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by Elazar Elhanan

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THE PRICE OF REMORSE: YIDDISH AND THE WORK OF MOURNING IN JACOB STEINBERG'S HEBREW POETRY

Elazar Elhanan

Abstract

The negation of the Diaspora, its culture, and its language, Yiddish, was a central part of the Zionist effort to define a new, "normal" national culture—a Hebrew one. This process of negation and substitution was very often expressed as a historically predetermined one: as though the "natural" course of events demanded this evolutionary development in which Diaspora and Yiddish culture would die as the national Hebrew culture was revived. This article considers, on the one hand, the mournful discourse employed by the Hebrew national poet H. N. Bialik, a discourse that tried to come to terms with the unbearably natural fact of life that is the death of a loved one and offer solace in the form of the promise of an afterlife for Yiddish in the Hebrew national culture. On the other hand, this article contrasts Bialik's position with the works of Jacob Steinberg, Bialik's supposed poetic heir. This article reads Steinberg's refusal to mourn the passing of Yiddish and his inconsolable melancholia as a critique of Zionist national politics and aesthetics—a critique that offers no alternative, only condemnation.

I. The Plague of Multiple Tongues

The question of the emancipation and modernization of Jews in Eastern Europe was, to a large extent, a question of language.[1] The significant change demanded of the

[1] Dan Miron, "S.Y. Abramovitsh beyn yidish le-'ivrit: omanut neshimah 'bishnei haniḥirayim,'" in '*Itot shel shinui: sifruyot yehudiyot ba-tekufah ha-modernit: kovets ma'amarim li-khvodo shel Dan Miron*,

Jewish population in modernity turned, arguably, on the resolution of what the poet Hayyim Naḥman Bialik called "the plague of multiple tongues."[2] Reformers, intellectuals, and activists argued for the transformation of the special trifecta of languages spoken or used by East European Jews—the local language of Russian, Polish, or Ukrainian; Hebrew; and Yiddish—into a "normal" and "healthy" monolinguistic national existence.[3] Political debates of the time often focused on placing assimilation into the local language in opposition to the embrace of one of two nationalist possibilities: Zionism and Yiddishism. Debates seemed to force a choice between the languages. This choice was particularly important for the Yiddish language. While Hebrew seemed to be secure in its place by force of tradition and affiliation with the Zionist nationalist project, Yiddish became the heart of an identity crisis.[4] Yiddish was the metonymy representing Jewishness/being Jewish, a signifier trailing a long list of other signifiers such as exile, passivity, smallness, femininity, mimicry, disorder, or traditionalism. These signifiers, whether they were perceived as positive or negative, were also perceived to be characteristics that needed to disappear in order for the "zhid" to become a modern citizen. Although many Hebrew authors of the period—the first decades of the twentieth century—also wrote in Yiddish, they eventually felt it was necessary to choose and then remain committed to Hebrew. The choice was understood as a profoundly existential one. As a result these authors created a discourse that would legitimize their political act of choosing Hebrew.

In this article I will read the discourse surrounding this choice as the expression of the work of mourning, in the Freudian sense. These writers participate in a discourse whose goal was to render the loss of the world of Yiddish understandable; to advocate for a process that would give the passing away, but also the staying behind and moving ahead, a positive meaning, in spite of the sense of loss. I will contrast this discourse with a parallel refusal to mourn the Yiddish language and a deep melancholia in the poetry of Jacob Steinberg.

II. Jacob Steinberg, or the Jeweler

Jacob Steinberg (1886–1947) was a prominent poet, author, and critic both in Hebrew and in Yiddish and an integral part of the burgeoning literary scenes of Odessa and Warsaw. As a young poet he was crowned by H. N. Bialik as one of the national poet's successors, together with Zalman Shneur and Yaakov Cahan.[5] But often forgotten or ignored is that, in addition to his prominent place in the sphere of Hebrew poetry, Steinberg was also an important Yiddish writer. He received acclaim and recognition for his Yiddish writing from key figures such as Abraham Reisen and the critic

Michal Arbel, Gidi Nevo, Michael Gluzman, eds. (Kiryat Sedeh-Boker: Mekhon Ben-Gurion le-ḥeker Yisrael veha-tsiyonut, Ben Gurio University, 2008), 60.

[2] Ḥayyim Naḥman Bialik, *Devarim shebe'al peh* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1935), 226. Unless otherwise noted all translations are the author's.

[3] Dov Sadan, *Avnei bedek* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1962), 12.

[4] It is important to note that even the attachment of the Yiddishist movement to the Yiddish language came as a reaction to the Hebraist and maskilic discourse on the language. See D. Fishman, *The Rise of Modern Yiddish Culture* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 23.

[5] H. N. Bialik, "Shirateinu hatse'ira," in *Kol kitvei Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik* (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1947), 236–41.

Baal-Makhshoves, who wrote an enthusiastic introduction to Steinberg's novel-in-rhyme, *Rusland* (*Russia*).[6] However, in 1914 Steinberg immigrated to Palestine and, despite his success in Yiddish, never wrote another word in Yiddish or even on the topic of Yiddish culture. Unlike his peers, Steinberg never explained his choice to abandon Yiddish or his choice to write in Hebrew. But as we read through his late writings, it is possible to gauge the deep impact the loss of Yiddish had on his poetry, an impact that defined his mature poems and also carried with it a sharp critique of the role of art and poetry in Zionist literature.

As Miron and others claim, one can sense a real change—a deepening of sorts—in Steinberg's poetry from the 1920s.[7] Once in Palestine, he developed a poetic language that allowed him to achieve extremely dense and complex expression in poems that were simultaneously minimalistic. This change was grounded in Steinberg's poetic consideration of the Hebrew language in contrast with other European languages. Steinberg formulated a poetic principle according to which only minimalist verse, reduced to its barest elements, is in fact poetry.[8] Steinberg called for a poetic line that would find its meaning only in the tense, forced, momentary relations of its components. According to Steinberg, these forced relations reflected the unique capacity of the Hebrew language to force together two nouns without any of the grammatical cushioning found in European languages, producing surprising and contradicting effects from their "discomfort." However, this capacity of the Hebrew language was supplemented in his theoretical texts and poems by a mysterious ingredient that made the fusion of words possible. This ingredient appears in the form of the mysterious "noḥam": a hapax appearing in the book of Hosea, which Steinberg uses to signify both solace and remorse.[9]

Steinberg described the poet as a jeweler fusing together stubbornly solitary Hebrew words with the corrosive power of remorse and regret, while also finding solace in their fusion.[10] *Noḥam* was the substance that relates the poems to the world, and through it feelings were invested in the artistic object and were separated from the poet. This procedure is described in the poem "A Hymn to *noḥam*."[11] However, Steinberg

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[6] Jacob Steinberg, *Rusland: a poeme* (Warsaw: Farlag universal, 1914).

[7] Dan Miron, "Beyn mukdam leme'ukhar be-shirat Yaakov Shtaynberg," *Haaretz*, 18 January 1963.

[8] Jacob Steinberg, "Ha-shura," in *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg* (Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1957), 333–40.

[9] Hosea 13:14: "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death: O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave, I will be thy destruction: repentance [noḥam] shall be hid from mine eyes." (KJV)

[10] Steinberg, *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg,* 43, 55.

