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*Aspects of Alienation
in Contemporary Hebrew Poetry*

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POSTGRADUATE HEBREW STUDIES

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Israeli literature is so young that while diversity among groups of writers is already perceptible its significance has not yet been fully analysed and whatever distinctions exist are more subtle and difficult to describe than those of the many and divergent groups of European Modernists. The Israeli writers themselves are not aware of working within a defined aesthetic framework nor do they consciously follow a leader such as Pound in his day or Valéry or Eliot. Yet there has been at least one distinctive group which has assumed a clear corporate personality: the first generation of poets of the State of Israel, those loosely and often inaccurately called the 'Palmach' poets after the Elite Corps of the Israel Defence Force. They are an entity which, despite their individual differences, functions and can be described as a psychological unity. While they fall into separate categories determined by a certain biographical circumstances or by their choice of themes or by what one critic calls 'poetic norms'—the poetics that distinguishes one literary convention from another—there is a linking feeling, an attitude that clothes the entire generation like a uniform. This is the emotional withdrawal from the cultural, nationalistic and religious absolutes that had formed a sustaining scaffolding for earlier writers. If one poem could be used as the paradigm of the emotional perceptions of the Palmach period it would be Haim Guri's 'Odysseus', written in 1960 when the poet was 34 and which contains the defining elements and the definitive tone of the time. The poem describes the homecoming of Odysseus to a place grown unfamiliar to him and where no-one recognises him. The inhabitants speak a different language from his and draw their children away from him, retreating for safety into their houses. The classical Odysseus was at least finally recognised by the serving-maid Euryclea; Guri's Odysseus remains unknown in a world that has altered beyond all possibility of contact; only nature has remained constant and familiar.

Ulysses

He returned to his native town and found a sea,
With various kinds of fish, grass floating on slow waves,
A weakening sun on the margin of the sky.

To err is human, Ulysses said to his heart
And returned to the crossroads by the neighbouring
town
To find a road to his native town which was dry.

Tired of dreams, a yearning wandering man,
Among folk who could not speak his kind of Greek,
The word-hoard he took on his voyage too dead to try,

For a flash he thought he had overslept and returned
To a folk who did not think his return was strange
And did not look at him with a widened eye.

He enquired with his hands and they looked back,
Trying to dredge a meaning out of the depths.
Purple faded to violet in the sky.

And the elders rose and drew the children away
Who stood in a circle round him, and dragged them
home:
And light after light grew yellow in house after house
nearby.

And dew came, and fell on his head.
And wind came and kissed his lips.
And water, like old Erykleia, came and bathed his feet,
But failed to observe the scar, and as water does,
rushed by.

Translated by Dom Moraes

וּבְשׁוּבוֹ אֶל עִיר מוֹלְדוֹתוֹ מְצָא יָם
וְדָגִים שׁוֹנִים וְעֵשֶׁב צֶף עַל הַגְּלִים הָאֲטִיִּים
וְשֶׁמֶשׁ נִחְלָשׁת בְּשׁוּלֵי שָׁמַיִם.
טְעוֹת לְעוֹלָם חוֹזֵר, אָמַר אוֹדִיִּסְס בְּלִבּוֹ הָעֵיף
וְחֹזֵר עַד פְּרִשְׁת־הַדְּרָכִים הַסְּמוּכָה לְעִיר הַשְּׂכָנָה
לְמִצָּא אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ אֶל עִיר מוֹלְדוֹתוֹ שְׁלֵא הִיְתָה מִיָּם.

הֶלֶךְ עֵיף כְּחוֹלִם וּמִתְנַעֵנֵעַ מְאֹד
בֵּין אַנְשִׁים שֶׁדְּבְרוּ יוֹנִית אַחֲרָת.

הַמְּלִים, שֶׁנִּטַּל עִמּוֹ כְּצִידָה לְדֶרֶךְ הַמַּסְעוֹת, גּוֹעוּ
בִּינְתֵימָם.

רַגַע חָשַׁב כִּי נִרְדָּם לְיָמִים רַבִּים
וְחָזַר אֶל אֲנָשִׁים שֶׁלֹּא תָמְהוּ בְּרֵאוֹתָם אוֹתוֹ
וְלֹא קָרְעוּ עֵינָיִם.

הוּא שָׁאֵל אוֹתָם בְּתוֹנוּעוֹת וְהֵם נָסוּ לְהִכִּין אוֹתוֹ
מִתוֹךְ הַמְּרַחֲקִים.
הֵאֲרַגְמָן הַסְּגִיל וְהֵלֵךְ בְּשׂוּלֵי אוֹתָם שָׁמַיִם.

