

ESTRANGED NIGHTINGALES: ON POETRY WRITTEN BY NEAR EASTERN JEWS IN ISRAEL

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1. Introduction

While poetry written by Near Eastern Jews in Israel generally follows the forms of Israeli poetry in general, their poetry does not simply emulate the writing of Israeli poets of European origin; rather, it sometimes introduces unique settings, themes and metaphoric language drawn from the specific background of poets of Near Eastern background. It is, therefore, important to recognize the unique contribution of this poetry within the context of the larger corpus of Israeli poetry. Eben-Zohar (1973, p. 431) sets a minimal requirement in order to determine whether a literary work belongs to "Israeli literature" or not. He uses the "territorial criteria": if a literary work belongs to the place, to the population, to the language and culture of Israel—then it is an Israeli literary work. On the basis of Eben-Zohar's territorial criteria the poetry of Near Eastern Jews in Israel certainly belongs to Israeli literature: it belongs to Israel, to its population, to its language and culture.

The beginning stages of modern Hebrew literature in Israel occurred from about 1880 through the end of World War I. The end of that war marked the beginning of an accelerated process (1920–1935) which made Israel the center of Hebrew literature. With that shift of the center of Hebrew literature to the land of Israel, Near Eastern Jews began contributing to Hebrew literature on a more regular basis. In his introductory essay on Hebrew literature, Sadan (1950, pp. 53–55) describes the beginnings of the participation of Sephardic Jews in Hebrew literature in Israel, first in prose and later in poetry, and he indicates that, within time, Jews of all backgrounds will express themselves in that literature. Indeed, the literary productivity of Israeli authors of Near Eastern origin is a fact of the Israeli literary scene today.

Near Eastern Jews in the land of Israel participated first in the field of prose (Burla, Shami) and only later in the field of poetry. Their contribution to the center of Hebrew literature in Israel preceded the Palestinian period (1920–1947). Mordekay Tabib (born in Rishon Leṣion in 1910, of Yemenite origin) began his literary career as a poet. His first poems appeared in the supplement of *Dābār* in 1938; but it was only after the mass immigration of Near Eastern Jews to Israel in the nineteen-fifties that Hebrew poetry came to be gradually published on a regular basis. Since then their contribution to Israeli poetry has occurred on an accelerated level.

Some of these poets wrote first in other languages (Arabic, English, French), shifting to Hebrew when they immigrated to Israel. Many of them already knew Hebrew to some extent, making this shift easier. Shlomo Zamir, Shalom Katab and Aharon Zakay, for example, wrote and published in Arabic in Iraq, but they wrote in Hebrew after immigrating to Israel. Zakay and Zamir published their volume of poetry a relatively short time after coming to Israel, Zakay in 1957 and Zamir in 1960, when he was awarded the Shlonsky prize. Needless to say, poets of European origin experienced the same difficulties in shifting to Hebrew. Raḥel and E. Zusman, for example, started writing in Russian; S. Shalom, in German; Anda Amir Pinkerfield, in Polish.

Israeli poets of Near Eastern background who were born in Israel, such as Mordekay Tabib and Aharon Almog, and also those who arrived to Israel at an early age—such as the twins Hersel and Balfur Hakak, who came to Israel at the age of two—did not confront the problem of changing their language of composition.

In a current autobiographical publication (1986, p. 38), S. Shalom tells the reader about the first poems he wrote in German at the age of eleven, living in Vienna. His teacher directed him toward becoming an important German poet, but he experienced a crisis and swore that he would no longer write in German and would instead strive to be a Hebrew poet. A more detailed accounting of the difficulty in changing from one language to another was provided by Samy Michael, an Israeli writer born in Iraq.

Michael describes (1983, pp. 8–11) how Jewish authors, immigrating to Israel from Iraq, dealt with their new situations. Some of them continued to write in Arabic for the readers they left behind in Iraq, and even considering their talent they became frustrated and bitter because only a little part of their writing was published and they became unknown. Another group—including Shmuel Moreh, Sason Somek and David Zemah, ceased publishing creative work and turned instead to the

field of research in Arabic language and literature. Only a few writers from Iraq chose to write in Hebrew. In his autobiographical essay, Michael described how, in spite of the fact that he moved to Israel in 1949 at the age of twenty-two, he is still bewildered—his Hebrew literary work in Israel is neither typically Iraqi nor typically Israeli. Michael discusses some ways in which he was affected by the fact of being an Israeli writer whose origin is an Arab country. In Iraq he belonged to a minority group (Jews) which had to live in silence. Any attempt to raise his voice and protest against what was done to Jews there was tantamount to committing suicide. Once in Israel, he was able to write about Arab-Jewish relations in Iraq without feelings of guilt or fear. Not having studied in Israeli schools, his knowledge of Hebrew, Jewish sources and Hebrew literature was limited, and for a long time he used translation mechanisms (from Arabic or English) in order to write in a language which was not his mother tongue.

Michael presents feelings and problems typical of his generation of Near Eastern writers, and even though he wrote prose, the issues he raised apply equally to poetry.

Generally speaking, due to language problems, most of the first generation of the Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin lacked a sophisticated knowledge of one layer or another of Hebrew literature and did not use allusions as an important device in their poetry. This resulted in an innovative and fascinatingly original poetry, free of tradition, in the case of Shlomo Zamir; sometimes it resulted in missing sophisticated language opportunities in the context of their writing. Allusions are used in Hebrew with powerful effects due to the sources alluded to—the Bible, the prayer book and well-known writers in the field of modern Hebrew Literature. Michael's generation does not make an extensive use of allusion. However, the generation which was born and educated in Hebrew does make sophisticated use of allusion, as we shall note in the case of "Šāhîn" and "Look at the ground" of Almog, which allude both to biblical verses and modern Hebrew poems.

