melancholia was not lost, but remained confined to esoteric doctrines, to the plastic arts and to literature, where it was preserved as a relic or a “dead object” – a once-meaningful form that has been hollowed out – a form that the modern reader encounters a sort of “hieroglyph.” Such a process of “hieroglyphization” is also at work in Vogel’s poem. The dog, the stone, the tendency to wander and the bent back are all phenomena traditionally associated with melancholia. By invoking melancholia without naming it, Vogel’s poem confronts the reader with a cluster of signs that both demand and resist interpretation – hence the disturbing, unresolved quality of the poem.

When viewed from within the longstanding European tradition that dealt with melancholia, the allegorical emblems that populate Vogel’s poem point to the dark, earthbound aspects of the melancholy complexion. These aspects are associated with the characterization of melancholy as a medical syndrome resulting from an excess of black bile. This condition was distinguished in Hippocratic writings as “prolonged fear or depression,” whose manifestations were “aversion to food, despondency, sleeplessness, irritability, restlessness.”¹⁵ The adverse effects of mel-

¹⁵ Hippocrates, *Humors*, trans. W. H. S. Jones in *Hippocrates, Vol. 4* (Cambridge:

ancholy were not limited to bodily symptoms, but also had significant spiritual and theological implications. In medieval Christian tradition melancholia was associated with one of the seven deadly sins, *acedia*, commonly known as the sin of “sloth.” Originally, *acedia* was not identified with laziness, but with the qualities of sleep that signaled the weakening of one’s rational control that implied “the neglect on the part of the rational soul of the virtues and of the knowledge of God.”¹⁶ *Acedia* was essentially understood as “sadness with regard to the essential spiritual good of man, that is, to the particular spiritual dignity that had been conferred on him by God.”¹⁷ It thus implied a collapse into the self, a fall into self-absorption in which the human being turned his back on God and the cosmic order so as to indulge in sinful contemplation of earthly goods. In this depraved state, the fundamental equivalence between human and animal existence came to be revealed. As Walter Benjamin noted, melancholia is “the most genuinely creaturely of the contemplative impulses, and it has always been noticed that its power need be no less in the gaze of a dog than in the attitude of a pensive genius.”¹⁸ Consequently, the dog was a popular emblem of melancholia and was used to represent the melancholic attachment to earthly things in Renaissance and Baroque art.¹⁹

The stone, too, was an emblem that played an important role in representing the telluric aspects of melancholia. Since Greek antiquity, black bile has been associated with the qualities of coldness and dryness, with the autumn and (in accordance with a Pythagorean tradition) with the element of earth. Hence the inherent link between a state of melancholia and the coldness of stone as a dry, inert mass. Benjamin did not fail to observe this link between melancholia and the stone, commenting that “in the inert mass there is a reference to the genuinely theological conception of the melancholic, which is to be found in one of the seven deadly sins. This is *acedia*, dullness of the heart, or sloth.”²⁰ In these

Harvard University Press, 1931) 185; Hippocrates, *Epidemics III*, trans. W. H. S. Jones in *Hippocrates, Vol. 1* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923) 263. See also Stanley Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression: From Hippocratic Times to Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 30.

¹⁶ See Siegfried Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967) 17.

¹⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993) 5.

¹⁸ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 146.

¹⁹ Raymond Klibansky et al., *Saturn and Melancholy* (New York: Basic Books, 1964) 322–323.

²⁰ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 155.

terms, the stone represents the subjection of the melancholic to abject matter and to earthly influences, which is entirely deaf “to the voice of revelation”²¹ and acknowledges no higher law than the world of objects.

The figures of the lowly dog and the inert stone ultimately converge in a third figure closely associated with the negative effects of melancholia, namely, the so-called “posture of melancholy” which “bent the back forward, drew the gaze earthward.”²² This posture was traditionally represented by a figure that desolately let its gaze fall to the ground while supporting its drooping head with its hand.²³ In the poems of *Before the Dark Gate*, the downward gaze of the melancholic appears as a symptomatic cringe – the bent back – that recalls not only a confinement to earthbound existence but also the “angle of inclination of [man’s] creatureliness”²⁴ (as Paul Celan termed it) – that is, the fundamental equivalence between a state of humanity and a state of animality, emblemized by the figure of a lowly dog. This constellation is evident in a number of poems in which the characteristic bent back (*shachoach*) makes its appearance. Aside from the “bent backs” and “lowered heads” with which the poet and his dog “wander day and night” in poem 44, we encounter this same posture with the “bent, weary wandering-shadow” that carries the “harvest” of the speaker’s “longing” in poem 21,²⁵ with the “ancient tree/[that] still weighs heavy on its tombstone,/bent” in poem 38;²⁶ and when the poet stands “bent by the window/doleful” in the “twilight hour,/on grey autumn mists” as his youth departs in poem 39.²⁷ Most tellingly, however, the bent back appears in the eponymous poem 64, which makes a direct allusion to poem 44: “Through days and nights/We all walk with bent backs,/Secretly,/Until we arrive/At the great, dark gate.”²⁸