[11] אִישׁוֹנַי עֵינַי קָמוּ מִצָּרוֹף כָּל רִיק וּכְזָבָיו,
וְאֱמוּן בְּדֹלַח פָּג בִּמְכִיתַת כָּל יְקָרוֹת;
אַךְ כְּחָשׁ חֵן עוֹד סוֹבֵב אֶת אֶת רוּחִי כַּאֲשֶׁר סָבַב
וּבְקֶצֶב רָז תְּנָהֳרָנָה חִידוֹתַי הַנִּפְתָּרוֹת.
[…]
הָהּ, אֵיפֹה אֶמְצָאֶךָ, הַנֹּחַם פְּרִי-הַמְּרוֹרִים
אֲשֶׁר עֶסְיסְךָ רִפְאוּת, וּמַחַיִת-לֵב חֲדָשָׁה?
זֶה אַרְסְךָ מִסְתַּנֵּן כְּנִטְפֵי שֶׁרָף טְהוֹרִים,
וְשׁוֹרֵף גְּלִימַת צַדִּיק וְנוֹקֵב שִׁרְיוֹן רָשָׁע.

My pupils rebelled from smelting every void and its lies / and the faith of crystal expired in the shards of all that is precious / but the lie of grace still turns my spirit as it did / and in a secret rhythm all my solved

never specified the cause for the poet's remorse. Quite the contrary: he defined his pain as mysterious, unknown, and even unknowable.

It is my contention that this hidden remorse is in fact a critique of the Zionist national literature and the imposition of the Hebrew language that the Zionist political project demanded. *Noḥam* serves as a silenced remainder after the price paid to the nationalist ideology: the renunciation of Yiddish language and culture. In the comparison that Steinberg makes between the forced relations of Hebrew and the flexibility of other languages, Yiddish is the implied "other," a supple and yielding European language in contrast with the hard and demanding Hebrew; the remorse that suffuses this comparison is due to the loss of the Yiddish speaker—the modern, urban, cosmopolitan Yiddishist. In order to argue this point, I will look at a specific moment in Steinberg's poetry, the moment following the apparent choice between Yiddish and Hebrew, as it is expressed in the long epic poem from 1915, "Mas'a Avisholem."

III. "When Everything's Said and Done, Yiddish Was a Home to Us All," or Mourning

In order to demonstrate Steinberg's unique attitude toward the choice between Hebrew and Yiddish, we can begin by looking at the counterexample of H. N. Bialik. As the Hebrew national poet and the admired father figure of Steinberg's generation of poets, Bialik presents an important and instructive case that highlights the mainstream attitude toward the languages within Hebrew literature, an attitude very different in tone and in political intentions than that of Steinberg.

Bialik presents a type of discourse that is ambivalent and complex.[12] It explicitly talks of the two languages in terms of death, revival, resurrection, and afterlife. In a letter to fellow writer and editor Y. H. Ravnitski from August 8, 1898, Bialik explains his reluctance to write in Yiddish: "For finally, the *zhargon* would be eradicated from under God's skies. The tongue of the land would expel it from life, and our language [Hebrew] would drive him out of literature. May its end come swiftly and in our days, amen!" And yet, despite this demand for the eradication of Yiddish, the lowly *zhargon*, Bialik displays at the same time a great deal of tenderness toward Yiddish. He adds in the same letter: "I'll admit that the fine yearnings of childhood, [. . .] ghetto and the cheder are more easily said in the *zhargon* [. . .] than in the holy tongue."[13] Like his mentor Aḥad Ha-Am, Bialik justified this position by framing the death of Yiddish as a necessary step in the growth of the nation. According to Bialik's point of view, Yiddish serves a specific historical function, and now it is no longer needed and must pass away, like Aramaic or other Jewish languages in their time. However, even in its passing, Yiddish was still beneficial—its living sap should be ingested by the old tree of Hebrew culture.[14]

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riddles will glow [...] Ha, where shall I find you, remorse, son of bitter fruit / that your sap is healing and revives the heart? / Your poison filters as pure drops of fiery poison / and burns the cloak of the righteous and pierces the armor of the wicked. (Ibid., 55.)

[12] Shmuel Werses, *Mi-lashon el lashon: yetsirot ve-gilguleihen be-sifrutenu* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1996), 480.

[13] H. N. Bialik to Y. H. Ravnitski, 8 August 1898, in *Igrot Ḥayim Naḥman Bialik*, volume 1 (Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1937), 126–27.

[14] Bialik, *Devarim shebe'al peh*, 226.

This ambivalence is even clearer if we compare the way Bialik describes the relationship between the two languages with the way he describes the historical process of Yiddish's demise and Hebrew's rebirth. When writing about the historical process, Bialik relies on natural metaphors: trees and fruits, life and death. In stark contrast, the metaphors describing the relations between Yiddish and Hebrew are hierarchical, gendered, and sexualized. Following Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's (Mendele Moykher Sforim) melodramatic parable in which he falls in love with Yiddish, personified as the despised slave girl,[15] Bialik admonishes the poet I. L. Peretz for neglecting "mitzvat ona"—the obligation to have sexual relations only with one's own wife, the queen Hebrew—by instead spilling his "seed"—his literary talent—into the servant, Yiddish.[16] Rather than the natural and inevitable passing away and birth of the organic metaphor, the image that arises from these metaphors is a set of relations determined by choice, separation, and betrayal. It can be argued that these sexual metaphors indicate an ambivalent counterpoint to Bialik's narrative of natural decline. However, the narrative of natural decline cannot tolerate ambivalence; for Bialik, a romantic nationalist, Yiddish *must* die for Hebrew to be born, but it also must be mourned, i.e., introjected, transformed into a part of the self, and thus granted an afterlife in the resurrected national body:

> Hebrew literature would be filled with content . . . with the introduction of new material, its capacity would naturally grow. . . . The language would "nationalize" all that is in it and all that comes within its boundaries.[17]

In the vein of Benjamin, Adorno, and others scholars, modernity can be identified with the mourning of tradition. This understanding of modernity transforms the question of mourning, and the working through it, into a key question within the critique of culture, and it is endowed with political importance.[18] The formulation of Freud in his text *Mourning and Melancholia* casts the work of mourning as the healthy counterpart of the zeitgeistic pathology of melancholia,[19] as if to say that the decadent, degenerate mal de siècle should find its cure in the narcissistic enjoyment of still being alive.[20]

Bialik's attitude toward Yiddish cannot be reduced to a successful working through mourning that celebrates the life of Hebrew after the death of Yiddish. It entails an added complication: in Bialik's discourse, the death of Yiddish becomes not only a historically determined fact but also a political and existential necessity. It is a painful

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[15] Mendele Mokher Sefarim, *Kol kitvei Mendele Mokher Sefarim* (Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1950), 1–6.
[16] Israel Ch. Biletzky, *H. N. Bialik ve-yidish* (Tel Aviv: Hots'aat Y.L. Perets, 1970), 70.
[17] Bialik, *Devarim shebe'al peh*, 232.
[18] The first part of A. Haverkamp's book *Leaves of Mourning* describes how the work of mourning became a major prism through which the encounter with modernity was experienced and understood. Through this prism modernity was either worked through or rejected. The rejection of modernity was elevated to the degree of a moral and artistic stance through the works of melancholy figures such as Baudelaire and Hölderlin that personified the impossibility of working through the loss. A. Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning: Holderlin's Late Work—with an Essay on Keats and Melancholy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), x.
[19] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume 14 (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), 243–60.
[20] Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning: Holderlin's Late Work*, 31.

and complex process that involves the people closest to him, as Bialik himself gently explains in the same letter quoted above:

> And Reb Mendele, who wrote in *zhargon*, I wonder if he'll have any atonement in this world. I hope that his penitence now, in translating and bringing back his works to Hebrew, will do him some good.[21]