In some cases, a poet's poetic language is influenced by his specific background. "I am hoarse rabbabba in a black bosom," writes Erez Biton (1979, p. 7), referring in his metaphor to the musical stringed instrument used by the Bedouins, usually around the camp fire at evening. Yosi Ozer (1981) writes, "the dates which you ate just today, here are their pits in my pocket since yesterday" (1981, p. 18), a translation of an Iraqi-Jewish proverb, meaning: What you just now grasped—I have already known for a long time. In another poem (*Ibid.*, 20) Ozer uses the Jewish-Arabic idiom in its original language. This idiom states

that “the figs are dense (compact, compressed—L.H.) and the nuts are noisy”—referring to two types of people: One which hides cunningly and one which is boisterous and candid. Biton uses Jewish-Moroccan language in certain poems, as if to say that the language and the event are inseparable—and he translates the Jewish-Moroccan into Hebrew within the poem itself (1976, pp. 32–33). The lips of the bride in Biton’s “Moroccan Wedding” (1976, pp. 36–39) are described in this way: “Your lips are two dates / of the Buskary kind, which is the sweetest kind.”

The Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin write without fearing “the authorities” and enjoy freedom of speech of Israel. Michael, for example, describes how the Jewish writers in Iraq were silent after the 1941 riots against the Jews in Iraq, because protesting would endanger their lives. But in Israel, the Iraqi born poet (1931) Shalom Katab wrote poems (1973, pp. 73–96) in which he vividly described those riots. He also wrote poems (1973, pp. 124–48) to the memory of the Ten Martyrs of 1969 in Iraq.

It is noteworthy that some poets of Near Eastern background who were born in Israel (such as Aharon Almog and Tubia Sulami) give special expression to their unique background within Israeli life. But just as some Israeli poets of European origin (i.e., David Shimoni, Natan Alterman, Yisrael Efrat) wrote about Near Eastern Jews, some poets of Near Eastern origin born in Israel (i.e., Shulamit Kohen) or immigrants to Israel (i.e., Aharon Zakay) wrote poetry lacking any thematic or stylistic traces of their origin.

Today, poets such as Erez Biton, Shlomo Avayo, Aharon Almog, Roni Somek, Gavriela Elisha, Selley Elkayam, Peres Banay, Herşel Hakak, Balfur Hakak, Shalom Katab, Mose Sartel and other Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin contribute regularly to the Israeli literary scene. While today the literary work of Near Eastern Jews appears regularly in literary supplements and periodicals, the existing English anthologies of Hebrew poetry do not as yet reflect this recent change, and such poetry is inadvertently excluded from most of these anthologies. For example, an anthology published in 1966, *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (Burnshaw, Carmi and Spicandler) does not include a single Hebrew poem by a poet of Near Eastern origin, and neither do anthologies published later (Finer-Mintz, 1968; Bernhard, 1980; Carmi, 1981). And when some expression was given to this poetry, its real place was not reflected; in the anthology of Schwartz and Rudolf (1980) only four pages were devoted to translations of poems by poets of Near Eastern origins (Shulamit Kohen and Erez Biton).

The poetry of Near Eastern Jews was overlooked in anthologies of Hebrew poetry in translation because for a long period it was also overlooked in the Israeli literary scene and establishment. Bringing an area of modern Hebrew poetry which has been largely ignored to the attention of the literary and scholarly world is therefore a significant task. The changes in the Israeli literary scene during the last decade—which integrated the poetry of Near Eastern Jews into the established corpus of contemporary Israeli poetry—are not yet reflected in anthologies of Hebrew poetry in translation. Poetic presentations of the atmosphere, ways of life, customs, characters, historical events and folkloristic characters from the specific background of the Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin have not found their way into any anthology of contemporary Israeli poetry in translation. When this is accomplished, the reader will be simultaneously introduced to some poetic elements unique to these poets, such as the use of original or translated idioms from the Jewish dialect of a given poet which serves as an organic element in the world he describes, or the use of figurative language and emotional tone intrinsic to the events and ways of life described in the poem.

Selecting poems from the many volumes published by Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin is a pioneering task. The existing research and anthologies which could assist in selecting representative works are relatively scarce.¹

In the frame of this article I will attempt a close reading of three poems written by two Israeli poets of Near Eastern background—two poems by Aharon Almog and one by Erez Biton.² We will then use these poems to demonstrate some aspects of the unique contribution of Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin to modern Hebrew poetry. Almog and Biton are important poets on the Israeli scene generally and two of the most prominent poets of Near Eastern origin. Their poetry combines both sophisticated use of poetic devices, demanding the constant active participation of the reader, and frequent attachment to unique aspects of the life of Near Eastern Jews. Though Almog was born in Israel, he

1. Foundational works related to the field were done by the author of this paper; by Abraham Štal and by Yafa Binyamini. For some works of Štal and Binyamini see the Bibliographies in my books (Hakak 1981; 185).

2. All the three poems in this article were translated from the Hebrew with the generous help of my colleague, Professor Herbert Davidson, University of California, Los Angeles. Another translation of this poem may be found in the anthology of Schwartz and Rudolf, 1980, p. 61. See the Appendix for the Hebrew text of Šahin.

relates to his Yemenite background in many of his poems. Biton relates to his specific background in a vivid, emotional and sensual manner, using distinct details and relating to them in an emotional poetic style. Almog relates to his specific background in a subtle, restrained manner. The three poems selected represent and demonstrate some of the unique characteristics of this poetry—in their descriptions, images, ideas, and treatments of the confrontation between East and West.