The peculiar fate of the poet and his dog, condemned to “wander day and night” with “bent backs” until death, is ultimately revealed as the common lot of all humanity. Curiously, what sets the poet apart from the rest is not his sublime death or tragic life, but the conscious acceptance

²¹ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 152.

²² Eric Santner, *On Creatively Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) 43.

²³ This posture, as Klibansky et al. point out, dates back to ancient Egyptian and Greek art. See *Saturn and Melancholy*, 286.

²⁴ Paul Celan, “The Meridian,” in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001) 409 (trans. modified).

²⁵ Vogel, *Poems*, 36.

²⁶ Vogel, *Poems*, 53.

²⁷ Vogel, *Poems*, 54.

²⁸ Vogel, *Poems*, 80.

of a dog's fate. Others, like Bialik, suffer a similar fate, but they pretend to be superior. Only in secret do they submit to their congenital melancholy and helplessness, and to the inevitable obscurity of their death.

In these terms we can begin to sketch the general trajectory of melancholia in *Before the Dark Gate*, both as a poetic constellation and as an implicit critique of Zionist mentality. In the convergence of poetic and national categories, melancholia unfolds as an intricate net of correlations that permeate Vogel's poetry. Far from a rigid poetic form associated with a definite set of figures, melancholia appears as a cluster of terms, disseminated as fragments throughout the poems of *Before the Dark Gate*. Each fragment is embedded in other poetic contexts, incorporating them into the constellation of melancholia in an ever-expanding centrifugal movement. This movement of dissemination issues from poem 44, which serves as a refined poetic core in which the essential allegorical terms associated with melancholia coincide.

Traces of this dissemination are most clearly evident in a few poems adjacent to poem 44. The closest parallel to the figure of the wandering poet and his dog is the "ancient tree" (*ilan atik*) that appears in poems 38 and 47, which is clearly marked, too, by a creaturely "angle of inclination." In poem 38 the figure of the ancient tree is allegorically contrasted with the flowing water of the stream: "Look, / All the waters of the stream / Rushed to flow into the distances, / But an ancient tree / Still weighs heavy on its tombstone, / Bent."²⁹ The melancholic posture of the ancient tree suggests that the cause of its predicament is not a tragic persistence of life over death, but an earthbound inertia and stasis in the face of inevitable transience. Weighing "heavy on its tombstone," the tree is burdened by the inability to die, figured spatially in the poem as rootedness to the ground that prevents the tree from "flowing into the distances." In this respect, the tree differs from the itinerant poet-dog who finds no rest until he dies. Indeed, the next stanza establishes a direct analogy between the flowing water and the many wanderers who come and bask in the tree's shade: "Many summers / Perished sadly in crimson silence, / Thousands of wanderers camped quietly / In the darkness of its shades."³⁰

In its rootedness to the earth, the tree remains witness to the perpetual cycles of natural history in which life ebbs away in silence, in

²⁹ Vogel, *Poems*, 53.

³⁰ Vogel, *Poems*, 53.

its undisclosedness of meaning. But such vegetative rootedness by no means implies a superior form of life or a kind of terrestrial immortality. Instead, it is the hallmark of an inert or dim presence associated with the lower strata of the creaturely. Thus, even though the dog and the poet may be considered inferior, degenerate creatures by normal “human” standards, they are nevertheless free to roam about as they please and eventually perish. This is precisely the kind of freedom that is denied the ancient tree and accounts for its melancholy “angle of inclination.”

The relationship between the wanderer and the ancient tree is further elaborated in poem 47, which is narrated from the perspective of the wanderer who approaches the tree in the twilight hour, exposed and vulnerable:

My bread has run out, my legs are bruised,
How will my soul calm
In the twilight?

Alone I will approach the thicket,
Against an ancient tree
I will lean –
And my interior is dark.

