mother, who had also run off with and been abandoned by a white man—are both made to suffer and commit suicide. Lisitzky has his male Indian protagonist choose suicide over marriage to a white woman. In each case one might wonder whether the conformity to the prohibition on miscegenation simultaneously reflects a Jewish anxiety over mixed marriages—a subject that comes up clearly in Lisitzky's memoirs.

Where Efros's epic does differ from established conventions is in his Zionist emphasis on territory and soil. Several times in the poem, Tom chastises the Indians for hunting rather than working the land, arguing that their way of life makes a strong connection to the land impossible: "Thus you flit above the earth, not within her. / And what is the wonder if, from beneath your feet, / your rootless feet, the land withdraws / and seeks to pass to those, to those / who desire to make their feet into roots?" (58–59) (In fact, Indians do engage in agricultural work—but only the women of the tribe. When Tom works in the field, the male hunters make fun of him for engaging in "women's work.") Laying the blame for white usurpation of the land on the Indians themselves, Tom tells the Nanticokes that they must "Grasp the earth / with tooth and nail, hold on to the clods, / and then . . . no power in the world will be strong enough / to remove you from your place. That is salvation" (66). Such Zionist touches are, however, a relatively minor aspect of the poem which, far more than Silkiner or Lisitzky, shares in the larger American cultural ethos and uses Indians as thematic material, not as reflections for Jewishness.

At over three hundred pages, Ephraim Lisitzky's *Dying Campfires* is the longest of the Hebrew Indian epics. It is also the least satisfying. While not devoid of interest—I will touch below on some of its surprises—the poem's ambition and scope are not matched by a commensurate talent, and the project as a whole lacks Silkiner's idiosyncratic broodings and Efros's gift for melodrama. Lisitzky founders on the contradiction between, on the one hand, his ambition to document something of the inner truth of the Indian, and on the other, the lack of historical specificity which results from his maskilic cultural referents. For starters, Lisitzky has written his poem in the thumping meter of *Hiawatha*, something that English-language poets would have considered fairly retrograde by the turn of the century, let alone in 1937. Lisitzky's interest in Indian culture is expressed primarily through his introduction of various Native American myths into the narrative of the poem.

Unfortunately, these insertions have an arbitrary quality—perhaps inevitably, since they are drawn indiscriminately from different native peoples, and thus their connection with any specific tribal culture is excised—and they often serve only to lengthen a poem which already feels bloated. In the prose foreword, Lisitzky notes that many of the names he uses are imaginary, and that he has mixed rituals and legends from different tribes. He writes: "My aim was not to provide a historical-folkloristic record, in which scientific accuracy is the main thing, but to rescue and gather within Hebrew poetry an echo of the songs of the vanishing Indians."[18] Yet one wonders how Hebrew readers are supposed to catch an echo of Indian songs when Lisitzky has used Longfellow's English meter, which was borrowed in turn from Finnish poetry.

As in the other two Indian epics, the depiction of the Indians in *Dying Campfires* is extremely generic and sentimentalized. In the introduction, for example, they are portrayed, in highly general terms, as Edenic innocents, living "their lives in innocence and righteousness, hunting their game, catching their fish, fighting their wars and smoking their peace-pipes, singing their songs, dancing their dances, and raising up prayer to 'the Great Spirit'" (8). The poem's male heroes all speak, look, and act more or less like each other, while the female characters have even less individuality. This sentimentality and lack of individuation is, of course, hardly unique in the annals of non-Indian literature dealing with Indians. Nor is the stoic resignation to an unalterably tragic fate which Lisitzky ascribes to his tribesmen. In these ways, Lisitzky has successfully emulated his romantic, American literary models.