2. *Two Poems of Aharon Almog*

The poetry of Aharon Almog, a third generation Israeli born (1931) poet of Yemenite origin, closely reflects some of Israel's compelling national and social issues. The trivial daily reality is judged with perspective in his poems. Some of his poems have a narrative, story-like basis. The fact that he was educated in Israel and that he is familiar with both modern Hebrew literature and older Jewish sources informs his poetry through the sophisticated use of allusions. Almog's sophisticated poetic world draws from the poems of Bialik and Zak, from the Bible and the Talmud. The various effects attained through his use of allusions make of the heritage of the Hebrew language an enriching source of allusions and not a stylistic burden. The effects of such allusions are left to the reader, who at times senses the perception of humor in Almog's serious poems, and the impact of the allusion becomes seriocomic. For example, in his poem "ʿĀên qōlnôa^c sderot" (1979, pp. 9–10) seeing an embracing couple, he demands of any witness to this loving act: "put off thy shoes from off thy feet"—the same language that God used in telling Moses to take off his shoes "for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). This use of allusion is simultaneously a means of depicting the bond of love as holy and of secularization of the sacred sources. After instructing the one viewing the embracing couple to take off his shoes, Almog now employs a curse in colloquial Arabic which was absorbed into the Hebrew slang in order to reproach the viewer and to ensure that he obeys the instruction. The effects of the allusion and the mixture of lofty biblical language with an Arabic curse in a Hebrew poem are left to the individual reader; they are serious and humorous at the same time.

It is noteworthy that Almog's poetry, in spite of his being a third generation Israeli, renders a sensitivity to his own specific community and to its social issues, and he addresses himself in his poetry to social aspects of the life of Near Eastern Jews in Israel, as evident in his poem "Šahîn" (See the Hebrew text in the Appendix to this article).

ŠAHÎN

Šahîn. Who would believe that there is a name with such
 Oriental enchantment
 A king's daughter
 A princess—although she was never informed
 Even she did not know
 Nor did her parents
 And so she came here from the East with her patrimony
 First a transit camp, then a rickety shack
 Finally a house with a little garden
 The young men saw her and they praised her
 She met someone cool who was like a brother to her
 He asked: What's your name?
 She said: Šahîn
 (What a jack ass; he did not understand)
 He rented an apartment, he took care of the ambience—a table
 A sofa living room furniture, car, phone
 Carpets, balcony. At night he said to her: "I
 Luv Yoo Šahîn". During the day he played tag
 With her. He enjoyed it. She enjoyed it, and
 Thus slowly, slowly, died the legend of
 Šahîn.
 Šahîn
 Patience
 You and I slowly slowly
 You see²

"Šahîn" is the first of three love poems which appear at the end of Aharon Almog's "*Hašda'a lëyisrā'el hiltôn yërûšālāyim*" (1977, pp. 69–71). "Šahîn" (p. 70) focuses upon love for an Israeli woman of a Near Eastern origin and on the erosion of that woman's life.

Some of the language of the poem suggests a light attitude on the part of the poetic speaker toward his subject. The intonation of the poetic speaker is restrained, he avoids explicit "protest"; and agony is felt with some resignation. Disillusionment with the new Israeli life style explains in a seemingly casual manner, the presence of agony in the poem. The casual attitude and undertone of frustration elicits strong sympathy for the suffering character in the poem—Šahîn and the poetic speaker. The poet uses both colloquial Hebrew and highly poetic language for his purpose. In some lines, the colloquial Hebrew rises to a poetic style due to its juxtaposition with the lofty words, the rhythm, and the biblical allusions.

The name “Šahîn” assumes importance in that the entire opening sentence of the poem dwells upon it. The poet employs a period only three times in the poem, twice following the name, Šahîn, which alludes to someone royal (the Persian King—the Šah). This Near Eastern name has a metonymic quality, enchanting in its very sound. The Hebrew text draws our attention to the name also because of the rhymes: “Šahîn” “*ma’ămîn*” (believe) “*mîn*” (such, also sex). The enjambement at the end of the first line encourages us to connect Šahîn and sex (“*mîn*” means sex). The second line, however, emphasizes the origin of Šahîn and renders the contextual meaning of “*mîn*” as (such).

As the poetic speaker moves to describe Šahîn herself, he alludes to Bialik’s poem “May my lot be with you.” Bialik descried, in that poem, the thirty-six righteous men who were believed to exist secretly in the world. Bialik’s poem describes them as “rich—although you were never informed / Spiritual noblemen—and you did not know.” The allusion makes Šahîn as one of the thirty-six righteous people. Almog alters the language of the above quoted second line of Bialik, substituting for Bialik’s high and dramatic style a colloquial Hebrew more appropriate to the new time and place and the mundane reality. Šahîn, by the power of the allusion, is perceived as a woman of rare virtues.

Šahîn’s parents and Šahîn herself, are innocent and unaware of her uniqueness. She herself did not know that she is a princess (in nature, in the eyes of the speaker) “nor did her parents / and so she came here from the East with her patrimony.” In the world of Šahîn’s family, her virtues are normal human qualities.

Step by step, Šahîn progressed economically in Israel. Employing both Biblical and colloquial Hebrew, the poet describes briefly both Šahîn’s suffering and her gradual economical progress. Šahîn started on the lowest economic level, living in a rickety shack (the transit camp of Israel in the 1950’s). Only when she attained “finally a house with a little garden,” did young men discover her; they “saw her” and “praised her,” an allusion to the biblical Song of Solomon (6:9). This allusion brings forth all the unique qualities of the beloved woman of the Song of Solomon. The poem alludes also to another biblical source, the Woman of Valor (Proverbs 31:10–31): Both elevate Šahîn to a lofty rank. In the Hebrew text of the poem, grammatical rhymes result from the structure of the suffixes (“*hôrêhā*”—her parents: “*abôtehā*”—her ancestors, here translated as “patrimony”). Then the reader finds sophisticated rhymes—connecting the Modern Hebrew song and the biblical allusions: “*rā^{ua}*” (rickety); “*Rā^{uhā}*” (saw her): “*vayhalêlûhā*” (and they praised her). Like the rhymes of this poem which fuse together biblical allusions and

modern Hebrew song, Šahîn combines in herself both the great characteristics of the biblical woman and the contemporary Near Eastern woman who immigrated to Israel.