On the heights of evening
Winds will sail
And ruffle our crests.

Into the night
I will silently protrude
And I shall be forest and night.

Thus I will stand
Years of tranquility –
And my interior is dark.³¹

The encounter between the wanderer and the ancient tree is marked by the same distinctive gesture that characterizes the encounter with the dog in poem 44. In both poems the point of contact takes place when the poet “leans” his head on the dog and against the tree. This act of leaning indicates an encounter with an otherness that extends beyond mere empathy. It may be characterized, following Beatrice Hanssen, as “a radical openness to the creaturely – that is, an alterity that surpassed the confines of the merely human.”³² Whereas the existence of the dog

³¹ Vogel, *Poems*, 63.

³² Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) 6.

was marked in poem 44 by ceaseless wandering until the point of death, the existence of the tree is described in poem 47 as an entrenchment in oblivion of the self: “thus I will stand/years of tranquility – /and my interior is dark.” This language of estrangement from the self is an important poetic device in Vogel’s writings, and it features prominently in his diaries, most strikingly, perhaps, with the statement: “I don’t know myself. Vogel has lost Vogel.”³³ Robert Alter has argued that these terms in which “the self is not whole, or one, or reliably continuous” render Vogel’s work essentially modernist in character.³⁴ While that may be true, when viewed from the melancholic constellation, Vogel’s language of estrangement appears first and foremost as an attempt to break down the boundaries that separate human from non-human existence. This language that emphasizes undisclosedness of meaning (“my interior is dark”) is an articulation of the silenced language of nature. It is the seal of a melancholic consignment to nature.

In light of this analysis of melancholia, the occurrence of a vocabulary of self-estrangement in Vogel’s poems can be explained in terms of the self-absorption that characterizes *acedia*. Traditionally, *acedia* implied a fall into self-estrangement in which man renounced his divine legacy and acknowledged no higher law than the world of earthly things, and in this depraved state he demonstrated his uncanny affinity with lowly animals. But in a modern context the self-estrangement characteristic of *acedia* is dislodged from its traditional theological moorings and is no longer exclusively associated with sin against the divine order. Instead, it emerges as the primary channel of communication between human and earthly nature. In other words, it is precisely at moments in which “the self is not whole, or one, or reliably continuous” that language assumes a poetic function in which the boundaries of the human experience are overcome in order to give voice to mute nature. Paradoxically, in this poetic capacity the melancholic language of self-estrangement becomes both revelatory and obfuscatory. It is revelatory insofar as it represents a range of experiences that extend beyond the scope of the merely human. At the same time, however, it is also inherently opaque because in its “natural” capacity, it communicates the constitutive undisclosedness of meaning universally shared by all creatures.

As Hanssen noted in her study of Walter Benjamin, such remarkable openness to abject forms of animality and vegetative existence

³³ David Vogel, *Tahanot Kavot: Stories; Diary* (Hebrew; Israel: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1990) 314.

³⁴ Robert Alter, “Fogel and the Forging of a Hebrew Self,” *Prooftexts* 13 (1993) 7.

implies an ethical call for “an all-inclusive turn toward nature.”³⁵ But this “nature” is not to be conceived as a metaphysical or cosmic totality. Rather, it is the realm of the earthly insofar as it designates what traditionally falls outside the boundaries of the human subject, relating to false, accidental or perverted notions, environmental captivity or unconscious impulses. The openness to earthly forms of life demonstrated in poems 44 and 47 is similar to the “attentiveness” (*Aufmerksamkeit*) to the creaturely that Benjamin identified in the writings of Franz Kafka.³⁶ When considered in these terms, the distinct contribution of Vogel’s poems lies in establishing an intrinsic link between attentiveness to the creaturely and the melancholic disposition. In Vogel’s poems melancholic self-estrangement leads to a fundamental form of poetic and ethical responsibility toward all living beings.

The poetic consequences of the melancholic turn toward earthly nature are elaborated in a single, telling stanza in poem 47: “Into the night/I will silently protrude/and I shall be forest and night.” The first two lines suggest attentiveness to the creaturely, where the shared experience of poet and tree merge into a single poetic voice. But in the third line the speaker suddenly turns to reflect back on himself, precisely at the point of extreme self-estrangement. At this point the natural objects invoked – “forest” and “night” – become implicated in a form of subjectivity as emblems of a fundamental undisclosedness of meaning. Far from manifestations of “pure,” self-sufficient nature, Vogel’s “forest” and “night” are earthly, allegorical figures: the forest in which one cannot find one’s way, and the night through which one cannot see. Here the estranged poetic subjectivity, in its turn toward the earthly and the creaturely, encounters itself as allegorical nature.