We see in Bialik's words the work of mourning in all its problematic nature: that of being stuck between the anvil of self-serving mourning and the hammer of melancholia.[22] According to Jacques Derrida the very politics of friendship is based on the structural possibility of one friend surviving the other, burying him, and mourning him. Friendship is in fact a preparation toward coming to terms with the loss of the other.[23] Bialik personifies Yiddish in the image of people close to him, such as Abramovitsh, an act that results in an admission of guilt over the benefit to Hebrew that comes with their demise. The process of mourning is defined by the dialectics between parting with the dead and not letting go. The friend can be remembered, commemorated, and mourned by speaking, not only *for* and *of* but also *as* the dead.[24] In Bialik's attempted translation of Abramovitsh's novel *Fishke der krumer* (*Fishke the Lame*), he came much closer to the author's Yiddish tone than Abramovitsh himself did in his own published Hebrew rendering.[25] Likewise, in his translations of folksongs and other texts, Bialik attempted to enrich the Hebrew language with the "living" qualities of Yiddish, to infuse Hebrew with the vernacular amplitude of Yiddish, it's folkish elements; to integrate into the Hebrew language the host of Jewish attributes contained within Yiddish, to appropriate them and render them part of the new Hebrew self. This practice should be understood as an effort to live on in Hebrew after the death of Yiddish:

> For me the end is evident and clear and I find in it a great tragedy, when everything's said and done, Yiddish was a home to us all. Finally, the nation had created, prayed, and cried in that tongue! . . . I have one consolation: that the Yiddish tongue would survive by its translation, good or bad, into Hebrew. But anything that won't be translated from it into Hebrew will be lost and will leave no trace.[26]

IV. "Remorse, Son of a Bitter Fruit," or Melancholia

As mentioned earlier, the elaborate narrative of transition from Yiddish to Hebrew that Bialik presented is completely absent from Steinberg's writings. With the exception of a few essays, published between 1914 and 1918 and never collected or

[21] Bialik, *Igrot*, 126–27.
[22] The image of anvil and hammer appears in a formulation of mourning by Derrida: Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 6.
[23] Ibid., 16.
[24] Ibid., 25.
[25] Werses, "Bialik metargem et Mendele," in *Melashon el lashon*, 277-80.
[26] Bialik, *Devarim shebe'al peh*, 232.

republished, Yiddish language and Yiddish culture are never mentioned in his work.[27] This sharp break with Yiddish appears to be consistent with Steinberg's general approach to the two languages, which clearly differs from the views presented here as Bialik's: Bialik speaks of the eventual natural development of a "healthy" national language as Yiddish is absorbed into Hebrew. Steinberg, who was far less committed to the Zionist project and far more engaged with Yiddish culture than Bialik was, did not try to supplement one language with the other but rather to "clean" each of the languages of traces of the other. This is true from a linguistic point of view and is also evident if we examine his literary corpus.[28] In Steinberg's poetic practice there was a strict generic distinction between the two languages, using Yiddish for prose and Hebrew for poetry. Hence it stands to reason that with the move to Palestine, all that was Yiddish would be left behind. Yiddish for Steinberg did not stand in for the world of tradition, "the fine yearnings of . . . the childhood of the ghetto and the cheder" that Bialik talked about. Rather, it stood for a specific kind of modernity, a different possibility of Jewish politics that was opposed to the mainstream Zionist view. This possibility hinged on an affirmation of the Diaspora and was embodied in the Yiddishist self: a figure standing in for modernity, its promises and failures, that Steinberg portrayed in dozens of stories and other works. Reading Steinberg's work in light of this distinction, Yiddish becomes a possible trajectory that is initially considered and then discarded in favor of Zionism. The fact that Steinberg never collected or republished his Yiddish work seems to strengthen this position: in the absence of a monument in the form of a consolidated volume, his Yiddish oeuvre vanished from the public and critical eye, as if it had never existed.[29]

The trouble is that this view of Steinberg's work is inaccurate to say the least. Looking at the material published in both languages it is clear that, while in Europe, Steinberg often transgressed his own boundaries and produced important works in the "wrong" genre and language. In spite of the distinction he attempted to make between the languages, he wrote significant prose works that were first published in Hebrew and he conducted important experiments in poetry in Yiddish, thus creating intricate relations between the different segments of his work. Similarly, even uncollected, unacknowledged, and disavowed, Steinberg's Yiddish work would continue to inform his writing for many years. The clearest presence of Steinberg's Yiddish past in his Hebrew present was the ongoing project of translating his prose stories; these very translations, like their Yiddish origins, were concealed and even denied.[30]

And yet, Steinberg never talks of the place of Yiddish in his work or of the difficulty of leaving it behind. He does not use the rhetoric of mourning identified above in Bialik. Instead of a narrative of choice or necessity there is only silence, signifying an

[27] These texts were collected in Jacob Steinberg, *Deyokna'ot va-'arakhim: masot asher lo nikhlelu be-khol ketavav* (Tel Aviv: Agudat ha-sofrim ha-'ivrim be-yisrael, 1979).

[28] Aharon Komem, introduction to Jacob Steinberg, *Gezamlte dertseylungen* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), xii–x.

[29] Steinberg's biographer Israel Cohen seems to express the generally accepted opinion in viewing the poems of 1907–1914 as poems expressing a loss of way, typical of the fragmented life in the Diaspora, which was resolved by Steinberg's decision to immigrate to Palestine. See Israel Cohen, *Yaakov Shtaynberg: ha-ish vi-yetsirato* (Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1972), 65.

[30] Aharon Komem, *Darkhei ha-sipur shel Yaakov Shtaynberg* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1976), 37.

absence. It seems as if that aspect of Steinberg's life was confined to what Abraham and Torok would call a crypt.[31]

The interest of this paper, however, is not in Steinberg's psychology as expressed in his poems, but rather in the use that Steinberg, a viciously clever and brutally honest poet, makes of this psychic landscape. As Derrida would explain it, the entombment in the crypt, beyond its defensive psychic role, could in fact be part of a strategy of self-serving mourning: it is a one-sided contract in favor of the survivor, a spectacle mimicking the introjection expected from the work of mourning, which is performed in erecting the crypt, allowing the subject to remain in a state of "mid-mourning," bound to never to fully process the object loss but to appear as if he did.[32] This strategy was a very useful one for Steinberg. As explained earlier, it allowed him to find a place within the sphere of the Zionist national literature as a writer in mid-mourning, a writer whose heart was still in Europe with its smoky cafes, gaslights, and supple languages, but whose soul was intertwined with the rocky, hard, and dry Hebrew language. Such a mode of mourning comprised an original and sophisticated reproduction of the "torn heart" that was expected from the Hebrew writer.[33]

There is a moment though, just after Steinberg's immigration from Europe, when he represents with brutal honesty the pain that the sacrifice of Yiddish and Europe caused. This moment is most evident in Steinberg's only epic poem in Hebrew "Mas'a Avisholem" ("Avisholem's Journey"). In this work Steinberg adopts a position that Walter Benjamin called the heroic stance of melancholia, that is, the refusal to view the passing of the dead in the light of redemption. In a contemporary text to Freud's writing, *The Origins of the German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin inverses the roles ascribed to mourning and melancholia by giving melancholia the moral upper hand, so to speak, and even describing it as a heroic stand.[34] In opposition to the "[s]elf affirming ideas of idealist philosophy"[35] that come into play in the work of mourning, in which "with the transformation of the deceased the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption," the melancholic figure presents the transient nature of things and their materiality, which is the *facies Hippocratica* of nature: "history lies before the eyes of the observer as a stiffened, primal landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed as a face—or rather in a death's head."[36] Accepting the loss of tradition caused by the advent of modernity and industrial capitalism, and celebrating the aforementioned narcissistic pleasure of being alive, would be affirming the liberal-bourgeois project, its "natural"

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[31] "A segment of an ever so painfully lived Reality—untellable and therefore inaccessible to the gradual, assimilative work of mourning . . . leads to the establishment of a sealed-off psychic place, a crypt in the ego." Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel,* vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 141.