What we would not expect to find in the poetry of Longfellow or the novels of Cooper, however, is an Indian echo of the Jewish-Arab conflict in Mandate Palestine. Early in the poem, the benevolent Vulture tribe is forced to leave its usual hunting grounds, which have been desiccated by a terrible drought. But when the weak and hungry tribesmembers turn to the forested lands nearby for food and refuge, they are cruelly repulsed by the Serpent tribe. When the Vulture tribe holds a meeting, the descriptions of the Serpent people's callousness and violence sound like Jewish complaints about Arab terror and intransigence. Here, the Vulture chief speaks of the Serpent tribe's actions toward his unfortunate people:

הֵחֵרַשְׁנוּ וַנִּתְאַפָּק	Deaf they were to our entreaties
כִּי אָמַרְנוּ: דַּל שִׁבְטֵנוּ	When we said our tribe is dying,
וּבְבוֹאוֹ אֶל הַמְּנוּחָה —	We must find a place of refuge
טֶרֶם הֶחֱלִיף בָּהּ כֹּחַ,	Ere our people will recover,
טֶרֶם נִרְפָּא מִן הַמַּכִּים	Ere we heal from wounds
אֲשֶׁר חֹלָה בּוֹ הָרָעָב.	of hunger.
אַךְ יְדַעְתֶּם אֶת הַנִּבְלָה	Yet you all know of the outrage
אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לָנוּ שִׁלְשׁוֹם:	Which they once inflicted on us:
דַּלֵּק דָּלְקוּ לַהֲמוֹנֵיהֶם	Chasing after
חֶבֶר נַעֲרֵי שִׁבְטֵנוּ	youths of our tribe—
עַל לֹא חָמָס בְּכַפֵּיהֶם	Blameless were this group of young men
אֶפֶס דָּגִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלוּ	Save that they had dared to take fish
מִן הַיְאוֹר, בְּהִיוֹת הַלַּיְלָה,	From the waterway at midnight—
וַיַּפְגִּיעוּ בָם חִצֵּיהֶם	And they slew them with their arrows,
טְבוּלֵי רוֹשׁ וּטְבוּלֵי רָשַׁע	Dipped in venom, dipped in evil.
. . . . .	. . . . .
הֲכִי נוֹסִיף לְהִתְאַפֵּק	Can our self-restraint continue
עַד אִם יִרְהֲבוּ כֹּה בָנוּ?	When they act so insolently?
הֲכִי נוֹחִיל עַד בָּאוּנוּ	Shall we wait
גַּם בָּזֶה יְמֵי בַצֹּרֶת	in days of famine
אֲשֶׁר נִגְוַע אָז בָּרָעָב	When our people die of hunger
יַעַן יִכְלְאוּ מִמֶּנּוּ	While they withhold from our people
שֶׂפַע דִּיג הַיְאוֹר וְצֵידוֹ	The abundance of the river,
כָּבְשׁוּ לְמוֹ וַיִּבְלָעוּם,	While they swallow up the bounty
אוֹ עַד אִם הִמְרִיצָם רָהָבָם,	Of the forest which they rule o'er
גְּבֹר יִגְבַּר שִׁבְעָתָיִם	Waiting till they next plot evil,
אִם לְעֵת כָּזֹאת נַחֲרִישָׁה,	Till their arrogance increases,
לִנְפּוֹל בָּנוּ וּלְנַשְׁלֵנוּ	And the wicked fall upon us,
מֵאֲחֻזַּת יַעֲרֵנוּ?	Oust us from our home, the forest? (112–13)[19]

Reading this as a reflection of contemporary events in Palestine, we can hear the chief echoing the much-debated question of self-restraint versus retaliation in

response to Arab attacks ("Shall our self-restraint continue / When they act so insolently?"). The moral argument that Arabs should share the land with needy Jewish refugees resounds in his rueful complaint: "Deaf they were to our entreaties / When we said our tribe is dying, / We must find a place of refuge / Ere our people will recover." And the mention of the mob attack likely refers to the Arab riots themselves.

The other notable departure from the conventions of American romantic literature is the unambiguous opposition to the treatment of the Indians by the whites. While the vanishing Native Americans were looked upon with pity in the literature and art of nineteenth-century America, the advancing whites were not portrayed with the extreme antipathy seen in Lisitzky's poem. In the introduction, Lisitzky describes the encounter between the whites and the Indians as follows: "From across the 'mighty waters' there came a white monster; before it, blood and fire and columns of smoke, and after it, utter destruction—and it poured out its wrath upon them, and persecuted them in anger and destroyed them from under the heavens of their homeland" (8). In the poem itself, the whites are manipulative and cruel, using their superior technology to cow and destroy the Indians, and intimidating the tribes into signing treaties, only to break them when they please.[20]