קָמוּ הַמְּבַגְרִים וְנָטְלוּ אֶת הַיְלָדִים שֶׁעָמְדוּ סְבִיבוֹ
בְּמַעְגָּל
וּמָשְׁכוּ אוֹתָם.
וְאוֹר אַחַר אוֹר הִצְהִיב בְּבֵית אַחַר בֵּית.

בָּא טַל וַיִּרַד עַל רֵאשׁוֹ.
בָּאָה רוּחַ וְנִשְׁקָה לְשִׁפְתָיו.
בָּאוּ מִיָּם וְשִׁטְפוּ רַגְלָיו כְּאֲבִירֵקְלִיָּה הַזִּקְנָה.
וְלֹא רָאוּ אֶת הַצִּלְקֶת וְהִמְשִׁיכוּ בְּמוֹרֵד כְּדֶרֶךְ הַמַּיִם.

In view of the circumstances of the time it is not at all incongruous that so stark a poem, confronting a moment of terrible realisation, should have been composed by a man who had affectionately been nicknamed 'Poet of the Palmach' because he seemed in the 50's to be the most prominent representative of a generation initially suffused with the kind of golden glory denied to most; but the glory passed and they were suffering a sudden apprehension of change that left them as bewildered as the Odysseus of the poem.

One of Guri's contemporaries, Avin Hillel (born in 1926) declared that the Israeli writers of his generation shared what amounts to a common biography: they were born between 1915 and 1930; those of them who

were not *Sabras* had immigrated to Palestine at an early age and learned Hebrew. They joined youth movements, graduated from High School and moved onto *kibbutzim* then into the army. Many of them distinguished themselves in the War of Independence and all saw the Proclamation of the State of Israel while still in their teens or early twenties. They were the first generation to have Hebrew as their mother tongue or as a vernacular which they could use freely. They were the first to grow up within the Israeli landscape to which they could relate without the reverence of their predecessors.

Many Israeli critics of the time questioned the fact that their poetry should have reflected a reality not substantially different from that of the bleak and self-critical post-war European literature and in similar terminology, despite Israel's foundation on the ideologically positive. One critic, Gidon Katznelson, for example, gave the Palmach poetry the blanket label of 'nihilism'; others spoke of its atmosphere of 'silent, stifled weeping', its 'painful sigh', its sense of 'acute nothingness' and, on a less emotive level, its lack of values. It is more depressing to read the criticism of the 50's and 60's than the poetry itself. The critics paid attention only to the negative confessionalism of the verse, separating it from any investigation into the relationship of the poets to their milieu or examination of the individual motivation that had led to the pessimistic collective pattern of their literature.

There is no doubt that, while the critics exaggerate its pessimism, contemporary Israeli poetry is indeed troubled and anxious and it does express a sense of futility. It is introspective, its spokesman asks fundamental questions relevant to human experience, concerning identity, purpose, individual freedom and choice. 'A man at a window raises his hands. /When will he receive his food/When is the season of his love, the time of his death?/What does he want? . . .' These allegorical questions, put by Yehuda Amichai, have no immediate answer, either in Israel or elsewhere. According to Nathan Zach who calls himself 'a bitter romantic' the only answers given are panaceas developed as defences by society to hide the fact that, in his words, there will never, never, never be anyone to offer comfort. In other poetry of the same period God has withdrawn from the world, leaving it filled with fear and pain instead of mercy which He keeps for Himself. The promises of the past are unfulfilled and its absolute values are illusions, the present is uncertain and brings nothing but disruption. The prevailing image, repeated time and again, is that of fragmentation. The lost unity in the poets' lives, the sense of discontinuity between past and present has led to a breakdown of rationality and wholeness. The

spiritual and ideological monoliths have been shattered into little pieces. According to Amichai, man's 'whole coin' has become 'small change', leaving him incomplete. And he, who is 'not like the cypress, not all at once . . .' becomes 'like grass in a thousand careful green shoots . . .' Peace and beauty, too, are illusory. Tuvia Rübner describes what could be a perfect world and a perfect spring, but by preceding a series of lyric images with the word כִּאֲלוּ (‘as if’) he tells us that neither that world nor that spring exists.