[32] Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning: Holderlin's Late Work*, 18.

[33] Hannan Hever, *Ha-sipur veha-le'om: kriot bikoratiyot ba-kanon ha-siporet ha-'ivrit* (Tel-Aviv: Resling, 2007), 17; Hever, "Between Approval and Negation of the Diaspora in 'Abshalom's Journey' by Yaakov Steinberg," *'Iyunim bi-tekumat yisrael* 22 (2012): 234.

[34] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (New York: Verso, 1998). See also Haverkamp, *Leaves of Mourning: Holderlin's Late Work*, 1.

[35] J. J. McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Cornell University Press, 1993), 116.

[36] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 166.

and redemptive pretenses. On the other hand, rejecting it and falling into the so-called "pathology" of melancholia would be a critical examination of said project and of its historicity. Similarly, in the poem "Mas'a Avisholem" Steinberg refuses to affirm the deterministic and redemptive course presented by Bialik and adopts an alternate point of view, which exposes the political bad faith involved in mourning the loss of Yiddish, a loss prescribed and desired by the Zionist ideology.

V. Mas'a Avisholem

"Mas'a Avisholem" is an epic poem in seven parts telling the story of the immigration of Avisholem, a Ukrainian Jew, to Palestine.[37] In its first cantos the poem reproduces the modern Jewish *bildung* story as it was formulated by Bialik and emulated by his disciples: childhood in the cheder and the yeshiva; a break with an oppressive tradition experienced as an Oedipal conflict; the subsequent encounter with the world of non-Jewish thought, poetry, and art, and its promise of sexuality and freedom; and the need to constitute an individual subjectivity provoked by this encounter with the non-Jewish world as well as the understanding that a Jewish youth has no place in Europe.[38] The poem then proceeds with a Childe Harold-like narrative of the journey and encounter with the Orient, culminating in a profound tone of resignation and disappointment in the personal and spiritual changes that had been anticipated. The last canto of the poem "A Lament for the Homeland" stages a great funeral oration on the hills of Jaffa:

וּכְמוֹ זָעַף תְּלוּנַת עוֹלָם
[…]
שְׁאוֹן הַיָּם הָעַז מִתְגַּלְגֵּל;
וּלְעֻמָּתוֹ מִמֶּרְחַקִּים
צָפָה יְלָלַת שׁוּעָלִים
הֲלֹא הוּא יְלֵל הַיְּשִׁימוֹן
אֲשֶׁר יֵעוֹר לַיְלָה לַיְלָה
לְתַמְרוּרִי תַּעֲלוּמָה.
[…]
דּוֹמֵם צָפָה אָז הָעֵלֶם
אַף לְיֵלֵל הַיְּשִׁימוֹן הָאֵזִין
וַיִּתְאַבֵּל בַּמִּסְתָּרִים
בֵּין גַּבְנֵנֵי חוֹל שׁוֹמְמִים.

אֵלֶּה דִּבְרֵי אֲבִישָׁלוֹם
זֹאת הַקִּינָה אֲשֶׁר קוֹנֵן
לְתַמְרוּרִי הַדּוֹמְיָה

[37] Steinberg, *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg*, 31–43. The title can be translated as "The Journey of Avisholem." The name Avisholem (Avishalom) appears in the Bible only once, and only in passing. See 1 Kings, 15:2, 10.

[38] Dan Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam: li-dyokna shel ha-republika ha-sifrutit ha-'ivrit bitḥilat ha-meah ha-esrim* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1987), 151–53.

עַל הַחוֹף בְּלֵיל הַתְּכֵלֶת.

And like the anger of the world's complaint
[. . .]
The mighty crush of the sea is rolling;
And across, from the distance
Floats the wail of foxes
The wail of the wilderness
That wakes every night to the weeping of mystery
[. . .]
Silently the youth then watched,
And listened to the wail of the wilderness
And mourned in hiding
Among desolate sand hills.

So were the words of Avisholem,
This is the lament that he spoke
To the sweepings of the silence
On the shore in the azure night.[39]

This scene constitutes Avisholem as a person deeply immersed in grief. The loss expressed in the poem is very clearly defined as the loss of the homeland, Ukraine. The rich, diverse world of the Russian empire was a place to which Steinberg intimately belonged and yet also a place from which he felt rejected. Compared with the loss of the Ukrainian homeland, the land of Israel offered little in return.

Not surprisingly the critics read this depiction of Avisholem in mourning as a poetic and ideological failure. It failed to display the required transformation that the encounter with the "real" homeland was supposed to produce. As Tsipora Sivan notes, this poem was expected to be an autobiographical poem and a Zionist epic, which it was obviously not.[40] Critics attacked the melancholic tone that regarded the Zionist project with the disdain of a disappointed tourist.[41] The land of Israel was not the remedy for the poet's tortured soul; he experienced no mystical communion with the land.[42] As Cohen writes of the poem: "truth be told, we were a bit disappointed by this foreignness of a Hebrew poet who talks not of the land of Israel but of the Orient."[43] What is lacking from the poem is precisely this redemptive work of mourning that would render the loss acceptable by translating it into a normalized narrative.

VI. To Build and Be Built By It

[39] Steinberg, *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg*, 39.
[40] Tsiporah Sivan, *Shirat Yaakov Shtaynberg* (Tel Aviv: Bar Ilan, 1991), 108.
[41] Cohen, *Yaakov Shtaynberg: ha-ish vi-yetsirato*, 74.
[42] Hever, "Between Approval and Negation of the Diaspora in 'Abshalom's Journey' by Yaakov Steinberg," 243.
[43] Cohen, *Yaakov Shtaynberg: ha-ish vi-yetsirato*, 74.

Most of Steinberg's critics overlooked the fact that, for all his negativity and doubt, Steinberg had implicitly declared himself part of the Zionist project. By choosing to write in Hebrew, discard Yiddish, and immigrate to Palestine, he announced his (albeit reluctant) intention to build something within the Zionist project and in some way be built by it. The price of this commitment was the negation of the Diaspora as a viable political option.[44] In Steinberg's case this negation necessitated the renunciation of his own Yiddishist self, and of the radical political utopia nestled in Yiddish literature, in favor of Zionist nationalism. Steinberg's "sin" was in highlighting the fact that Yiddish did not have to die. In the poem, there are no historical or spiritual exigencies that compel Avisholem to come to Palestine but rather, like many European settlers before him, it is the mix of erotic and material possibilities denied him in the European metropole but available in the Orient.[45] Depicted as such, the mournful discourse over Yiddish can be viewed as the self-serving contract Derrida described, allowing the subject to appear as if in mourning while in fact safeguarding himself from acknowledging responsibility.