Lisitzky similarly portrays Christianity and its emissaries as arrogant, hypocritical, and cruel. Silkiner, as we have already seen, shows the Spanish conquerors in a church, singing hymns to peace while their victims freeze to death outside. Efros's poem, while less vehemently hostile to European designs, depicts a Christian missionary's blundering self-righteousness as he debates the Nanticokes about their religion. Lisitzky gives us Adam Anderson, an insolent priest with a gilded cross around his neck, who harangues the Indians about the one true religion. The tyrannical nature of Anderson's mission becomes quickly evident as he makes it clear that Christianity is an offer the Indians cannot refuse. Any who persist in other forms of worship will be destroyed: "more than / One war have we waged while bringing / The word of our lord, the Son of God, / To the savage tribes and peoples, / When they dared to rise against us, / And we trampled them beneath us" (225). In such episodes we see Lisitzky's Jewish estrangement from the culture of the Christian West. He identifies with the Native Americans against the brutalities

of the Europeans, a sentiment likely given additional force by contemporary events. (In 1937, the ravaging white monster from across the seas must recall the Nazi beast.)

This dimension of the poem expresses the American Hebrew poets' uncertainty about their place in America as well. While it is telling that not one of the Hebrew poets portrays the whites as native-born Americans, their tales of tragedy inevitably challenge any spotless picture of American history. It is significant in this regard that the figure of Adam Anderson can be seen not only as a general indictment of Christian violence, but also as a specific retort to Lisitzky's primary American model. When he depicted the cruelty of the priest in *Dying Campfires,* Lisitzky doubtless had the ending of *Hiawatha* in mind, for Longfellow concluded his poem with a Christian missionary preaching to the Indians, to rather different effect. As it speaks so starkly to the tensions surrounding the figure of the Indian and its use by the American Hebrew poets, I will end with Longfellow's sermon:

Then the Black-Robe chief, the prophet,
Told his message to the people,
Told the purport of his mission,
Told them of the Virgin Mary,
And her blessed Son, the Saviour,
How in distant lands and ages
He had lived on earth as we do;
How he fasted, prayed, and laboured;
How the Jews, the tribe accursed,
Mocked him, scourged him, crucified him;
How he rose from where they laid him,
Walked again with his disciples,
And ascended into heaven.
And the chiefs made answer, saying:
"We have listened to your message,
We have heard your words of wisdom,
We will think on what you tell us.

It is well for us, O brothers,
That you come so far to see us!"[21]

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NOTES

1 The best introduction to the work of these writers and its cultural contexts is *Hebrew in America: Perspectives and Prospects,* ed. Alan Mintz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993); especially the editor's introduction and the leading pair of essays, "A Sanctuary in the Wilderness: The Beginnings of the Hebrew Movement in America in *Hatoren,*" by Mintz, and "*Ameriqa'iyut* in American Hebrew Literature," by Ezra Spicehandler, 13–104. See also Mintz's "Hebrew Literature in America," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Jewish Literature,* eds. Michael P. Kramer and Hana Wirth-Nesher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 92–109. For examples of the primacy these writers extended to Silkiner's Indian epic, see the introduction to *Antologyah shel hashirah ha'ivrit ba'amerikah,* ed. Menachem Ribalow (New York: Histadrut Ivrit, 1938); and Eisig Silberschlag, *From Renaissance to Renaissance: Hebrew Literature from 1492–1970,* vol. 1 (New York: Ktav, 1973), 249, 276–79.

2 Ephraim E. Lisitzky, *In the Grip of Cross-Currents,* trans. Moshe Kohn and Jacob Sloan (New York: Bloch, 1959), 175–76.

3 See the similar comments of Nurit Govrin in her essay, "Hatevi'ah la'amerika'iyut' vehagshamatah basifrut ha'ivrit ba'amerikah," in *Migvan: Meḥkarim basifrut ha'ivrit uvgilluyeha ha'amerikaniyim,* ed. Stanley Nash (Lod: Habermann Institute for Literary Research, 1988), 91.

4 Shimon Ginzburg, *Shirim ufo'emot* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1931), 273. All quotations from this work are my translations.

5 This was not the only time that Ginzburg detached and transfigured elements from Central Park in order to present them as locations opposed to—rather than part of—New York City. In "Bamigdal," a long poem written in 1912, the year of his arrival in the United States, Ginzburg excoriates New York as a satanic city, fleeing in his imagination to a pastoral land of Israel. Yet in the midst of his Zionist pastoral, he portrays a couple wandering through a storehouse for Egyptian,

Greek, and Christian artifacts—a place clearly based on the Metropolitan Museum of Art!