This retreat from affirmation and hope is the result of many factors. First it was a reflection of the disappointment that the social reality for which the Palmach generation had fought so ardently was not what diasporan ideology had predicted. The State of Israel had failed to create its utopian community; on the contrary, it exhibited the social and political ills characteristic of all contemporary Western democracies and its materialism and equivocal humanism resembled too closely other post-war European societies. The dream 'to be a nation like all the nations' had assumed an ugly, pragmatic interpretation. According to Simon Halkin, the Israeli seemed to be living through something like the post-war confusion that characterised the American and European 'lost generation' of the 20's. Suddenly the Israelis were confronted with an urbanised, materialistic bourgeoisie that replaced the idealistic agrarian order they had believed in and fought to establish. Internal strife and endless war allowed them no chance of continuous stable settlement.

The retreat of the poetry is, second, the result of a universal literary trend away from the general; from looking outward towards spiritual absolutes modernist writers turned inwards, to the individual mind and spirit. Israeli critics accused the poets, for example, of having failed to make a worthy appraisal in their work of the monumental event of their lives, the War of Independence. But this allegation applies as well to the whole of western literature which has suffered the same withdrawal from great matters which the writers are no longer equipped to express either in appropriately epic terms or in complete language. The events of the 20th century have dwarfed meaningful comment. The poet has no choice but to retreat into the safety of his own close surroundings, narrow his context and explore his inner world. Amir Gilboa creates an image for this withdrawal, combining both peace and unity, by describing the closing of fingers inwards towards the palm of the hand where 'their security was infinite/in the team of the clenched fist . . .'

וְקָץ לֹא הָיָה לְבִטְחוֹנָן / בְּצִנּוֹת הָאֲגָרוֹף הַקְּמוּץ.

One of the consequences of this withdrawal of the poetry is its loss of functionality; it is now neither polemical nor an epic reflection of an ideology as is the literature of the pioneers. It merely reveals the consciousness of its society without attempting any further to influence it. The drama has taken over any didactic sociological function and the poet is no longer prophet. A poem by Amichai has the narrator standing in a room looking at the landscape through the window and reporting to those inside about what he sees; his role is now that of observer.

The principal causes for the poetry's introspection are the twin pillars of crisis at the root of it, those concerning the poet's social and traditional identity. The first of these crises came about due to the modification of the notion of the communal and founding 'we' (אֲנֵינוּ) in the changed multi-lateral society. After the War of Independence the ideology of the Collective was viewed as an anachronism, once political self-determination had been achieved and it was the reflection of this communal ideal that brought about one of the great social reversals of the time: the practical disintegration of the group. The first major dialectical area of the poetry was, therefore, the loss of communal identity, the substitution of group consciousness by individual awareness and the primacy of private selfhood.

As a consequence the individual was left to define himself, no longer within the sustaining framework of the group. His need now was to come to terms with his life as an individual without being directed by the group. The poetry of the Palmach generation had no choice but to embark on a quest for the new poetic 'I' but neither the poet nor indeed the modern Israeli novelist or playwright has yet been able to establish it within a clear sense of tradition or social identity. The idea of a search for identity has become something of a 20th century cliché; in Israel, however, the need to delineate the 'I' is a vital problem which does not deserve to be devalued by contemporary Western psychological fads. The motivation for the search there is a necessary reevaluation of the nation as Jews and as the first generation of Israelis, implying a re-examination of all the factors that had previously defined a Jew: the redefinition of 'self' is, then, no more than a redefinition of the Jew.

The breakdown of secure communal identity resulted in existential poetry of wandering and homelessness in a predominantly urban environment. The new 'I' has lost his rootedness, his 'house' which appears frequently as a symbol of security, tradition and settled values. Rübner's spokesman asks: 'Where have I come from and where am I going?'

כִּינֵן בְּאֵתִי ? וְלָאֵן / אֲנִי הוֹלֵךְ ?

and later he cries: 'My house isn't here; this isn't my street; my house isn't here . . .'

To Yehiel Mar the house is an image for enclosure and safety so he speaks of a vanished house, its walls and windows unaccountably gone, leaving furniture exposed and a Chagall painting hanging from a nail in the air, suggesting that the stability of the traditional past has disappeared with the house. The poets present countless details of the inanimate in their environment — cars, buses, bus-stations, jukeboxes, radios, apartment-houses (הַשְּׂכוּנִים), banks, cafes, doors, windows and so on, all signifying a sense of isolation and alienation in a townscape crowded with things instead of people and evocative of their sudden plunge into a strange external world that exactly echoes their confused inner world. The street, the setting for many of the poems, represents the course of life where the past is reencountered and which sometimes leads towards death. It is the most consistent image of the quest for self-knowledge — 'that's why I keep walking down that same street, down that same section/to gather from those familiar pavements/the permanent farewells and sudden encounters/ and to kiss the events and spreading rumours . . .' Or he discovers that innocence and security reach only to 'the end of the streets', the familiar world of childhood. Beyond that is a great sorrow 'that eats at the heart'.