In "Mas'a Avisholem" Steinberg produces a derisive version of the spectacle of repentance requested by the national literature. This repentance is manifested in the assumption of a retrograde poetics, the poetics instituted by Bialik, which Steinberg had already renounced several years before.[46] Therefore Steinberg appears also to renounce his own success and achievements up to 1914, namely the advancements he had made toward a mature symbolist style in Yiddish. While the presence of Yiddish is never discussed or acknowledged, it is evident in the text through the unique and intense relations between "Mas'a Avisholem" and two of Steinberg's major Yiddish texts: the novel in rhyme *Rusland* (Russia), and the epic poem "Di troyerike libe" ("The Sad Love"). This engagement with *Rusland*, on which many critics commented, is a first layer, exhibiting the necessary price paid to the Hebrew national literature. On a deeper level the impossibility to mourn appears in the epic poem's relationship with the other Yiddish text: "Di troyerike libe."[47] The debts owed to that poem will haunt Avisholem all through the text.

VII. Avisholem and *Rusland*

One of the reasons that "Mas'a Avisholem" was read as a failed poem was the proximity of its publication to the publication of *Rusland* in early 1914 and to Steinberg's arrival in Palestine in the spring of 1914. *Rusland*, Steinberg's Yiddish chef d'oeuvre, is very different from "Mas'a Avisholem." *Rusland* places its speaker squarely in the line of Russia's great Romantics rather in the Hebrew Romantic tradition that begins with Bialik. The novel refers directly to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Lermontov's Caucasus poems, presenting a speaker who is superficial, detached, yet very intelligent, weary of pleasure, and bored with life. Like *Eugene Onegin*, *Rusland* is

[44] Hever, *Ha-sipur veha-le'om: kriot bikoratiyot ba-kanon ha-siporet ha-'ivrit*, 33.
[45] Hever, "Between Approval and Negation of the Diaspora in 'Abshalom's Journey' by Yaakov Steinberg," 244.
[46] Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam*, 204.
[47] Jacob Steinberg, "Di troyerike libe," in *Gezamlte shriftn* (Warsaw: Velt bibliotek, 1908), 56–70.

the story of a love affair, set during the violent reactionary period following the failed 1905 revolution and featuring an egocentric individual, who is depicted against a wide social background in rigid stanzas and in a light musical rhythm. However, in this case the nameless hero is a Russian Jew. He cannot have peace of mind, a sense of belonging, or any erotic relief because he is detached and morose, at an equal distance from all things. This gives the character the ability to observe and sardonically comment on everything around him. The speaker judges all that he sees with contempt. The revolution seems to him vulgar and fashionable. The Ukrainian nationalist discourse strikes him as authentic and powerful but primitive and atavistic. His fiancée's father and her fashionable leftist brother, who represent the Jewish bourgeoisie, are despicable and incomprehensible to him. However, the delicate development of the plot soon demonstrates that what is presented as the hero's aristocratic distance is in fact an emotional paralysis: a profound vulnerability that is expressed as aggression but is made acceptable through wit and charm.

Many critics expected "Mas'a Avisholem," which appeared in segments in different publications in 1915, to either be a rewritten, corrected *Rusland* or an immediate continuation of it.[48] The protagonist of *Rusland* who says, "ikh zog 'adye!' dir, land fun knekht" (I say adieu to you, land of slaves), was supposed to complete the sentence upon his arrival in Palestine.[49] "Mas'a Avisholem" was often described as an adaptation of *Rusland* and it is clear why since the two works addressed such a similar topic.[50] On a formal level, though, there are many differences between the works: "Mas'a Avisholem" is mostly narrated in blank verse in the third person, as opposed to the rhymed first-person narration of *Rusland*. Further, the Pushkinesque irony of *Rusland* is replaced in the Hebrew with a humorless severity. Nevertheless there are still clear connections between the two. Steinberg defined in *Rusland* a hero that he claimed was impossible for him to create in Yiddish:

פֿעסט נאָר איינזאַם אָן אַ שיעור
איז דער העלד, וואָס כ׳פֿאַנטאַזיר:
אָן אַ זיכערקייט אין האַנט,
אָן אַ חלום פֿאַרן מאָרגן,
וועט ער זוכן בײַ די פֿיַינד
פֿרייד און לעבנס־לוסט זיך באָרגן;
נאָר זײַן וואַנדער־וועג באַגלייטן
וועט ווי שפּאָט די קלאַנג פֿון קייטן.

אין זײַן בלוט דאָס קאַלטע פֿײַער –
וועט קיין זאַך נישט זײַן אים טײַער,
וועט ער האָבן אַלץ געווׅוסט,
נאָר אָן גלויבן און אָן לוסט;

[48] Sivan, *Shirat Ya'akov Shtaynberg*, 155.
[49] Cohen, *Yaakov Shtaynberg: ha-ish vi-yetsirato*, 429.
[50] See for example: Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam*, 207. Shalom Luria, "Ha-poema *Rusland* shel Yaakov Shtaynberg ve-zikatah le-shirato be-'ivrit," in *Divrei ha-kongres ha-shishi le-madaei ha-yahadut*, ed. A. Shin'an (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1980), 125.

מיט זײַן שמייכל וועט ער גערן
פֿרעמדע אָפּגעטער צעשטערן;
בלײַבן וועט ער דאָך אַליין,
עלענט, איינזאַם ווי אַ שטיין.

Stable but immeasurably lonely
Is the hero I imagine:
Without confidence in today,
Without a dream for tomorrow
He will borrow from his enemies
Happiness and lust for life;
His wandering way will be accompanied
By the mocking sounds of chains.

In his blood, the cold fire—
Nothing will be dear to him,
He will already know all,
Only without faith or lust;
With his smile he will gladly
Destroy strange idols;
And then he will be left alone,
Wretched and lonely like a stone.[51]

As Dan Miron has shown, the description that the Hebrew poem's hero, Avisholem, gives of himself is modeled very closely after the description in *Rusland*:[52]

עַז אֲנִי וְלֹא לִגְבוּרָה.
אֵי בִּטְחוֹנִי בְּיוֹם הוֹלֵךְ,
הֶמְיַת נַפְשִׁי לְיוֹם מָחָר
וְלַעֲתִידוֹת כִּי תִקְרֶינָה?

רַךְ אֲנִי וְלֹא לְחֶדְוָה,
רַק לְאוֹיְבַי וְלִמְנַדַּי
אָרוּץ לִדְרֹשׁ וְאֶשְׁאֲלָה
רִנַּת חַיִּים וְחֶדְוָתָם;
וּבְעוֹד אֶצְחַק צְחוֹק שִׂבְעוֹנִי
תַּחֲרִידֵנִי כְּנַף־הַבְּדִידוּת,
יַכְלִימֵנִי פִּזְמוֹן כְּבָלִים.

I have might but not for heroics.
Where is my certitude in the passing day
The whispers of my soul for tomorrow
And for the futures that may come?

[51] Jacob Steinberg, "Rusland (Original and Translation by Shalom Luria)," *Dapim lemeḥkar basifrut* 2 (1985): 54.
[52] Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam*, 207.