One of the most elaborate manifestations of this allegorical nature takes place in poem 40, widely considered as one of Vogel’s seminal poems:

On autumn nights
There falls in the forests an unseen leaf
And lies still to the earth.

In the streams
The fish will jump from the water
And an echo of a moist thump
Will answer in the darkness.

³⁵ Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin’s Other History*, 104.

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968) 134.

In the black distance
Gallops are sown of unseen horses
That are melting away.

All these
The tired wanderer will hear
And a quiver will pass through his flesh.³⁷

The nature scenes depicted in the first three stanzas are products of the allegorical imagination, in the sense that they present, as Chana Kronfeld observed, “the most subjective, imperceptible internal qualities as if they were objective sense data.”³⁸ But Kronfeld does not explain what precisely is at stake in those “subjective, imperceptible internal qualities.” Instead, she maps these enigmatic scenes onto a literary-historical trajectory that exemplifies the passage from impressionism to expressionism in modern poetry. In this sense, she shares with Alter the same reductive approach to the poetic fragment, the fragment that refuses to assimilate into an overarching literary or historical scheme. When Alter identifies Vogel’s recalcitrant language of self-estrangement as a characteristic trait of modernist literature, he too avoids confronting the inherent obscurity of the fragment. By subjecting these fragments to a totalizing historical interpretation, both scholars offer a false compensation for their unresolved obscurity, consequently leaving them unredeemed.

By approaching the nature scenes in poem 40 as emblems of melancholic self-reflection, rather than as stylistic markers on a historical trajectory, my reading addresses these scenes not as discrete fragments, but in their essential interconnectedness. Indeed, the reference to melancholia is already implied in the first line of the poem, “on autumn nights,” which sets the tone for subsequent depictions of allegorical nature. By now we are familiar with the entire array of poetic terms employed in this poem – autumn, night, forest, earth, streams, darkness, distance, wandering – in their relation to melancholia. Autumn, a classic emblem of melancholia (that appears interchangeably with twilight in poems 38 and 39) is here conjoined with the impenetrable night that recurs, as in poem 47, along with the impassable forest. The phrase “autumn nights” would therefore suggest melancholic contemplation as it encounters a fundamental obscurity. However, from within that hopeless obscurity, a single movement unfolds: an individual leaf “falls” to the

³⁷ Vogel, *Poems*, 55. Trans. Chana Kronfeld and Eric Zakim in Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 191–192 (trans. modified).

³⁸ Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 192.

“earth” and “lies still.” The fallen leaf, an emblem of *telishut*, is no longer suspended helplessly between heaven and earth. It penetrates the obscurity of the forest not by traversing it horizontally to its end (where meaning would supposedly reside), but vertically, by reaching the earth below. The earth functions here not as a locus of transcendent meaning, but as an immanent ground of being where all movement comes to a halt, as indicated by the word “still” (*dumam*): a soundless as well as motionless rest. In its fall to the earth, the fate of the leaf has been sealed. Its fall becomes emblematic of the natural historical trajectory of all earthly life, paralleling the obscure death of the poet and his dog on the stone in poem 44.

In the second stanza, the apparent contradiction of the “single, specific fish jumping out of the water in many different streams”³⁹ can be resolved if we recall that the stream whose waters “rushed to flow into the distances” serves as an emblem of transience in poem 38. Not unlike the wanderer, the fish is a creature that by its very nature is impelled by forces of transience. But the stanza depicts the fish at the peculiar moment when it escapes – if only momentarily – from the grip of the forces that push it ever onward. When considered in these terms, the natural scene of a fish jumping out of the water becomes an allegorical drama of a search for meaning in the dark void that lies outside the flux of transience. But this search for meaning only yields the “echo of a moist thump” in the obscurity of the void: a vanishing ripple on the impenetrable surface of eternity.