The Collective has no relevance in this urbanised life. The sense of purpose that has brought the State into being has disappeared and with it the spirit of comradeship and unity. The pioneers, the momentousness of the war and the idealisation of its *Sabra* hero are relegated to mythology. Benjamin Galai, in a poem called 'Those who Go, Never to Return' makes the statement based on Ecclesiastes and radical in the face of the romantic war-poetry, that 'thus it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion/for life will not be given twice'.

כֹּה טוֹב לְקַלֵּב חַי מִן הָאֶרֶץ הַמֵּת, / כִּי הַחַיִּים לֹא יִתְּנוּ עוֹד פַּעַם.

The exact social and intellectual context of this poetry is left undefined primarily because it remains stringently non-political. Political terminology is used as image instead of comment. Throughout his writing Yehuda Amichai explored its considered retreat from social involvement, and even the war poetry rejects political debate in its preference for the concerns of the individual. The 'self' as a composite portrait of the Israeli/Jewish citizen, bearer of a clear cultural identity, remains distant and unattainable. In one area alone is there an attempt to confront and perhaps clarify a national dilemma which runs like a current under most of the poetry of the

Palmach generation, that of the past which represents the poet's historical self and also his tradition and religion. This is the second major dialectical area of the new writing and its central crisis. It is the representation of a metaphysical quandary which helps to interpret the malaise of the poetic 'I' without offering a cure for it and in its own way it is a continuation of the spiritual struggle we find in the literature of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement of the 18th and 19th centuries. In fact the genesis of the problem was to be found in that very Enlightenment.

One of the consequences of the disintegration of the Eastern European Jewish communities in the 19th century was their polarisation into distinct blocks of orthodoxy and non-orthodoxy which, in the uncompromising spiritual terminology of the time, could only be called secularism. It seemed that in the matter of rationalising Enlightenment philosophy and traditional orthodoxy only revolution was possible and not reform, for piety and observance, directed towards Messianic redemption and ingrained over the centuries, could not be undermined by compromise. Later the predominantly secular nature of Zionism prompted some parents to object to their children's decision to move to Palestine. Amos Elon reports that many pioneers carried with them memories of angry scenes at home, together with rabbinic condemnation. It seemed, therefore, that in many cases commitment to Zionism meant disobedience not only to the father but to God as well. In Haim Hazaz' story, 'The Sermon', Yudka, the sermonist, declares that Zionism begins with the wreckage of Judaism. 'When a man can no longer be a Jew', he says, 'he becomes a Zionist'. Hazaz was not being prophetic for he saw what was happening in the years immediately preceding the foundation of Israel. For the new generation of farmers and workers manual labour had replaced study as the focus of life. The literature of the Palestinian Jews dealt, in the main, with the search by the modern Jew for an ideology to replace that of the past and they found it in the hope of national rebirth: pioneering supplanted religious piety and mysticism became directed to the land. It seemed to support Harry Levin's contention that 'no literature has ever been so intensely spiritual as ours. I do not venture to call it religious, but certainly it has the special intensity of concern with the spiritual life which Hegel noted when he spoke of the great modern phenomenon of the secularisation of spirituality . . .' Klausner claimed that the Jew returning to his homeland lost his over-spirituality; he had found a substitute for it in his awareness of his role in the continuity of Jewish history—but he remained concerned about the place and extent of religious orthodoxy in his life.

The main ideological divergence of the young Palmach writer from his

predecessors was in the dwindling of this concern and also in the shift in his attitude to the past with which he felt little kinship. He no longer admired the tradition which he associated exclusively with unhealthy enclosure in intellectual and emotional darkness, 'a world of oppression, defamation, persecution, martyrdom . . .', that 'Jewish' world that Hazaz contrasts paradoxically with Zionism. The nationalism of the Palestinian Settlement had become inappropriate in the face of the difficult reality after 1948. His own attitude together with the doubts first expressed by the Jewish Enlighteners and the transformed orthodoxy of the pioneers, led to the manifestation in Israeli literature of a critical consciousness towards the past.