I'm soft but not for joy,
Towards my enemies who banished me
I'll run to borrow
the song of life and their joy;
And while I laugh a sated laughter
I'll be terrified by the wing of loneliness,
I'll be put to shame by the tune of chains.[53]

Another formal element that features strongly in both poems is the long lists of similes, analogies, and comparisons that intervene between the speaker and the object of his description. Both Sivan and Cohen wrongfully describe these long lists (up to twenty successive images) as a unique experiment undertaken in "Mas'a Avisholem," and not a successful one. Cohen sees it as "a carnival of images" and another critic defines it as an unhealthy tendency.[54] But these long lists of comparisons already appear in *Rusland*, where they fulfill the same function of indicating "in their feebleness . . . delirium, dizziness, and an awakening that cannot express itself," as the only positive review of "Mas'a Avisholem" described it.[55] The similarity exists also in the loving description of Ukraine, described in both texts as a land of love and bounty, as well as in the qualification of the homeland as a woman, cruel and capricious in her love. However, as Shalom Luria sums it up:

> There is indeed a resemblance between "Mas'a Avisholem" and the epic poem *Rusland*, mainly concerning some topics addressed in both, the persona of the hero in the novel, the descriptions of Ukraine, the span of description, imagery, and characteristic rhetorical devices. On the other hand, differences stand out in regards to the structure, the development of the plot, in the descriptions of the house of study, the sea, the land of Israel, women, the tone, the motives, the point of view of the speaker and his worldview, the supporting characters, and the rhythmic structure.[56]

Luria is describing the strong sensation of rupture one gets when reading these two texts alongside each other. Because of the many similarities, the difference between *Rusland* and "Mas'a Avisholem" is uncanny. While looking very much alike, the personae in the texts are opposed to one another. The contained Yiddish speaker who avoids his inner

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[53] Steinberg, *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg*, 37.

[54] Sivan, *Shirat Ya'akov Shtaynberg*, 117.

[55] Ya'akov Fichman, *Kitvei Ya'akov Fikhman*, (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1959), 266. See for instance the following passage:

> וועַן אַ פֿרישער און געזונטער / יונגערמאַן גייט זיך דערשיסן [...] / וועַן עס ווערט אַ פֿרוי פֿאַרבונדן / מיט אַ מענטשן, וואָס זי האַסט, [...] וועַן אַ שיינע פֿרוי, וואָס נאַרט, / קושט און האַלדזט דיך זיס און צאַרט [...] וועַן אַ מיידל ווערט פֿאַרפֿירט; / וועַן אַ יתום פֿאַלט אין גאַס...
>
> When a fresh and healthy/ Young man goes to shoot himself . . . / when a woman's about to tie herself / To a man she hates . . . / When a beautiful woman who deceives / Kisses and holds you sweet and tender-like . . . / When a maid is led astray / When an orphan falls in the street . . . (Steinberg, "Rusland," 47–48.)

[56] Luria, "Ha-poema *Rusland* shel Ya'akov Shtaynberg ve-zikatah le-shirato be-'ivrit," 130.

world is replaced in the Hebrew poem by Avisholem who is driven by irrational desires, dreams, and mysterious sounds:

אֵלֶּה קוֹרוֹת אֲבִישָׁלוֹם
הוּא הָעֶלֶם כְּבַד־הַחֲלוֹמוֹת,
אֲשֶׁר הִצִּיל בְּיוֹם זָדוֹן,
בְּהִתְגוֹשֵׁשׁ אֵל בְּאֵלִים,
פְּלֵיטַת אֵשׁ וּשְׁיָר נִשְׁמָתוֹ.

This is the story of Avisholem
The youth heavy with dreams,
That saved in a day of evil,
As a god wrestled other gods,
A keepsake of fire and the remainder on his soul.[57]

The Yiddish novel and the Hebrew epic reveal two opposing experiences of reality. We can see this clearly if we compare the the encounter with Palestine in "Mas'a Avisholem" with the arrival in Russia in *Rusland*.

כְּצִלִּיל־שִׁיר חֲדַל־גַּעגּוּעִים,
כַּהֶבֶל עֲלִילוֹת עֶבֶד;
כְּזֵר פְּרָחִים אַחֲרֵי מִשְׁתֶּה
וְכַעֲטָרַת מֶלֶךְ נִשְׁכָּח;
כְּפְנֵי חֶרֶב חֲלוּדַת־לַהַב
וּכְעֻצְבוֹן לֹא תִשֹּׂיחֶנּוּ;
[...]
כָּכָה נִגְלְתָה הָאָרֶץ
לַאֲבִישָׁלוֹם בָּרִאשׁוֹנָה.

As the sound of a song that lost its longings,
As the vanity a slave's heroics;
As a bouquet of flowers after a dance
And as the crown of a forgotten king;
As the face of a sword consumed by rust
And as unspeakable sadness
[. . .]
So did the land reveal itself
to Avisholem for the first time.[58]

The long descriptive list found in "Mas'a Avisholem" is very different from the description found in *Rusland*:

וויידער זיי, די אַלטע בילדער,
אָט איז ער, דער דריטער קלאַס

[57] Steinberg, *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg*, 33.
[58] Ibid., 30.

מיטן ריח און געפילדער;
גויים־איוגן פֿול מיט האַס,
ייִדן־איוגן, אַך, אין זיי
שטעקט אַ ביטערער געשריי,
וועלכער איז, פֿון צו־פֿיל גרויל,
באַלד דערשטיקט געווען אין מויל.

Here again the old pictures,
Here it is, the third class
With its smell and bustle;
Gentiles' eyes full of hate,
Jewish eyes, ah, in which
A bitter cry is lodged,
Which, from too much horror,
Immediately chokes in the throat.[59]

In *Rusland* the irony and realism cover the violence found at the base of the social reality. On the other hand the highly symbolic, mythical images of "Mas'a Avisholem" are rooted in violent social relations that they block from view:

הָדוּר, דָגוּל, גְבַהּ עֵינַיִם
כָּכָה עָמַד אֲבִישָׁלוֹם
קוֹמְמִיוּת בַּעֲלוּמָיו
וּכְשֹׁךְ סַעֲרַת הָאֵלִים
בְּמוֹלַדְתּוֹ וּבְנַפְשׁוֹ.

Elegant, great and proud
so did Avisholem stand
rebelliously in his youth
as the storm of gods calmed down
in his homeland and soul.[60]

This description is very different from the mocking, self-ironic description of what is presumably the same period in *Rusland*.[61] These two texts present nearly opposing approaches to experience, and it stands to reason that they would do so as they were written from two very different subject positions. The person departing in *Rusland* leaves with a tremendous sense of rejection from a place and a woman he loved. The emotional state of the speaker is obfuscated by an ironic view of the harsh reality full of

[59] Steinberg, "Rusland," 32.
[60] Steinberg, *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg*, 32.
[61] See for instance:
אין דער צײַט, ווען אַלע פֿלעגן / דעם קאַפּריזן פריַהַייטס־גאָט / שענקען זייער האַרצס פֿאַרמעגן, – / פֿלעג איך מיט לײַכטן שפּאָט / אין געריוש זיך איינזאַם דרייען; / כ׳האָב שוין דאַן געווּסט פֿאַרהאַסן / דעם גפֿילדער פֿון די מאַסן, – / איך זוך גליק נאָר דאָרט, / וווּ צווייען
In the time when all / worshipped the capricious freedom god / with their heart's dearest goods— / I used to move around the tumult / with a slight scorn; / already then I knew to hate / the bustle of the masses— / I seek happiness only in twos. (Steinberg, "Rusland," 22.)

failure and rejection. This ironic mode cannot help but reflect the emotional and mythical worldview that guides it, thus placing the speaker in an unresolvable contradiction. "Mas'a Avisholem," on the contrary, is written from the opposite position. The speaker in the poem has arrived in Palestine. Following Hannan Hever, it could be argued that the need to cover the violence of the colonization of Palestine precluded the realist style of *Rusland* from being repeated in "Mas'a Avisholem."[62] As Luria writes: "*Rusland* is built on the relation between the past and the present, while 'Mas'a Avisholem'—between the present and the future."[63] This relation between the subject and the utopia implied in the relation between the present and the future has to be legitimized. Steinberg could not have produced the same image as in *Rusland* where he created a person forcibly belonging, through many sentimental and historical ties, to a social group and a land from which he feels alienated and rejected. Such an ironic-realist depiction of the Zionist reality of the colonization of Palestine could not have legitimized the speaker's position in relation to the nationalist project. At most it would have been another bitter disappointment, "The Truth from Eretz Yisrael" à la Steinberg.[64]