Transience is also at stake in the third stanza, with the reference to the “black distance” where “gallops are sown of unseen horses.” We get no closer to deciphering this allegory as long as we observe it merely from a syntactical perspective, as Kronfeld does when she points to an ironic contrast between the predicate *nizra’ot* (“are sown”) and its subject *daharot* (“gallops”).⁴⁰ From a semantic perspective, this contrast could be resolved once we identify the various terms at work in this allegory. As in the scene with the ancient tree and the stream in poem 38, the figurative language here is based on a substitution of temporal and spatial categories. Thus, the gallops of horses that are “melting away” invoke palpitations, or otherwise a condensed and accelerated pace of “subjective time” toward an obscure point in the future. The “black distance” toward which the horses are rushing is nothing other than the “great, dark gate”: an emblem of death in its natural historical dimensions. Far

³⁹ Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 192.

⁴⁰ Kronfeld, *On the Margins*, 193.

from ironic, the contrast between the “gallops” and its predicate “are sown” indicates a distressing experience of impending death.

In the last stanza, the cumulative physical effect of the three nature scenes that allegorically depict the experiences of transience, natural history and obscure death, is subtly registered on the individual, the weary wanderer. These nature scenes are not sublimated poetic soulscapes. Rather, they emerge from the deepest recesses of the creaturely and indicate the wanderer’s “attentiveness” to other, non-human forms of life similarly encumbered by immersion in an undisclosedness of meaning. The “quiver” that passes through the wanderer’s flesh in response to such scenes recalls Martin Heidegger’s designation of the “essential disruption” (*wesenhafte Erschütterung*) in animal life, in which the animal (in this case, the poet-wanderer) “finds itself essentially exposed to something other than itself, something that can indeed never be manifest to the animal either as a being or as a non-being.”⁴¹ The “quiver” that passes through the wanderer’s flesh is a physical indication of a state in which the creature “is delivered over to an arresting opacity,”⁴² marking its fundamental exposure in a state of “nonrevelation.”⁴³ As we noted earlier, it is precisely such helpless absorption in a state of nonrevelation that constitutes the essential trait of the dark, earthbound aspects of the melancholy complexion and accounts for the uncanny affinity between human and animal life.

This analysis of melancholia in Vogel’s *Before the Dark Gate* would remain incomplete without addressing another issue of central importance: namely, melancholia as a source of poetic creativity. Whereas I have hitherto emphasized the dark, telluric aspects of melancholia with their various manifestations in Vogel’s poems, there is a parallel tradition in Western thought, dating back to Aristotle, that associated melancholia with outstanding achievements in arts, philosophy, poetry and politics.⁴⁴ This more benign version of melancholia was dialectically

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 273.

⁴² Santner, *On Creaturely Life*, 34.

⁴³ See Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) 68.

⁴⁴ This is elaborated in the famous Problem 30.1. See Aristotle, *Problems, Vol. 2: Books 20–38*, trans. Robert Mayhew (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) 277–297.

linked to its dark, earthly aspects, and was appropriated by Renaissance humanists such as Marsilio Ficino in doctrines of genius that sought to liberate the sublime and spiritual aspects of melancholia and suppress the dark, earthly, material ones. These two contrasting aspects received their most iconic expression in Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514), in which the figures of the winged genius and the sleeping dog are juxtaposed (see Fig. 1). In accordance with a platonic tradition, the wings not only marked the creative powers of the melancholic genius, but also suggested the ability of the human mind to transcend the finite limits of material nature.⁴⁵ The figure of the dog, on the other hand, signaled the dull sadness of a creature entirely absorbed in its earthly discomforts. In Dürer's engraving these two figures are complemented by a third figure: a large stone,⁴⁶ which, as we have already noted, indicates subjection to abject matter. There is thus a strange correspondence between Dürer's engraving and Vogel's poem 44 in their evocation of these three central figures in the context of melancholia: the poet (or the outstanding person), the dog and the stone. But there are also some noteworthy differences that reveal how Vogel has both appropriated the Western legacy of melancholia and adapted it to his own purposes in order to formulate a distinct poetic statement.

Although it may be impossible to prove that Vogel knew Dürer's engraving, he was certainly familiar with the constellation of the sleeping dog and melancholia. This is evident from a poem he wrote circa 1918–1919, possibly an early version of poem 44, which was suppressed and not included in the poems of *Before the Dark Gate*:

Around me the victory of youth still rejoices
 Its pink melodies
 Dance into the gloomy silence
 Of my room.

In a black corner
 I will lie with my lonely, good
 Dog.

⁴⁵ See Noel L. Brann, *Debate Over the Origin of Genius During the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) 82–122.