Aharon Meged told the story of a young Israeli couple who decided to give their newborn son a modern Israeli name in defiance of his great-grandfather who wanted to call the child Mendele in memory of a murdered grandson. The parents refused, claiming that the child would suffer all its life for having a name so redolent of the Diaspora. In this story, in other poems and throughout the poetry the image of the past, with its memories of persecution on the one hand and devout piety on the other, is that of the father, called *av* or *avi* who, like all archetypes, possesses immense emotional significance. He is the symbol of authority, of identity and of Judaism. The poetry in which he appears shows us that an explicit emotional phenomenon is not the property of a few isolated individuals, and its prevalence in every contemporary Israeli form and genre of literature reveals it to be almost a cultural neurosis. The father appears several times in the works of at least 23 contemporary poets in a guise that is almost identical throughout the verse, almost exclusively idealised and romanticised, taking its cue from Bialik's tender portrait of a beloved father who died young, leaving the son in perpetual mourning. The 'father' poetry is something like a cultural diary, charting the course of an emotional dilemma and it seems to follow Max Brod's precept that diaries ordinarily resemble a kind of defective barometric curve that registers only the 'lows', the hours of greatest depression.

The nature of the poetic father is clearly delineated. He is the archetypal loving patriarch and custodian of God's law for the family. He is able, for example, to 'draw love from his slender body like a magician draws rabbits and towers from a hat . . .' (Amichai). He is the rock and support of the son's life, like a house whose walls enclose him—when those walls are destroyed or removed the son can say:

There's never been poverty like mine
I don't even have a wall for my forehead
(Mar)

עוד לא היתה דלות גדולתי.
אפלו פתל אין לי למצחי.

and

We were supported by your house
And now there's no wall

(Tomer)

על ביתך נסמכנו,
והנה אין קיר.

The romanticised dream-father seldom speaks, appearing rather as a fixed image, somewhat ghostlike in his inaccessibility. Throughout the poetry he is dead and of blessed and beloved memory and his death is recalled compulsively by the mourning son, his grief intensified by the notion of the spiritual gulf that existed between them while the father was alive:

A moment of silence, please. Please. I want
to say something. He passed
right next to me. I could have touched
the hem of his coat. I didn't touch it. Who
could have known what I didn't know . . .

(Zach)

רגע אחד שקט בבקשה. אנא. אני
רוצה לומר דבר מה. הוא הלך
ועבר על פני. יכולתי לגעת בשולי
אדמתו. לא נגעתי. מי יכול היה
לדעת מה שלא ידעתי.

What he did not know was that he was less removed than he had thought from his father's world which he has since renounced.

Splendid images describe this father who was always the awe-inspiring figure of the writer's youth. He is identified with a lost world, bearing in his person the mysterious beauty of coexistence with God and obedience to the Law. He is associated in the son's memory and in the poetry with one or another of the Jewish festivals or with the daily synagogue services. In a poem by Shlomo Tnai the son takes the age-old stance of the Jew at worship, moving forward and back 'like a tree in a wind' and he sees his dead father's face in his hands as he covers his own face in prayer.

Yet the 'father' poetry is more than a dignified elegy on an unambiguously virtuous parent. Its value to us lies in the tension it reveals, that the beloved figure is the source of serious conflict in the son. The father's identification with the lost world is concomitantly an identification with a tradition which has long ceased to be an organic part of the sons' lives although they are nostalgic for the control and order it provided. In his day Kafka had examined what he called the 'father complex from which more than one Jew draws his spiritual nourishment', claiming that it 'relates not to the innocent father but to the father's Judaism'. He tended to idealise the authentic Jewish orthodox existence, believing that he and his father 'might both have found each other in Judaism'; he could not have known that the authentic Judaism he admired caused as much trouble to the sons as had his father's commitment to form without meaning. His celebrated statement of his own generation's problem could have been applied conceptually to the Palmach Jews: 'Their hind legs were bogged down in their father's Judaism and the front legs could find no new ground. The resulting despair was their inspiration'.

The Israeli poets put it differently: in a quatrain Yehuda Amichai sets out the effects on the son of the loss of his father's Judaism and his unique 'way':

In the sands of prayer my father saw angels' footsteps.
He taught me a way and I answered him with ways.
Therefore his face was bright and mine is scorched.
Like an old office calendar I'm covered in dates.

בְּחֹלוֹת הַתְּפִלָּה רָאָה אָבִי עֲקֵבוֹת מְלֵאכִים.
הוּא צָוָה עָלַי דְּרֹךְ וְעִנִּיתִי לוֹ בְּדַרְכִים
לְכֵן פָּנָיו הָיוּ בְּהִירִים. לְכֵן פָּנַי חֲרוּכִים.
כְּלוֹחַ מְשֻׁרָד יָשָׁן, אֲנִי מְכֻסָּה מְאָרִיכִים.