Yet the choice to immigrate to Palestine had to be justified. The commonplace justification found in the national literature had the land of Israel figure as the cure to the Jewish degenerate disease manifest in the life of the Diaspora.[65] Even if far-fetched, even if it were no more than a horizon of possibility, Hebrew critics and writers demanded that the land of Israel had to be the answer.[66] Therefore Steinberg recreated in "Mas'a Avisholem" the basic drama of the national literature: that of the conflict between the decadent poet and the worldview imposed on him by the national literature. The main question of the poem becomes the stormy inner world of the speaker with its conflicts and contradictions. Myth and complex existential questions replace social reality as the apparent driving force of the hero, requiring a heavy epic tone and form. The democratic vision of *Rusland* is replaced here with a strange tale of fate. The reality of Avisholem, who is pushed to Palestine by mysterious urges and sounds, is very different from that of the protagonist of *Rusland* who says: "nor ikh—kh'bin yung, ikh ken nokh klaybn" (but me, I'm young, I can still choose).[67] The atmosphere of alienation and hurt, which was an underlying sensation in *Rusland*, becomes in "Mas'a Avisholem" the cornerstone of a worldview: "eḥad hu yegon haḥayim" (the grief of life is one and the same). As Luria writes:

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[62] Hever, "Between Approval and Negation of the Diaspora in 'Abshalom's Journey' by Yaakov Steinberg," 252.

[63] Luria, "Ha-poema 'Rusland' shel Ya'akov Shtaynberg ve-zikatah le-shirato be-ivrit," 126.

[64] See Aḥad Ha-Am (Asher Ginzburg), "The Truth from Eretz-Yisrael": "In all things it is our custom to learn nothing from the past for the future. . . . Our brethren in Eretz Yisrael . . . were slaves in their land of exile, and they suddenly find themselves with unlimited freedom. . . . This sudden change has engendered in them an impulse for despotism, as always happens when 'a slave becomes a king.'" As quoted in Alan Dowty, "Much Ado About Little: Ahad Ha'am's 'Truth from Eretz Yisrael, Zionism, and the Arabs," *Israel Studies* 5, no. 2 (2000) 175.

[65] Ḥamutal Bar-Yosef, *Maga'im shel dekadens: Bialik, Berdichevsky, Brener* (Tel Aviv: Ben Gurio University, 1997), 17.

[66] Hever, "Between Approval and Negation of the Diaspora in 'Abshalom's Journey' by Yaakov Steinberg," 234.

[67] Steinberg, "Rusland," 7.

> The epic poem "Mas'a Avisholem" is not a literary or spiritual continuation of *Rusland*, unless we wish to perceive it as a leap from one character to another, from one situation to another, from one point of view to another, and from one language to the other.[68]

VIII. Avisholem and "Di troyerike libe"

Notably, while performing this jump from one character and language to another Steinberg employs a model borrowed from his Yiddish poetry. For all its similarities to *Rusland*, "Mas'a Avisholem" is modeled very closely after Steinberg's "Di troyerike libe." The poem "Di troyerike libe" tells of a young man and his attempt, and failure, to love a "beautiful, pure Jewish girl." Formally the poems are very similar in their proximity to the poetic models of Bialik: the epic and the autobiographical. Both display the same structure: long lines (octo- or decasyllabic) with an epic meter, which are interrupted on several occasions by an address in short rhymed verses. In both poems the protagonist and unnatural speakers pronounce these addresses: the winds of creation in "Di troyerike libe" and dreams in "Mas'a Avisholem." Both open with a declaration placing the event of narration in an extreme and suggestive emotional state. Compare the beginning of "Di troyerike libe":

ס׳שטייען אויף פֿאַר מיר געשטאַלטען
ליבע, טײַערע – און לאַכען
מיט אַ קול פֿון אַ געליעבטער,
גוט און זיס צו מיר; –
וויַטער קומט איר מיך דערמאָנען
ליבע־טעג און ליבע־אָוונטס.

> Images present themselves to me
> loved, dear—and laugh
> with a voice of a beloved,
> good and sweet for me;
> come remind me
> of days of love and loving evenings.[69]

And in "Mas'a Avisholem":

יְפִי הָאַלְמָוֹת בַּחֲלוֹמִי
וּלְבָבִי גַּחֶלֶת עֲמוּמָה
צַו נֵצַח עַל שְׂפָתַי הַקּוֹדְחוֹת
וּבְיָדִי הַקָּרָה אֵין מְאוּמָה
[. . .]
וַעֲשֵׂי־לֵב בֵּין אוּדֵי יְצִירָה
מֵחֲלוֹם הַתַּעְתּוּעִים לֹא אֶרֶף
כְּגִיבּוֹר הַנּוֹפֵל עַל חַרְבּוֹ

[68] Luria, "Ha-poema *Rusland* shel Yaakov Shtaynberg ve-zikatah le-shirato be-'ivrit," 127.
[69] Steinberg, *Gezamlte shriftn*, 56.

וְעֵינָיו הַגּוֹוְעוֹת — לַחֶרֶב.

The beauty of immortality is in my dream
and my heart is a smoldering charcoal
the decree of eternity on my burning lips
and in my hand there is nothing
[. . .]
and with a smoking heart
among the ashes of creation
I will not let go of the delirious dream
like a hero falling on his sword
and his dying eyes on the blade.[70]

The two texts also differ considerably, but unlike the relation to *Rusland*, here the differences show a clear development rather than rejection or opposition. Take for example the depiction of childhood.[71] In "Di troyerike libe" childhood is presented in a series of disassociated vignettes, each endowing the speaker with a specific quality. In "Mas'a Avisholem" it is reduced to the one childhood experience that was canonized in Bialik's poetry: leaving the *beit midrash*. The description of this experience in "Mas'a Avisholem" is remarkably close to descriptions found in the poems of Bialik.

עוֹדוֹ נַעַר וַיִּבָּדֵל
מִבְּנֵי גִילוֹ הוֹגֵי־תוֹרָה
בְּבֵית רַבָּם וּבַחֲבוּרָה:
הוּא לְבַדּוֹ, רַךְ וְיִחִידִי
נָטַר דְּמָמַת בֵּית־מִדְרָשׁ
בַּאֲפֵלַת לֵילֵי חֹרֶף,
עֵת גַּם לַהַב נֵר־הַתָּמִיד
נִזְקַף תּוֹהֶה עַל הָעַמּוד
כִּמְשׁתָּאֶה לָעַצֶבֶת,
וְהַחֶשֵׁכָה סְפוּגַת יָגוֹן
דִּם נִתְקַפְּלָה בַּזְּוִיוֹת.