⁴⁶ The stone depicted in *Melencolia I*, known as "Dürer's Solid," is actually a polyhedron, a distorted cube whose precise meaning is still debated among art historians and mathematicians, with no conclusive results. For interpretations of the polyhedron see, for example, Terence Lynch, "The Geometric Body in Dürer's 'Melencolia I,'" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 45 (1982) 226–31; or Hans Weitzel, "A Further Hypothesis on the Polyhedron of A. Dürer's Engraving Melencolia I," *Historia Mathematica*, vol. 31 (2004) 11–14.

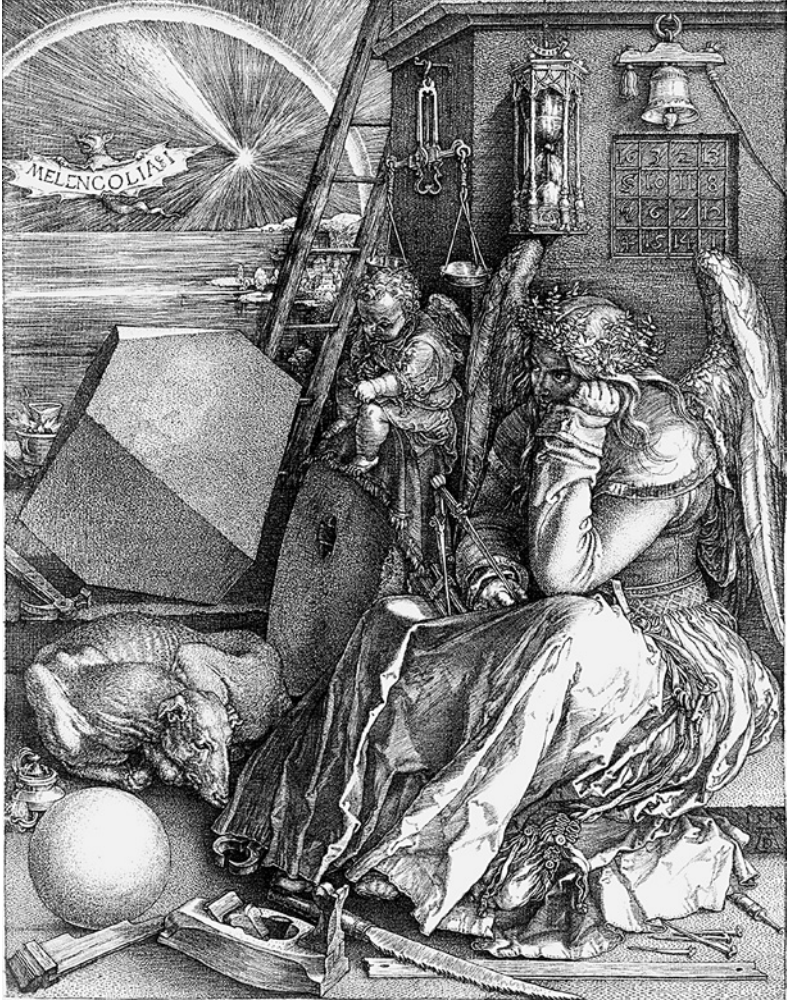


Fig. 1: Albrecht Dürer, *Melancholia I* (Die Melancholie), 1514.
© Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Graphische Sammlung
(Inv.Nr. A 1998/6753 Kupferstich, 24,3 × 18,9 cm).

Peacefully we lie
And dream.

Of pale, lukewarm
Mists,
Floating on an autumn morning.

Of a solitary wanderer
On the hill's path.

Of the journey's grey
Vapor, the cloud.

Peacefully we lie
And dream.⁴⁷

The sleep of the melancholic and his dog is the “sinful sleep” of *acedia* that entails the forgetting of human nature and of the essential goals of human life, which subsequently degrades man to the condition of a beast.⁴⁸ In Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, those guilty of *acedia* are condemned to stand fixed in the depths of the black mud in the fifth circle of hell, gurgling the words: “we were gloomy in the sweet air that the sun makes glad, bearing within us the fumes of sullenness (*accidioso fummo*).”⁴⁹ And this statement seems to correspond to the condition of the speaker in Vogel’s poem, whose “gloomy silence” stands in sharp contrast to the “pink melodies” of youth. Yet the absorption in this dull state of melancholia paradoxically brings about unique poetic visions: dreams that arise from a “geomantic slumber in the temple of creation, and not as sublime or even sacred inspiration,” as Benjamin remarked in reference to the figure of the sleeping dog in Dürer’s *Melencolia I*.⁵⁰ Such dreams provide an allegorical vision of nature, a nature impregnated with hidden meanings that relate to an existence entirely devoid of transcendence. Thus, for example, the frequent references in this poem to misty substances in the dreams – mists (*arfilim*), vapor (*kitor*) and the grey cloud (*av*) – point to the undisclosedness of meaning associated with melancholia and earthly life. The fog as a figurative device, as Ross Chambers observed in his study of melancholy in early French modernism, “threatens the stability of a well-ordered world, in which essential differences would be maintained, as well as the identity of an