Ben-Zion Tomer, too, lists a series of contrasts between his father's 'way' and his own, adding that by having abandoned them he loses all claim to his own son's respect: 'My father's already dead. His memorial is small: a stone./I'm still alive and my memorials are in the wind./What will be left, when I'm carried off like chaff./My son won't engrave my name on a tablet'.

Because of his 'way' which the son remembers and because of his association in the poetry with the sacral, the devout father is seen as the guardian and perpetuator of the spiritual core of Jewish life which the son has abandoned for other concerns. He embodies one of the pervading conflicts of the Jews: how to reconcile orthodoxy with an external, secular culture, the central problem of the Haskalah as yet unsolved. The young Israeli, heir to the conflicts of his Enlightenment predecessors, confused by the contrast between the dream and its realisation, could not withstand the temptation to seek solutions in alien systems of thought and he rejected the pious old Jew who represented cultural exclusivity. There is, therefore, an imputation of reproach in the dream-image of the father as he appears in the poetry, and in his silence which is an important feature of his image, his elusiveness and unapproachability. His rejection by the sons, the cause of the reproach, has created in them a strong sense of guilt resulting from a kind of spiritual parricide, the nature of which M. Z. Feierberg in his day was the first to realise when he said of his rebellious hero: 'He was murdering everything inside him: himself, his father, his father's fathers, his entire people . . .' The ensuing guilt pervades contemporary Hebrew verse. To the Israelis the primordial murdered father was not a legendary Greek king but a cultural father whom they killed by betrayal, abandonment and finally, rejection. As a palliative for guilt the sons have to justify their betrayal by finding a reason for it. In Israeli poetry this appears in the form of a two-fold accusation levelled at the father: weakness on the one hand and violence on the other, both ending in the sacrifices of the son and both symbolised by the primal story of the Binding of Isaac, the *Akedah*. The poems on this topic are expressionistic vignettes of the Biblical story, mingling reality and nightmare. Symbols of the *Akedah* - wood, knife, fire—flash across the scene, blood suddenly appears on the leaves of the forest, wood in the hands of Abraham. One of the most representative of these poems is Amir Gilboa's 'Isaac':

Early in the morning the sun strolled in the forest
Together with me and my father.
My right hand was in his left.

Like lightning a knife flared between the trees
And I was afraid of the terror of my eyes seeing blood
on the leaves.

Father, father, come quickly and save Isaac
So no-one will be missing from the midday meal.

It is I who am slain, my son.
My blood is already on the leaves.
And my father's voice was stifled
And his face pale.

I wanted to cry out, struggling not to believe
Tearing at my eyes.
And I awoke.

My right hand was bloodless.

יצחק

לקנות בקר טילה שמש בתוך היער
יחד עמי ועם אבא
וימיני בשמאלו.

בברק להבה מאכלת בין העצים.
ואני ירא כל-כך את פחד עיני מול דם על העלים.

אבא אבא מהר והצילה את יצחק
ולא יחסר איש בסעדת הצהרים.

זה אני הנשקט, בוני.
וכבר דמי על העלים.
ואבא נפתם קולו.
ופניו חורים.

וְרָצִיתִי לְצַעֵק, מִפְּרֶסֶר לֹא לְהֶאֱמִין
 וְקוֹרֵעַ הַצִּינִים.
 וְנִתְעוֹרְרִתִּי.

וְאֶזְלַת-יָדָם הִיְתָה יָד יָמִין

As in this poem Abraham's impotence is the core of the *Akedah* poetry; for example, in Rübner's 'Voices' Abraham knows from the start that he cannot fulfil God's command but he is impelled nonetheless to go with Isaac to the appointed place, as in a dream. He will fail to obey God and he will fail to save Isaac as will Gilboa's Father Abraham, who is already slain as he walks with his son in the forest. The power and authority he once represented have vanished. In all these poems the father has let the son down, either by his powerlessness in the face of a threat—the framework of Gilboa's poem is the Holocaust—or by his cruelty to the son who does not understand his actions. It is an indictment of the fathers who taught their sons a universe of values and powerful belief in life and then, in their obedience to an incomprehensible vision, abandoned them to the horrors of a world empty of mercy. Like Isaac the son did not protest or rebel but submitted to the inertia brought on by the conflict of love and disillusionment after he made the discovery that his 'right hand [that is, his father] was bloodless'.