While still a boy he distinguished
himself from his peers who ponder on the Torah
in their rabbi's house or in commune;
he alone, soft and solitary
he watched over the silence of the house of study
when even the flame of the everlasting candle
rose perplexed on the lectern
as if amazed by the sadness.
And the grief-soaked darkness

[70] Steinberg, *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg*, 31.
[71] Childhood is completely absent from *Rusland*, as it is absent from the rest of Steinberg's poetry.

silently folded itself to the corners.[72]

The expressions and images used in the scene of departure are taken from a number of Bialik's poems,[73] such as "Alone": "All gone with the wind, all swept away by the light / A new song filled with song the morning of their lives / And I, a tender chick, was quite forgot / Alone under the wing of the Divine Presence."[74] The impact of these allusions is strong. As Miron writes, in "Mas'a Avisholem" the scene in the house of study "inspires in the reader repulsion and wonder . . . it feels not only as a nearness to Bialik that is too intimate but also a certain quality of being essentially derivative."[75] Steinberg constructs the scene in a way that demonstrates it is an intentional and critical parody of Bialik's poetry.[76] Avisholem's departure from the *beit midrash* is a parody that transforms Bialik's crisis of faith from a foundational trauma into a generational experience, one stereotypical event among many.[77] However, beyond this parody, the entire scene of leaving the house of study is a translation—allusions, parody, and all—from the parallel segment of "Di troyerike libe":

איינער אַליין איז דאָס יִנגל געזעסען
אין דעם פֿאַרחושכטע קליוז און געחלומט.
שטיל קוקט די ווינטער־נאַכט דורך די צוועלף פֿענסטער
אינעם בית־מדרש דעם פּוסטען אריִן;
שטיל איז אין קליוז און עס רירט זיך קיין זאַך נישט;
ס׳דרימעלט דער עמוד, דער פֿלאַם פֿון נר־תּמיד,
אונטער דעם פּרוכת שלאָפֿט גאָט און זיִן תּורה,
ס׳שלאָפֿט אויך זיִן גלויבען אין האַרץ ביי דעם יִנגל;
באַלד וועט אויך ער, דער לעצטער, אַנטלויפֿען . . .

The only one and alone the youngster sat
in the darkened house of study and dreamt.
The winter night looks in through the twelve windows
of the dusty *besmedresh*
The room is silent and not a thing moves
The lectern and the flame of the everlasting candle are dreaming,
under the curtain God sleeps with his Torah
his faith is also asleep in the youngster's heart.
Soon he will escape as well, the last one . . .[78]

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[72] Ibid., 32.
[73] Ada Barkai, *Mishka'im Bialikaiyim be-shirat meshorerim 'ivriyim be-reshit ha-meah ha-'esrim, 1900–1920* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1976), 108. Interestingly Barkai and Miron both see in "Mas'a Avisholem" allusions taken from Bialik's "Mul aron ha-sefarim." Bialik's poem was in fact published in 1910, three years after the publication of Steinberg's poem.
[74] H. N. Bialik, *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik*, trans. A. Hadari (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 23.
[75] Miron, *Bodedim be-mo'adam*, 202.
[76] Ibid., 204.
[77] Ibid., 214.
[78] Steinberg, *Gezamlte shriftn*, 59.

The distance created by the use of Yiddish softens the sensation of overload generated by the excess of references to Bialik. In Hebrew it is Bialik's very words that strike at the reader. Similarly the fact that leaving the traditional house of study is only one of four biographical episodes appearing in "Di troyerike libe" (childhood, hunger, and violence being the others) dilutes Bialik's presence to a bearable measure. The difference between the two poems sharpens the message of the Hebrew poem and brings to the surface the criticism implied in the parody. The many experiences of "Di troyerike libe" are reduced here to one that determines and sets the tone for all the experiences to follow. The house of study scene appears in "Mas'a Avisholem" in the beginning of the canto "The Death of Gods." In the course of this canto the hero sits in the house of study by the side of his god until it dies. Saying goodbye, he sets out into the world but carries with him the faint scent of dead sanctity.[79] This attribute, the smell of dead sanctity, will accompany Avisholem further in his encounters with the new gods of the revolution or Zionism, revealing to him that to die is the gods' only godlike characteristic. In the Hebrew poem, these experiences are narrated briefly compared to the space they take up in "Di troyerike libe." What has been a general atmosphere in "Di troyerike libe," a hushed resentment against the false ideals imposed by romanticism and the national literature on the speaker, represented by the presence of Bialik, becomes in "Mas'a Avisholem" a clear idea and an attack on the national literature. The attack is carried through the parodic use of Bialik's poetry: its institution as a psychic and emotional foundation of the speaker and its subsequent presentation as false and misleading.

IX. The Price of *Noḥam*

In mourning, one is always compromised, always in danger of bad faith, of profiteering from the death of the other. One is at risk of performing the act of mourning in order to serve one's own narcissistic ends. The funeral oration itself is beset with bad faith and denial, as asking forgiveness of the dead is a performative act aimed at expiating guilt and camouflaging the fact that the dead can no longer forgive. Steinberg does not ask for forgiveness, makes no funeral oration, but rather settles for corrosive remorse. The national drama, as much as the erotic one, always involves a choice for him, a choice that is translated into betrayal and entails a terrible loss. It is this loss that constructs and determines the value of what was gained. When the poem "Mas'a Avisholem" is read through the prism of Steinberg's own Yiddish poetry it becomes clear that it is the renunciation of Yiddish expressed in the poem that generates the melancholic gaze. The engagement with *Rusland* demonstrates that the ironic, sharp-eyed and sharp-tongued, indifferent Yiddishist persona had to be left behind, not because he was a failed experiment but, quite the contrary, because he was such a successful one, whose sharp vision was too threatening for Steinberg to sustain in Hebrew. The joint effect of the crude use of Bialik's poetic world and word alongside the

[79] וּבֵין קִמְטֵי הַפָּרֹכֶת / רָעַד כָּל הַלַּיְלָה בַּחֲשַׁאי / רֶטֶט אֱלֹהִים הָאַחֲרוֹן / וְיֵאָלֵם עִם הַבֹּקֶר,- / אָז הִתְנַעֵר גַּם הָעֶלֶם / וְיִצְמֶד לִבְנֵי גִילוֹ, / אַך בְּצֵאתוֹ מִן הַבַּיִת / דְּבַק אֵלָיו לָעוֹלָמִים / רֵיחַ דַּק שֶׁל קְדֻשָּׁה מֵתָה

And between the folds of the curtain / all night a last tremor of god / in secret trembled / and with morning went silent / then the youth shook himself / and joined his fellow youngsters / but upon leaving the house / a faint smell of dead sanctity / was attached to him for eternity. (Steinberg, *Kol kitvei Yaakov Shtaynberg*, 34.)

exposure of Avisholem's roots in the speaker of "Di troyerike libe" shows how impoverished the new Zionist persona is when it is reduced to nothing but the nationalist urge. The poetic development of the epic poem "Mas'a Avisholem" does not succeed in justifying the immigration to Palestine. The renewed contact with the divine, which justifies the national project, will appear in Steinberg's later poetry through the religious-redemptive practice of poetic labor, as the fusion between the language, the land, and the past through remorse, "noḥam." Steinberg puts Avisholem behind him, his European longings and misgivings as well as the different futures and utopias he represented, which were still possible in Europe but now void because of this act of will, this choice of Zionism. The sacrifice of Avisholem was necessary so that the ascetic jeweler-poet could take the stage.

Even so, this sacrifice is not shown in a redemptive light. Steinberg creates in "Mas'a Avisholem" a dramatic scene that accentuates what Bialik tries to smooth over. Bialik tries to lock the dead in place, so to speak, to take care of the funeral arrangements and dispose of the corpse in the most convenient and productive way possible, while promising a sort of rebirth or afterlife. Steinberg, on the other hand, puts up a spectacle—where his dead Yiddishist self is not reborn in Hebrew nor is he by any means disposed of. Avisholem, much like the unnamed speakers of *Rusland* and "Di troyerike libe," rests at the bottom of everything, a reminder of guilt that draws the poetic gaze. The melancholic gaze cannot help but see that this sacrifice might be construed as necessary but it is still untimely, sorrowful, and ultimately unsuccessful.