When Šahîn lives as an Israeli *petit bourgeois* the legendary Šahîn is no more.

The “cool” guy who met Šahîn was practical, not sophisticated. Unlike the poetic speaker, it did not occur to him to compare Šahîn to the beloved woman of the Song of Solomon, to the Woman of Valor or to the thirty-six righteous people. She was “just a woman” to him and he did not understand her special virtues (“what a jack ass”), but he had an effective way of tempting Šahîn. He gave her all the status symbols of a beginning Israeli couple—a rented apartment, living room furniture, a car, a telephone, carpets, balcony. The list is long and specific and definite—unlike the expansive and poetic terms with which the poetic speaker described Šahîn—“a king’s daughter,” “a princess” in her nature. The “royal” terminology is supplanted by a mundane and materialistic reality. Šahîn’s husband is busy with his wife day and night. At night he applied his learning from American movies as he tells his wife in English “I / Luv Yoo.” The sound of “I” ending the line describing what he said to her at night is also a sexual allusion in light of the enjambement (only in the following line does it become clear that “I” is a transliterated English word and not merely a sound of excitement).

Šahîn’s married life signals the death of the legend. The speaker uses colloquial Hebrew in order to describe the sense of routine life of Šahîn, and simple rhymes are used in order to strengthen the routine and the repetitive nature of her life: *hikkîrâ* (she met)—*‘āmêrâ* (she said)—*‘avîrâ* (ambience); *memmûlâḥ* (“cool”)—*‘āḥ* (a brother); “Šahîn”—*hêbîn* (he understood); *sālôn* (living room furniture)—telephone; *mirpeset* (a balcony) *tôpeset* (tag); *nehêntâ* (she enjoyed) *mêtâ* (died); *lê‘aḥ* (slowly) *‘agâdat* (the legend of). Some of these rhymes serve to strengthen meanings: The “cool” guy (*memmûlâḥ*) acts as Šahîn’s “brother” (*‘āḥ*) in order to acquire her innocent trust: The living room furniture (“*sālôn*”) and “the telephone” create ambience (*‘avîrâ*) in the apartment (*dîrâ*). During the day Šahîn’s husband played tag (*topeset*) with her on the balcony (*mirpeset*)—recalling an Israeli song describing a girl who had missed her opportunity because she rejected the boy who loved her and with whom she played tag on the balcony. The allusion to that song (about Yosi and Miryam) points to the immaturity of Šahîn’s husband and to Šahîn’s sad end. The ironic detailed description of Šahîn’s married life voices the bitterness and cry of the speaker. Šahîn did not fulfill herself in a way suited to her unique qualities. The royal is exchanged

for the trivial, the lofty and untouchable for the mundane and easy-to-reach.

The poem is not explicitly one of social protest, but it makes it clear that Šahîn's life in the new land moves toward the grey and the trivial because of her innocence. The longest line in the poem, describing all the tempting acquisitions of the man whom Šahîn met, is compared with the short lines in which she was described as "a king's daughter" and "a princess". The little possessions replace the royal and the lofty and brings death to the legend. The shortest lines convey inner wealth, while the longest, naming all the acquisitions voices emptiness.

In the last four lines of the poem the speaker attempts to give hope to Šahîn. They form an incomplete sentence. The speaker does not accept the death of the romantic legend. We were already told that Šahîn's legend died "slowly, slowly." The speaker now promises Šahîn that "slowly slowly" he and she—but he does not complete the statement. Do those concluding lines voice his realization that it is too late for both of them, or his disbelief that anything will change in their lives? What in fact occurred "slowly, slowly" was the death of the legend and after that death nothing will revive. The Hebrew rhymes strengthen the meaning: "lēʔat-lēʔat" (slowly slowly)—"ʔagadat" (the legend of)—"anī vēʔat" (I and you)—the slow death of the legend was also the death of the possibility that the speaker and Šahîn will be united.

Pain and explicit social protest are well restrained in the poem. The factual narrative tone avoids emotionally charged language. Settled irony effectively replaces the need for an explicit social protest. Humor ("... At night he said to her I / Luv Yoo Šahîn") serves to achieve a low-key intonation. In the Hebrew text rhythm expresses meaning, and meaning contributes to establishing the rhythm. A slow rhythm pervades the first part of the poem; the marriage activity and business is then described in a rapid rhythm accomplished by intense activity, the list of possessions, and the many rhymes accompanying the colloquial Hebrew. At the conclusion the rhythm slows down again—paralleling the slow death of the legend and reflecting the resistant position of the speaker who can offer no comfort of message to Šahîn and who is passive and thoughtful, unlike the "wise guy" who had married her.

The entire poem consists of one stanza. The length of the lines is determined by the meaning, the rhythm and the linguistic tensions. The rhymes are casual. They are not decorative and give little indication of striving for a richness of sound. They also contribute to the meaning. Rhythm, not meter, is significant in this poem. The emphasis is not on

astonishing metaphors but on organic form. The use of the colloquial Hebrew and the Biblical allusions are integral to the message.

A strong message is hidden in the poetic lines even as they seem to convey a lightness of attitude. Šahîn and her parents, like many other Near Eastern Jews, were transplanted to Israel; the real subject of the poem is the cost of that transplanting.

(See the Hebrew text in the Appendix to this article).

LOOK AT THE GROUND

They ate the livers drank all the
Whisky and the beers (in Bet-She²an there are hungry children)
They put the drumsticks in their pockets for the dogs (They thought that
I Didn't see) they took the frosting off the cakes.

The party is over. There are expenses. We only use imported
Waiters. Two of them fainted as you can see. One is Jacques—a thin
moustache polished shoes champignon soup. Love!
That's something else.
With all the respect. For you.

Up to half the kingdom. A Last Tango, solo
It's no disaster Ms. Hason. The official
Erred. Every man

Has his day. Its not worth
Heart palpitations. Look at the ground and regard the notice
From the IRS as null and void.