Anadad Eldan's Abraham who asks to be sacrificed in place of his son, is a 'tired father, old in his dream' in a poem where the standpoint of father and son is reversed: the son calls out 'father come back' *אָבִיא, שׁוּבָה* as had Isaac in Gilboa's poem, but Abraham goes on, seeking something 'shining like a knife' that disappears as he approaches it. The distance between the two is never bridged, the vision of Abraham continues to elude the son. Haim Guri tells us in 'Inheritance' that Isaac lived a long and full life but bequeathed the hour of his binding to his descendants who are born 'with a knife in their heart'. This image of violence expresses well the views not only of Guri's war-weary generation but also of young contemporary Israelis who question the fact that they are constantly being forced into the sacrificial role of an eternal Isaac. The turning of Abraham in Guri's poem has an ironic significance: the Biblical message of the *Akedah* signifies the bond of love that the preservation of Isaac's life creates between father and son. Yet according to Guri: 'The boy, freed from his bonds, saw his father's back'.

These two crises brought about by the loss of two central elements of Jewish life, the collective and the religious, form the core of contemporary Hebrew poetry. The resulting sense of displacement has given rise to the designation of all the poetry as 'alienated' although the terms of such alienation are never defined. The dynamics of alienation as a social and psychological process apply only in part to the themes and aesthetics of the Palmach poetry although its popular terminology is relevant on an emotive level: solitude, depression, introspection, bewilderment and so on, the emotional vocabulary summarised in Guri's 'Odysseus'. However, emotional symptoms alone do not signify true alienation which is a complex social phenomenon arising from the apprehension of external control over the life of the individual. Israeli poetry can be said to be 'alienated' in one respect: in the relationship of the poet to the past. Alienation in this poetry means the *spiritual* alienation of a world which lacks what Harold Fisch calls 'traditional signposts'. The critical standpoint from which alienation is judged is generally a religious one: for example, Kurzweill expressed strong disapproval of the secularisation and anthropocentrism of the verse, contending that because of their shift in emphasis the poets were moving away from Judaism itself and that their negation of exile was leading them to a negation of Judaism. He accused them of having lost their sense of history and decried what he termed their constant 'archeology of the soul'. He was partly right: they were suffering from a deep and disturbing sense of historical discontinuity both provoking and provoked by a conscious renunciation of the exilic past. This is the nature of their alienation rather than the total loss of human perspective characteristic of social alienation. Yet we have seen in the 'father' poetry that the negation is not complete for the image of the father is not dispelled. Also the Israelis have retained two vital features of their ancient heritage and remain committed to them: the language and landscape of Israel.

Kurzweill claimed that their literature pushed language to levels of expression that estranged it from the moral significance of its roots in sacral Hebrew literature, and Daniel ben-Nahum added graphically that the sources appear in the poetry like beads pulled off the thread meant to hold them together. Just as these, and other critics, ignored the mythic possibilities in the utilisation of ancient stories and characters in the new poetry they ignored the exegetical possibilities in the reapplication of sacred texts. Phrases from the Bible, liturgy and so on, which do not commonly occur in modern speech, do indeed figure strongly in the imagery of the poetry, appearing allusively, dialectically, creating tension between their classical significance and their modern interpretation that gives them new meaning

and relevance. By his exploration of this significance the poet is making a commitment to the historical and cultural framework that created it; the historical value of this process is not lost on him nor is the irony inherent in his new methodology, for he says: ' . . . to speak now in this tired language/ a language torn from its sleep in the Bible . . . /in the language that described/ God's miracles now to say car, bomb, God . . . '. This intellectual use of the sources not only admits the vitality of the culture of the past but brings the reader to an awareness of it and its application to the present. The language has come to the poet in a certain phase of its evolution as a unique creative tool which he is engaged in the dynamic process of exploiting and enriching. To give a few examples out of a great many: Yehuda Amichai, whose entire body of verse is powered by Biblical and rabbinic allusions, bases a statement on one of the best-known lines in the liturgy: ' . . . He who makes peace in His high places will make peace over us and over all Israel'. Amichai says: ' . . . jet planes make peace over us and over all who love in the autumn . . . ' which implies that the instruments of death have assumed God's task of bringing peace to the world, as if they are deputising for Him. Another of his poems opens with the words of the prayer for the dead: 'Oh Lord full of mercy'. He adds: 'If the Lord were not so full of mercy/ There would be mercy in the world/ And not only in Him'. Nathan Zach frequently begins his poems with lines from the Bible and proceeds to build a poetic commentary on them: in one of them he repeats the phrase 'Fear not', God's comforting words to Abraham in Genesis 15. 1, and so misleading the reader into the belief that they offer comfort to him as well. However, they are preceded by the most terrifying intimations of doom and futility in lines from Job and Psalms—the refrain 'Fear not' then assumes an ironic and cautionary tone: the words mean 'don't worry' but the poem tells us all there is to worry about, in direct quotations from the Bible.