⁴⁷ Vogel, *Poems*, 268.

⁴⁸ See Wenzel, *Sin of Sloth*, 6–18.

⁴⁹ Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Vol. I: Inferno*, trans. Robert M. Durling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 119.

⁵⁰ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 152.

ego that wishes to control that world and ‘to take the helm.’”⁵¹ The conscious embrace of a doggish position that has renounced the self and the world – as opposed to the sovereign position of the sublime, winged genius – frees the poet and transports him into the heart of the world, into a hidden core in which he becomes privy to allegorical visions of profane earthly existence.

All the poems of *Before the Dark Gate* stand under the sign of such profane epiphanic power. The nature that they depict is not the product of sublime contemplation, as in Bialik’s Zionist poem “In the City of Killings,” nor is it merely an objective figuration of “the most subjective, imperceptible internal qualities,” as Kronfeld argues. In Vogel’s poems there is no “subject” to which these “internal qualities” could be ascribed. Instead of fragmented subjective experience, the reader is confronted with natural objects, products of the allegorical imagination. This allegorical nature is not simply a manifestation of textual indeterminacy, of a fog of words obfuscating an underlying subjective content. Rather, it encapsulates a latent wealth of meanings emerging from the depths of earthly life. In this way Vogel effectively renounces the posture of the melancholic genius in his poetry, without relinquishing a fundamental source of poetic figurative power. When considered in terms of the imagery offered in Dürer’s engraving, this position would translate into a rejection of the attempt to transcend beyond the boundaries of the world emblemized by the winged figure, and an affinity with the sleeping dog that signals profound absorption in the degradations and comforts of earthly life.

In light of such essential poetic and ethical commitments, we may ask in what sense Vogel’s position is quintessentially “Jewish” in character. I would address this question by extending the analysis of the allegorical imagery in *Melencolia I* to issues related to modern Jewish identity. An important point of reference for such consideration can be found in Marc Chagall’s painting *Solitude* (1933) which incorporates elements from Dürer’s engraving in a depiction of diasporic Jewish existence (see fig. 2). In addressing Jewish themes within the context of melancholia, this painting provides interesting points of comparison with Vogel’s poems. Most notably, the characteristic posture of melancholia – the earthbound gaze and the hand supporting the drooping head – is clearly illustrated with the figure of the Jewish man wearing his prayer shawl.

⁵¹ Ross Chambers, *Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism*, trans. Mary Seidman Trouille (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 29.



Fig. 2: Marc Chagall, *Solitude*.

© [1933] Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.

As in *Melencolia I*, an animal also appears – a goat lying on the ground – as an emblem of earthly existence (also associated in the painting with the musical qualities of the violin). The telling difference between Chagall’s painting and Dürer’s engraving lies in the position of the winged figure. Whereas in *Melencolia I* the melancholic thinker is endowed with the capacity to transcend the boundaries of the world, in Chagall’s painting the wings have been separated from the thinker and remain out of reach in the heavens. The appearance of the angel in the distance only serves to accentuate the acute sense of abandonment to an earthly existence, hence the source of the thinker’s “solitude.”

When we consider the role of allegorical emblems in Chagall’s painting in comparison with the poems of *Before the Dark Gate*, they seem to point in both cases to a loss of transcendental meaning and to a melancholic absorption in earthly existence. But whereas in Vogel’s poems such a loss of meaning ultimately frees the poet and grants him access to unique allegorical visions, Chagall’s Jew remains covered in his prayer shawl and clings to the Torah scroll, the trappings of an ethnic and religious identity reduced to pure material vestiges, entirely devoid of transcendence. Moreover, in stark contrast to the poet who kneels before the dog, leans his head on its back and eventually dies together with the animal with their “souls entwined,” Chagall’s Jew, in his absorption in

melancholic contemplation, has turned his back on the animal. In these terms Chagall's Jew appears as a tragic figure emblematic of a state of *telishut*: in his desperate attachment to outdated material remnants he reveals his inability to relinquish a lost collective meaning, and in his indifference to the animal he remains alienated from earthly life. Unable to occupy the realms of either man or beast, he remains suspended in an indeterminate state of being, much like Vogel's "unseen leaf" in poem 40.