The title of this poem alludes to a well-known Israeli poem by Shaul Tshernihovsky, "Behold, Oh Earth." Tshernihovsky's title in Hebrew is: "*Rē²i, ʔādāmā*" and Almog's title is: "*Rē²i ʔādāmā*"—the same words without the comma. We translated these words in two different ways—"Behold, Oh Earth" for Tshernihovsky's poem and "Look at the ground" for Almog's poem. (The translations reflect the fine differences of the meaning.) Tshernihovsky's poem, written in 1939, was published in 1940 in a poetry volume of the same title (Schocken, 1940, p. 3). Tshernihovsky addressed the earth of Israel in the name of the Jews in Israel. From 1936 to 1939, riots broke out in the land and Jews were murdered. The Jews in Israel, according to the poetic speaker, were spendthrifts—instead of burying in the earth such grains as wheat, spelt, barley or oats, they planted the choicest of their sons, who had sacrificed their lives for the defense of the *yīššūb*. Tshernihovsky found the desired bond between the people and the land of Israel. The poem, which laments the

death of Israeli pioneers, also celebrates a national victory based on that love of the land which justifies such a sacrifice: "Behold, Oh Earth, what spendthrifts we are indeed! / . . . take you the best of our sons . . . / Blest be their offering of death . . ." (Silberschlag, 1968, pp. 177-78).³

The speaker in Tshernihovsky's poem addresses the land of Israel in his monologue; in 'Almog's poem the speaker, an influential public servant, talks to a woman at the end of a party, and in his monologue he tells her to look at the ground (so that she will lie down, sleep with him) in consideration of the favor she has asked of him.

The allusion to Tshernihovsky's poem directs the reader to a comparison of the pre-state generation of Tshernihovsky's poem and the post-state generation of 'Almog's poem. The idealism and sacrifice of the pre-state generation darken the corrupt, materialistic and self-centered post-state generation. The *nouveau riche* speaker represents a whole social class which exploits the state for its own lust. The guests in Almog's poem "ate the livers drunk all the / whisky and the beers. . . ." Eating someone's liver, in Hebrew, means harassing or exploiting someone. The relations between the host and the guests are not loving ones. The first line continues and ends with an enjambement ("drunk all the") raising the expectation that the guests "drank all the blood"—and indeed the drinking of the whisky and the beers appears in the eyes of the speaker (metaphorically) like the drinking of his blood by his (metaphorically) "carniverous" guests. The implied author reminds the reader that while the guests ate delicacies and drank delightful drinks, children in the town Bet-Shan remained hungry. The impolite, abusive guests "put the drumsticks in their pockets for the dogs," thinking that the host did not see them, and "took the frosting off the cakes." The atmosphere is one of "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die" (Isaiah 22:13)—let us enjoy the present, trusting as little as possible to the future.

Now, at the end of the party, the host is left with the bills—but he is also left with a woman who remained after the party. The shallow, vulgar host tries to impress her. He boasts that the waiters are "imported"—a (typically) snobbish attitude which prefers imported to local "merchandise." The waiters were not accustomed to the level of stress to which they were exposed in Israel—"two of them fainted" and had not yet recovered as the woman "can see" for herself. The shallow, silly speaker most clearly exposes his character is his boasting about the waiter, Jacques.

3. See another translation of this poem by Kuselwitz (1978).

The use of three foreign words in one sentence (Jacques, lacquer for polished, champignon for mushrooms) is intended to impress the woman. The implied poetic voice is sarcastic. The strong impact of the successive frequent rhymes expresses the shallow boasting attitude of the speaker, it accelerates the rhythm and lightens the style: “*Ehad Jack sâpâm daq na^câlê laq mēraq / champignon*”—“One is Jackues—a thin moustache polished shoes champignon/soup.” The rhymes place an emphasis upon the sound, just as the speaker places an emphasis on external phenomena—moustache, polished shoes, foreign waiters and a foreign recipe for soup.

At the end of the second stanza the reader comes to grasp more clearly the situation between the speaker and the woman. It seems that the woman who stayed behind to be the last guest in the party, approaches the speaker in a “loving” way, and the speaker responds to her “Love! That’s something else”—love is not bills and food, the speaker is open to it “with all respect.” When the speaker says “With all respect. For you”—the reader may think that the respect is for the woman, but the enjambement prompts us to see that what the speaker has in mind for the woman is only “up to half the kingdom” (Esther 5:3), a Hebrew idiom signifying a person’s willingness to do his utmost for someone else, whatever it takes—and more. The speaker pretends to be magnanimous. The association with the movie “Last Tango in Paris” and with the sex between the American man and the young French woman in that film is legitimate. He agrees to dance “last tango, solo” with the woman and to determine in a very settled language the terms of their give and take: He will free her of her problems with the IRS after she sleeps with him. He immediately tells her that “the official erred.” The poem might also allude to a poem of David Avidan who, in “*Ad kân vēlô yôtēr*,”⁴ writes that Ahusuerus meant that he will take only one half of the kingdom of the ladies (the upper part), so that he will not be accused of being the father of many children. The allusion directs the reader to think not in terms of the speaker’s generosity but rather in sexual terms. The speaker in ‘Almog’s poem also offers half of the kingdom . . . and the IRS clerk’s notice to the woman (or her sender) should be regarded “as null and void.” He is sorry for her frightened heart palpitations after she received the notice. The word *dēpîqôt* in Hebrew, however, means not only “beats” or palpitations but, in slang,

4. See “*Ad kân vēlô yôtēr*,” “*mittôk ‘esrîm ušnayim šrîm šônênîm*” in *Sirê Dāvid ‘Ābidān*. A. Levin-Epstein Modan, p. 29.

refers also to intercourse. The woman should “go down” and in consideration he will take care of her income tax file: “Look at the ground and regard the notice / from the IRS as null and void.” This is his great day. The name of the woman is Hason—which means “brave,” “strong,” a Hebrew name in use mostly among Near Eastern Jews. As “strong” as she is, she submits to someone who uses his authority to save her money without regarding the matter on its merits. Both Hason, the weak party in this matter, and the speaker are corrupted—her monetary lust and his sexual lust motivate them respectively. While we do not know the woman’s response, her conduct appears to accept the deal.