6 On the poetic conservatism of the Hebrew poets in America, see Uzi Shavit, "The New Hebrew Poetry of the Twenties: Palestine and America," *Prooftexts* 12 (1992): 213–230. There were, of course, exceptions to this rejection of modernism, most notably Gabriel Preil. See Yael Feldman, *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinatti: Hebrew Union College Press, 1986); and Dan Miron's monograph, "Bein haner lakokhavim," in Gabriel Preil, *Asfan stavim, shirim 1972–1992* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1993).

7 For information on Silkiner see his contemporaries' testimonials in the *Sefer zikkaron leB. N. Silkiner,* ed. Menachem Ribalow (n.p.: Ogen, 1934). Also useful are Jacob Kabakoff, "B. N. Silkiner and His Circle: The Genesis of the New Hebrew Literature in America," *Judaism* 39 (1990): 97–103; and, by the same author, "Bein Shimon Halkin leB. N. Silkiner ul'Avraham Regelson," *Bitzaron* 9 (1988): 55–59.

8 *Communings of the Spirit: The Journals of Mordecai M. Kaplan,* vol. 1: 1913–1934, ed. Mel Scult (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 515.

9 B. N. Silkiner, *Shirim* (Israel: Dvir, 1927), 83. This is actually a second, revised version of Silkiner's poem, appearing in the volume of his collected works. The first edition, *Mul ohel Timmura: shivrei po'emah (mizeman shilton hasefaradim ba'amerikah),*was published by the Asaf publishing house in Jerusalem in 1910. Silkiner revised the work with the help of Shimon Ginzburg and, to a lesser extent, Shimon Halkin and Hillel Bavli. Generally speaking there are no significant alterations in the matter or style of the poem; the main impulse behind the revision was to clarify the syntax of Silkiner's long sentences, primarily through adjustments of word order and punctuation. All of my quotations are taken from the revised edition.

10 The passage also recalls biblical and midrashic treatments of the enslavement in Egypt and the building of the Tower of Babel.

11 Note, however, that this apparently anti-capitalistic sentiment, which appears in a number of works by the American Hebraists (we have already seen it in Ginzburg's "New York"), is less the expression of any sort of socialist politics than a reflection of these poets' pastoral, anti-urban, anti-modernist ideals.

12 This was the surmise of Silkiner's colleague, Shimon Ginzburg, who compared the poem to Bialik's "Megillat ha'esh"; see *Sefer zikkaron leB. N. Silkiner,* 29. (Of course, the language of slaughter has earlier Hebrew precedents as well, from medieval martyrologies to the rabbinic depictions of the fall of Betar.) The influence of Bialik's "Dead of the Desert" also seems to me pronounced, especially on Silkiner's depiction of the mythic, mysterious, vanished tribes.

13 The echoes of traditional Jewish texts are evident, as for example: "Through the crime of bloodshed the Temple was destroyed and the *Shechinah* departed from Israel, as it is written, *So ye shall not pollute the land wherein ye are; for blood, it polluteth the land . . . And thou shalt not defile the land which ye inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell* (Num. 35:33): hence, if ye do defile it, ye will not inhabit it and I will not dwell in its midst." (BT Shabbat 33a, Soncino)

14 See Ginzburg's essay in the *Sefer zikkaron leB. N. Silkiner,* 29. In the same volume, Y. F. Lachower, in an essay more representative of the poem's lukewarm reception outside of the United States, maintained that, while the subject matter was daring for its time, Silkiner's Indians were too remote and exotic to symbolize modern Jewish life effectively (38).

15 Hillel Bavli, "Esrim shanah aḥarei moto," in *Ruḥot nifgashot* (New York: Ogen, n.d.), 117–18, my translation.

16 Also in the Western theme is *Zahav,* Efros's long poem about the California Gold Rush. For a more positive assessment of Efros's and Lisitzky's Indian poems, readers should consult Alan Mintz's essay on Hebrew literature in America in *The Cambridge Companion to American Jewish Literature,* and Stephen Katz's thorough treatment of Lisitzky, "To Be As Others: E. E. Lisitzky's Re-presentation of Native Americans," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 73 (2003): 249–97. Katz's essay appeared after this article went to press.