In view of the foregoing examples from Bialik and Chagall, the openness to earthly life that Vogel advocates in his poetry appears to have surpassed the boundaries of a modern Jewish identity exemplified by a commitment to Zionism or, alternatively, by a melancholic attachment to religious fragments. The only link to Jewish identity in Vogel's poetry lies in his idiosyncratic appropriation of the Hebrew language under the least likely circumstances. In its characteristic self-estrangement Vogel's poetry exemplifies a "post-Jewish" mentality. Instead of the love of the nation or God, the poet draws his inspiration from the earth, invoking the humble love of a dog: "My good dog, / I kneel before the splendor of your love!" (poem 44).

The love of the dog is not a bond between servant and master, nor is it an expression of a national or religious solidarity. Rather, it is a pure manifestation of a primordial affinity that exists between two creatures, an affinity that emerges from the inherent obscurity of their existence. In the impenetrable forest of earthly life, love – like death – provides a solid ground and a definite orientation. And it is this love that allows the unaffiliated Jew – the *talush*, the one who lives in *telishut* – to rediscover and appropriate the non-human and non-sovereign dimension inherent in human life.⁵² In Vogel's poetry this creaturely dimension comes to undermine the sovereign position of the sublime poet and its corresponding forms of political and cultural affiliations. Vogel's choice of Hebrew as the primary vehicle of literary expression is not implicated in the Zionist project, nor does it partake in the sublime rhetoric of religious

⁵² In this respect Vogel's rejection of Zionism, which is entirely poetic, is to be distinguished from the ideological and philosophical attempts to "deconstruct" Zionism. Recent post-Zionist critique aims at exposing figures of sovereignty, nativity, and rootedness as self-contradictory constructions of a diasporic mentality. Vogel's poetry is not explicitly skeptical of the desired image of humanity and rootedness emblemized in Zionism, but it consciously embraces the uprooted, the nonhuman, and the vulnerable. Interestingly, both rejections of Zionism converge in the allegorical figure of the dog. See Ranjana Khanna's essay "Rex, or The Negation of Wandering" in *Deconstructing Zionism: A Critique of Political Metaphysics*, ed. Gianni Vattimo and Michael Marder (London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 133–146.

authority. Instead, Vogel pushes conventional linguistic boundaries by marking a territory within Hebrew that is stripped of transcendental meaning and the pathos of religious or national authority. His Hebrew, which sounds oddly contemporary,⁵³ is the language of earthly melancholic complexion. This melancholic language was later appropriated by Israeli statehood generation poets such as Nathan Zach and Yehuda Amichai.⁵⁴ But in contrast to these poets of the statehood generation, Vogel never depicts an estranged universal individual whose behavior is founded on an unquestioned sense of belonging to a national collective and to a national territory. The universality of Vogel's poetic subject is grounded in its creaturely provenance, and it belongs in a collective of uprooted, non-sovereign, subhuman individuals. This is the foreign "European" legacy that Vogel infuses into modern Hebrew. The universal bond with earthly life in Vogel's poetry is not determined by an affiliation with a state or a nation, but through the profane love of a dog, by which melancholia comes to assume its authentic poetic dimensions.

⁵³ Alter notes that "for a Hebrew reader at the end of the twentieth century, Vogel's language in most respects sounds remarkably contemporary." He ties this "natural" quality of language with the self-estrangement that characterizes modernist writing. See "Vogel and the Forging," 6–7.

⁵⁴ In a fascinating article, Michael Gluzman identifies the foundation of the State of Israel as the decisive moment in which Hebrew poets experienced "melancholia over the loss of poetry's significance in sovereign Israel." With the statehood generation poets "the poem implodes, unable to address a community, thereby resorting to self-reflexivity, to *ars poetica*. This renunciation of the poem's communicability turns its language into a form of traumatic speech imbued with mourning and melancholia." See Michael Gluzman, "Sovereignty and Melancholia: Israeli Poetry After 1948," *Jewish Social Studies*, 18.3 (Spring/Summer 2012) 176.