The comparison between the pre-state and the post-state generations is not at all flattering to the latter: corruption replaced idealism; depriving the state of its money replaced the sacrifice of life for the land; food and sex come before the national interest in determining behavior; extravagance prevails over modesty. Instead of investing that which is most precious—the lives of the best sons—for the sake of the national future, the focus is now upon immediate pleasure. Materialistic life negates all other values. Tshernihovsky’s poem ends with hope that the national future will justify the sacrifice (Silberschlag, 1968, p. 177–78):

And you shall cover all these. May the plant arise at length!
 To its homeland’s people sacred, in hundredfold splendour and strength!
 Blest be their offering of death, by whose glory our lives are freed . . .
 Behold, O Earth, What spendthrifts we are indeed!

These hopes in Tshernihovsky’s poem compare with the ironic fulfillment of the dream as conceived in ‘Almog’s poem.

Almog defines the poem as a sonnet. It has fourteen lines and it mentions “love.” The first two stanzas (octave, octet) are composed of four lines (quatrain) each; the last two stanzas (sestet), of three lines (tercet, triplet) each. No systematic rhyming or meter scheme is present in the poem. The rhymes, however, connect the stanzas both by their musical sound and by their semantic meaning. The following grammatical rhymes are based upon suffixes: *kēbēdīm* (livers); “*yēlādīm*” (children); *rē‘ēbīm* (hungry); *kīsīm* (pockets); *qrēmīm* (frosts); *kēlābīm* (dogs); “*meṣārīm*” (waiters); *mēyubbā‘īm* (imported). The first six of these words appear in the first stanza with the last two appearing in the second stanza; together they focus mainly on the guests and their conduct.

The following are also grammatical rhymes based on suffixes: “*bīrōt*” (beers); *hōṣā‘ōt* (expenses); *dēpīqōt* (beats, “palpitations”). With this also rhymes *kōl hakkābōd*—with all due respect. In this group ‘Almog’s

relates to the conduct of the host and the guests who are basically the same. Other rhymes relate to the "bargain" between the woman and the speaker: *rô'āh* (see), *šā'āh* (hour, day), *īā'āh* (erred), *hōdā'āh* (a notice). Other rhymes are *'āsôn* (disaster) and *hāsôn* (strong, brave): "solo" and "*šē'en lô*" (who does not have). The poem conforms to some traditional structural elements of the sonnet while not complying with others; its noncompliance with some of the schematic elements does not indicate a lack of organizational elements, but instead replaces them with an individual creativity.

3. *Erez Biton*

Erez Biton, born in 1942 to Moroccan-born parents who had moved to Algeria, immigrated to Israel in 1948. In his poetry, he introduces the Hebrew reader to new landscapes, events and characters unique to his community. The use within the Hebrew poem of the native language of his community (Jewish-Moroccan), striking metaphors, the richness of sensuality and color, unique artifacts, the various characters from the folklore and specific background of the Jewish-Moroccan community, and details of its day-by-day life are some of the features which distinguish Biton's poetry. Unlike authors who attempt to portray the world of Near Eastern Jews as they perceived it from the outside, Biton grew up in this world and describes it with an insider's perspective, portraying its beauty with neither nostalgia nor idealization. He is capable of discovering and focusing on the exceptional and attractive within the mundane. Biton depicts the enchanting within the concreteness of daily life. His pride and joy of his origin are presented not in a provocatively challenging manner, but rather in an inviting manner. The values of the Near Eastern Jews are not stated explicitly but are grasped by the reader, without the use of either polemic or a didactic attitude.

The struggle between the heritage of the past and the changed present preoccupies the poetic voice in the poem, "Reforming Odors" (1979, p. 13). This struggle together with the tension between East and West (Near Eastern Jews and European Jews) is not communicated without an overtone of the pain in the meeting between the two cultures. The world of the parents exists in the son's memory. The world of the son includes, through memories, the tradition, objects, landscape and faith which made his parents' world so beautiful in spite of its apparent deficiencies in the eyes of the speaker and of the reader. The meeting between East and West stimulated creativity, but did not bring happiness. (See the Hebrew text in the Appendix to this article).

REFORMING ODORS

What do you want from me you
 Taste of *ʿaraq*, you smell of pungent saffron,
 I'm no longer the same kid
 Wandering between the legs of the adults, playing snooker
 In Marko's Coffee Shop
 In Lod
 Friends
 I'm learning to eat ice cream now, from crystal,
 From a truck that whistles like a bird
 In the evening,
 I'm learning to open the lids
 Of antique music boxes.

Now
 Women tasting like strawberries
 Teach me to smell the Shakespeare binders
 From the seventeenth Century
 They teach me to play with a Siamese cat
 In a green salon.

Friends.

East and West confront each other in this poem. The poetic speaker, a Near Eastern Jewish Israeli, carries with him the taste of the *ʿaraq*, the smell of pungent saffron, memories from the town of Lod (populated mostly by Near Eastern Jews) and Marko's Coffee Shop, where the speaker, as a child, played snooker. At the time the poetic speaker is writing the poem, he is occupied by his learning of the West as his Israeli guides understand it: Ice-cream eaten from crystal goblets, a truck that whistles like a bird, antique music boxes, women tasting like strawberries, old bindings of books, a Siamese cat in a green salon.