Like James Joyce and Eliot the Israeli poets believe stories of the past to be a key to the present. Most of them recast Biblical situations and characters into a modern context, creating a unique methodology of irony, but irony is not always their purpose. Amir Gilboa, for example, relates the Biblical characters to his personal experience; his particular allusiveness does not attempt to distort the recalled text but to clarify his own life by means of familiar paradigms. Dan Paggis uses the primal Biblical family allegorically to trace the vicissitudes of modern man.

*Written in Pencil
in the Sealed Railway Car*

here in this carload
i am eve
with abel my son
if you see my older son
cain son of man
tell him i

כתוב בצפרון בקרון החרום

באן במשלות הנה
אני חנה
עם הקל בני
אם תראו את בני הנדול
קח קן אדם
תגידו לו שאני

Abba Kovner updates Cain as a modern wanderer after the Holocaust, a survivor in the 20th century. Biblical figures are used as paradigms, for metaphor or myth: Joseph's coat becomes horribly transmuted into a striped concentration-camp uniform; Samson, the modern individual, keeps returning to the barber for a haircut so that he should not have any power to make decisions. The modern Jonah runs away and deliberately hides from the world in the belly of the fish. The recalled text is a kind of shorthand, a virtual lexicon of phrases, images and characters from ancient literature. The poet is attempting to apply the experience of the past to his own contemporary circumstances: by reinterpreting ancient conclusions he is at once giving them a new commentary and making them relevant to our modern world. His language and allusions, the connections he has shown through them with the past, witness his awareness of an historical, cultural and spiritual consciousness that cannot be renounced. Language, says Walter Benjamin, confines what we can perceive, think or discuss. By virtue of their language the poets' perception is channelled towards a means of expression wholly identified with Jewish culture.

As he is committed to his language so is the Israeli poet committed to his

landscape for which he fought and which serves as a backdrop for his drama of loss and replacement. Its place in the continuity of Jewish history is not ignored by the poets and their attitude to it is a rejection of the notion of the mastery of nature by technology, one of the hallmarks of alienation; nature transcends the urban which is, in any case, symbolic of personal malaise in the Palmach verse while the landscape of Israel is represented as a reality.

The setting of much of the poetry is Jerusalem, both as the physical entity of stone and valleys, a political entity and at the same time transmuted into metaphoric guises. Whether or not the poet's Jerusalem is any longer a traditional image for Zion or a metaphor for Jewish history, God or the lyric 'I' himself, it is at the heart of the poet's Israel. After 1967 there was a surge of new verse on the subject of Jerusalem when the Palmach poets rediscovered the forfeited landscape of their youth — one of the few recoveries of a lost past they were able to make.

The poets of the Palmach could not continue to pursue the poetic preoccupations of their forefathers, by virtue of their changed circumstances; they are children of another time and another place, both of which their poetry expresses. If it does not exhibit the motivation and optimism of that of the Settlement in Palestine in the first decades of this century it is because it reflects the post-Holocaust period. If it not written in the spirit of religious devotion it is because it has evolved through a growing process of secularisation from the time of Haskalah. Yet the Palmach poets are writing in Hebrew about Israel; their verse is committed, whether to the search for identity, the relevance of the past, the landscape, love or the family. The social and political realities of their environment have forced change upon them which has given rise to a certain disillusionment and the need for reassessment and redefinition. Criticism of the life they find themselves living and a faintly romantic yearning for an unspecified better world does not signify alienation. The poet realises that he cannot return to a world that no longer exists, nor does he wish to transplant it: the father and son must go their separate ways.

The Israeli poets are not unbalanced, only confused, but this confusion itself is a healthy part of the shaping of the self which must in time emerge. Nathan Alterman, a precursor of the Palmach generation by virtue of his age, but one of them in spirit, wrote a line which could serve as an answer to the imputation of alienation in the post-'48 verse:

'Not everything is vanity, my daughter, not everything
is vanity of vanities'.

לא הכל הבליים, בתי, לא הכל הבליים והבל.