The key to the poem is the intonation of the poetic voice. On the surface, it may seem that he is boasting, telling his friends about his new learning which bestows on him a new social status. However, a closer reading of the poem reveals his mockery and contempt for the emptiness to which he was exposed and which is enveloped by expensive objects. Once he approached the world to which he was attracted, he learned that it is a world which emphasizes earthly rather than spiritual possessions. It is a world of acquisitions and possessions, and not one of human relationships; it is a world in which a book is judged by its cover, and ice cream is judged by its dish.

In the poem's opening line, the speaker addresses himself, in a colloquial Hebrew, to someone who has imposed himself on him. In the second line we find out that he is indeed talking to the taste of arak and to the smell of saffron which he personified (they "want"). He tries to rid himself of the distinctive taste of *araq* and smell of saffron and its touch (the Hebrew original speaks of "scorching saffron") which represent the Near Eastern world of his childhood. His contact with this world is not intellectual or conceptual; it is, rather, sensual and a part of his being. A well-used Hebrew proverb states that there is no accounting for tastes⁴—literally, no debate should take place regarding matters of taste and smell. Based on his new affiliations, he seeks to deny his ties with his childhood world: "I'm no longer the same kid," But he will soon admit that he did not find a better alternative to it. In his childhood he was "wandering between the legs of the adults, playing snooker / In Marko's Coffee Shop / In Lod." The coffee shop atmosphere, its odors, tastes, and its games, present a people-oriented life, an emphasis placed on the interaction between the players and on the presence of people. Later in the poem there will be an implicit confrontation with the objects-oriented world of the West. The setting is changed from a coffee shop to a living room, "salon." Now the poetic speaker begins to describe his new learning ("I'm learning . . . I'm learning . . . Teach me . . . They teach me" . . .), which, when examined, indicates a learning of a world empty of meaning but nicely covered up. Contrasted the taste of the *araq*, he now has the taste of ice cream and of women tasting like strawberries; rather than the smell of the pungent saffron, he has the smell of old bindings of books; instead of Marko's Coffee Shop he now has a salon; instead of playing snooker he now plays with a Siamese cat. His contact is now through objects and technical devices. Instead of tasting arak, he tastes strawberries through the lipstick of women; instead of listening to the chirping of birds he hears a truck that whistles like a bird; instead of the "pungent saffron" he smells the covers of books; instead of playing snooker in a Coffee Shop he plays with a Siamese cat in a salon. His new learning emphasizes objects rather than people, appearances rather than content, the mechanical and artificial rather than the natural. Women do not discuss Shakespeare's work with him but rather the binding of Shakespeare's books. Cover, decor and possessions all replace relations. The art of music serves the ice cream business and the music boxes.

No direct ideological statement is made in the poem, no declaration as to the distress of the speaker who is torn between his Jewish Eastern

roots and the way of life to which he has been introduced (Western in essence) and to which he was attracted before he became so closely acquainted with its emptiness. The boasting way in which he addressed the "friends" regarding his new learning turned out to be ironic, mocking and contemptuous of his new affiliations. The West did not teach him to open doors to new wisdom but rather the doors of antique boxes. The West did not offer the reforming of the odors which he craved. The ironic poetic closure sends us back to the opening of the poem: once he discovered the West, his ties to the genuine, definite, strong odors of his childhood prevail because they came from a way of life which is people-oriented and does not focus on a superficial contact with objects.

This free-verse poem is written in a narrative-like speaking style without metaphors. It leaves the reader with the task of unveiling the irony and of gathering the message of the poem which is not expressed explicitly. East and West are confronted not through generalizations but through daily objects and activities. The reader who will conceive the East in the poem as a troubled world (Tucker, 1983, p. 68), one of *ʿaraq* and idleness in coffee shops, will perceive that the exposure to the new way of life was enticing but not enhancing. The speaker who had abandoned his Near Eastern way of life to find a better, Western life-style, found emptiness instead.

Erez Biton has provided us with a poetic expression of some aspects of the life of Near Eastern Jews in Israel. In both poems the poetic speaker recognizes his own specific roots and heritage, clearly described as those of a Near Eastern Jew. In both poems the speaker strives to accept a different life style, closer to that of European Jews in Israel. In the poem "Basic Background Comments," this attempt ends up in creative pain when he adapts the music of Bach to his Jewish-Moroccan background; in the second poem, this attempt ends up in recognizing the vanity of the glamour which had attracted the speaker. He recognizes his strong attachment to his roots which, in spite of its deficiencies, represent a better world than that to which he was exposed.

4. The Poetry of Near Eastern Israeli Poets and the World of Their Roots

The poets, writing in Israel, who are of Near Eastern background have brought to life, in the written world, much of their world, their tradition and culture and their dilemmas.

Biton (1976, pp. 32-33) wrote about wedding celebrations of Moroccan Jews. He wrote an elegy on a central lyric character in the folktales of

the Jews of Algeria (pp. 34–35) who murdered his beloved woman because she deserted him, and he wrote about a Jew who was the king's singer in Morocco. He described a Jewish Moroccan wedding (pp. 36–39) with the "oudh" (lute), small *ʿaraq* barrels and clusters of dates. He also described specific events in the history of Moroccan Jewry. The typical aspects of the life of Moroccan Jews are described as seen by an insider. Biton's contribution to Hebrew poetry includes a description of a different way of life which is rich in its sounds, tastes and sights. The selection of the enchanting concrete fragments of reality from the life of Moroccan Jews conveys the values of this Jewry without need for nostalgia or polemics.

Almog's "Šahîn" exposes the reader to the Eastern enchantment of the name Šahîn, to Šahîn's coming to the East with her patrimony, to the life of the Near Eastern Jews in Israel in the Nineteen-fifties "transit camp," "rickety shack" and the reader becomes aware of the absorption difficulties of the Near Eastern Jewish immigrants in Israel.

Biton and Almog are not exceptional in writing about characters from their own background. I. E. Shlomo Zamir wrote about the Jews who were hanged in Iraq; Roni Ozer wrote about a Jewish Iraqi singer—Layla Murad. Many Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin, express in their poems a love of Israel. For example, Shalom Katab, Raḥel Parḥi, Raṣon Hallevi and Amnon Shamosh.

Some Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin express social protest, pain, frustration, estrangement and tension between the various Jewish communities in Israel and astonishment at the social gap in that country. The fact that freedom of speech (including the written word) is so highly respected and protected in Israel enables these authors to express themselves without fear. One finds poems of Raṣon Hallevi, Tubia Sulami, Ḥaharon Ḥalmog, the twin brothers Hersel and Balfur Hakak, Zvi Hakak, Yosi Ozer, Yacov Shaya, David Rabi, Shlomo Avayo, Erez Biton, Shalom Katab and others which voice disillusionment in the Israeli social reality. Shlomo Avayo (1976, pp. 23–24), for example, writes about the discrepancy between the Israeli Black Panthers' facade of strength (1976, pp. 23–24) and their concealing their tenderness and emotion; he writes (1973, p. 17) about the gap and separate worlds of the maid's children and the lady's children. Shalom Katab (1978) described the prejudice against the Near Eastern Jews when they first immigrated to Israel, their harsh living conditions when they first came, and the lack of understanding they confronted on the part of Jews of European background (pp. 9, 11, 12, 15–16, 20, 24, 43–44, 48, 74, 78, 94).

Biton's two poems present the painful difficulties in adjustment, past and present; Almog's "Šahîn" strives to show the tragedies involved in the absorption in the old-new homeland.

In some of these poems the younger generation observes the suffering of the older generation. The helplessness of the parents in Biton's "Basic Background Comments" and their inability to take rational steps and actions to protect themselves are obvious. In 'Almog's "Šahîn," her parents are not equipped to achieve a better life either for their daughter or for themselves. Similarly Shlomo Avayo and Šalom Katab wrote about the suffering of the parents' generation.

Rašon Hallevi and Amnon Shamosh used some of the poetic forms of medieval Hebrew poetry. In the first part of his volume *Diwan Sefaradi* (1981) Shamosh writes poems of the same familiar categories of medieval Hebrew poetry—poems which voice love, boasting or complaints. He uses a line divided into first (opening) part of the line (*delet*) and second (closing) part of the line (*sōgēr*).

The particular themes and figurative language in the poetry of Israeli poets of Near Eastern origin contribute to the uniqueness of their poetic world. Special attention to this poetic world will be an aesthetically enriching experience.

APPENDIX

שהין

שהין. מי היה מאמין שגש מין
 שם עם קסם מזרחי כזה
 בת מלך
 נסיכה ולא הגד לה
 גם היא עצמה לא ידעה
 גם לא הוריה
 וכך באה לקאן ממזרח עם אבותיה
 תחלה מעברה אחר כך צריף רעוע
 ולבסוף בית עם גנה קטנה
 ראוה בחורים ויהללוה
 הכירה אחר מלח שהיה לה כמו אן
 שאל: מה שמך?
 אמרה: שהין
 (חמור, לא הבין)
 שכר דירה דאג שתהיה אוירה שלחן ספה סלון מכונת טלפון
 שטיחים מרפסת בלילה אמר לה אי
 לאב יו שהין, ביום שתק עמה
 תופסת. הוא נהנה היא נהנתה, וכך
 מתה לאט לאט אגדת
 שהין.
 שהין
 סבלנות
 אני ואת לאט לאט
 תראי

ראי אדמה

אָכלוּ אֶת הַכְּבָדִים שָׁחוּ אֶת כָּל
 הַיּוֹסֵקִי וְהַבִּירוֹת (בְּבֵית שְׁאָן יְלָדִים רְעֵבִים)
 אֶת הַפּוֹלֶקֶס שָׁמוּ בְּכִיסִים לְכֻלָּיִם (חֲשָׁבוּ שְׁאֲנִי
 לֹא רוֹאֶה) הוֹרִידוּ אֶת הַקְּרָמִים מֵהַעוֹגוֹת.

הַחֲגִיגָה נִסְתִּימָה. יֵשׁ הוֹצָאוֹת. אֶצְלָנוּ מְלָצְרִים
 מִיְּבָאִים. שְׁנַיִם הִתְעַלְפוּ כְּפִי שְׁאֵת רוֹאֶה.
 אֶחָד ז'ק שָׁפֵם דַּק נְעֵלִי לַק מְרַק
 שְׁמִפְיָנוֹן. אֶהְבֶּה זֶה לַחֹדֶר. כָּל הַכְּבוֹד. בְּשִׁבְלֶךְ

עַד חֲצֵי הַמְּלָכוֹת. טַנְגוּ אַחֲרוֹן סוּלוּ.
 זֶה לֹא אֶסוֹן גְּבֵרֶת חֶסוֹן הַפְּקִיד
 טְעָה. אֵין אָדָם

שְׁאֵין לוֹ שְׁעָה. חֲבַל רַק עַל
 דְּסִיקוֹת הַלֵּב. רְאֵי אֲדָמָה וְאֵת הַהוֹדָעָה
 מִמֶּס הַכְּנֶסֶה בְּטֵלָה וּמִבְטָלָת.

תקון הריחות

מה אהם רוצים ממני
 טעם פראק גריח ועפרן צורב,
 אני פקר לא אחו הילד
 אבוד בין רגלים שמשחק סנוקר
 בקפה מרקו
 בלד.
 עקשו חברים
 אני לומד לאכל גלידה מבדלח
 מאוטו שמשמיע קולות של צפרים
 בערב.
 אני לומד לפתח דלתות
 בתכות נגינה עתיקות.

עקשו
 נשים בטעם תות־שדה
 מלמדות אותי להרית פריכות של שקספיר
 מן המאה השבע עשרה
 מלמדות אותי לשחק בתחול סימי
 בתוך סלון ירק
 חברים.

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