17 Israel Efros, *Vigvamim shotekim* (Tel Aviv: Mitzpa, 1933), 12. All quotations from this work are my translations. Arthur Hertzberg cites this poem as an example of the loneliness and alienation experienced by the educated Hebraist in America, though, as I have explained, the attitude toward the American environment in this poem includes positive elements as well. See *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 184.

18 Ephraim Lisitzky, *Medurot do'akhot* (New York: Ogen, 1937), 3. All quotations from this work are my translations.

19 My translation of this passage departs somewhat from a literal rendering of the original in order to highlight its *Hiawatha*-like formal character.

20 This picture of the settlers' westward movement links up with the Hebraists' negative attitudes toward modern, urban society. We see this towards the end of Lisitzky's poem, when one of the women of the tribe has a magical vision of the future—a future that is Lisitzky's present. She sees that the forest has been cut down, the marshes dried out, the fields destroyed, and the animals driven to extinction. The Indians survive only in tiny pockets, surrounded by whites and with almost no remaining traces of their culture. "Dwellings of stone," she prophecies, will reach

to the sky, "Blotting out the golden sunlight, / Swallowing the lovely silence / With their noisy multitudes" (247). This vision recalls the despair and bewilderment of Ginzburg's "New York," in which the Indian is the epitome of the city's victim, the outsider to the modern world of skyscrapers and factories. And the same sentiment surfaces in the opening of the first edition of *Mul ohel Timmura*, in which the shrill "rebelliousness and disobedience" (9) of the modern city is juxtaposed with the peace of Timmura's bucolic twilight.

21 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Selected Poems* (London: Everyman, 1993), 248. Tchernikhovsky understandably excised this passage from his Hebrew translation of the poem.

Lost Tribes: The Indian in American Hebrew Poetry

MICHAEL WEINGRAD

> we will seem to them like faceless Indians, like anonymous Aztecs,
> we will seem to them like the tribes that were scattered and lost.
>
> — Gabriel Preil, "Waiting for the Atomic Tomorrow"

> It isn't worthwhile, in these practical times, for people to talk about Indian poetry—there never was any in them—except in the Fenimore Cooper Indians. But they are an extinct tribe that never existed.
>
> — Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*

One of the more curious aspects of American Hebrew poetry is its evident fascination with Indians. While Native American motifs were not absent from Yiddish American poetry—Yehoash translated *Hiawatha* into Yiddish, for example—the figure of the Indian assumed a distinctively central place in the American Hebrew poets' self-understanding. These poets were nearly unanimous in dating the beginnings of an estimable Hebrew literature in the United States from the publication of Benjamin Nahum Silkiner's Indian epic *Mul ohel Timmura* (Before the Tent of Timmura) in 1910. Moreover, in the years following its publication, Silkiner's tale of the demise of "the Silent Tribe" and its chieftain became the centerpiece of various arguments about the *amerika'iyut* (Americanness) of Hebrew poetry in the New World. The very possibility of a viable American Hebrew literature seemed to some of its practitioners to hang on the promise

PROOFTEXTS 24 (2004): 291-319.

suggested by Silkiner's importation of "native" subject matter into the development of modern Hebrew letters. Indeed, Silkiner's work was followed by two other "Indian epics" written by Hebrew poets. In 1933, Israel Efros published his *Vigvamim shotekim* (Silent Wigwams), and four years later Ephraim Lisitzky's *Medurot do'akhot* (Dying Campfires) appeared.[1]

What explains the fact that three prominent figures in American Hebrew poetry produced book-length poems on Indian themes? Several factors are involved here, all having to do with the circumstances of Hebrew literature in the United States. First, these poets' relationship with America was profoundly ambivalent at best. They were reluctant immigrants. In their works and letters we see that they often experienced America and its urban landscapes as a bewildering, threatening wasteland. While the events that galvanized them were taking place in Eastern Europe and Palestine, the American environment seemed to them crass, materialistic, and indifferent to their cultural and ideological passions. Lisitzky, in his memoirs, recalls the words of the poet Menachem Mendel Dolitzky, who saw his immigration to the United States as a banishment into irrelevance:

> In Russia there were people one could fight—respectable enemies. We fought the battle of the Enlightenment and Zionism against our Orthodox brethren; but even the most fanatical of them were men of stature. We may have thought their opinions damaging, but we knew they were solid, stable. They had a tradition to fight for, and you had to respect them for fighting.
>
> But here in America? If only we had some of those fanatics and reactionaries from the Old Country here! They at least were loyal and devout Jews. Here we have a pack of boors, ignoramuses, whose only thought is to "make a living," with nothing spiritual about them. And then there's no one to fight *with* you. The Jewish intellectuals? Heretic socialists, heroes of Yom Kippur and Tisha B'Av balls; or else professional careerists, uninterested in their own people. . . .
>
> Then there's nothing to fight for. The Enlightenment and Zionism are disembodied spirits floating in chaos in this country—in the

> Old Country they were concrete ideas directly related to Jewish life and traditions. So there you are: in America, the Hebrew poet has no one to fight against, no one to fight with, and nothing to fight for. There's no place for him here—he's pushed aside into a corner.[2]

This acute sense of alienation was heightened by their extreme minority position even within Jewish literary life. While Yiddish saw a heyday, and English quickly became the dominant language of American Jewry, the Hebrew writers waited in vain for a substantial Hebrew readership to materialize on American soil. As the passage above shows, their aspirations to develop a Hebrew cultural center in the United States were accompanied by frequent contempt for what they saw as the spiritual emptiness and cultural philistinism of American Jewry and its assimilatory values. The turn to the Indian was therefore a way for these writers to be "American" while rejecting the actual America they saw around them. They could soothe their gnawing sense of purposelessness by taking on a mission: to expand the horizons of Hebrew poetry by bringing in indigenous American subject matter. And by setting their epics in a virgin, mythologized America, they could escape their harsh and disorienting surroundings.[3]

The Indian could even be used as America's "opposite": a counter-image to the greed, cruelty, and exploitation so often decried by Jewish immigrant writers in all languages. A central instance of this is found in Shimon Ginzburg's long poem, "New York" (1917), one of the few attempts by a Hebrew poet to depict the American urban experience at length. In the middle of the poem, Ginzburg uses the image of an Indian chieftain as a noble counter to the horrific phantasmagoria of life in the big city, described in terms and cadences distantly resembling his Beatnik namesake's "Howl." After recounting his anguished nocturnal wanderings through a demonic, degenerate New York, the speaker makes his way to what is almost certainly Central Park, then as now a respite from the city's tumult. In "a hidden corner / to which the city profane does not reach," the narrator finds what was once "a Masada / of desperate Indian warriors, here was their refuge / and here they all fell one by one at the feet of the victor, 'the white god.'"[4] This "legendary dwarven palace"—likely inspired by Belvedere Castle, Central Park's oddly three-quarter

scale fortress—is, in Ginzburg's imagination, still inhabited by the Indian "cacique" (chieftain), who appears as "an old man / clothed in white . . . prince of the dream-world, the ancient world that was destroyed." The "only one who betrays the kingdom . . . of Moloch"—that is, New York—he rules an innocent pastoral island, besieged by the forces of modernity.[5] He lingers by an anthropomorphized pool—the debt to Bialik is evident—that wistfully dreams of the "dense, virgin forests" and "joyful shouts of young redskins" that preceded the arrival of the white settlers, but that is menaced by the ugly reality of the city, "the tall buildings with their angry guards" that "keep her prisoner" (274). When cacique and the pool retreat into their "dreams of the splendor and glory that have passed away," Ginzburg continues excoriating the factories and workhouses of New York, depicted as infernal realms, ruled over by a sinister pharaoh. As the sole opponent of the industrial forces decried by Ginzburg, the Indian chief is linked with the displaced, disgusted poet, the Jewish immigrant who sees America as a nightmare of exploitation and oppression. Moreover, by seeing the island of Manhattan as a place where Indians were massacred by white settlers, Ginzburg, like the other poets who took up Indian themes, implicitly challenges a sunny and triumphalist conception of American history, and foregrounds, not freedom, but genocide.

However, the Hebrew poets' interest in Indians was not only a product of their personal and ideological alienation from America. It also reflected the aesthetic problems which, in all but a few instances, beset American Hebrew poetry. For these poets were not only uncomfortable with modernity, they were also uncomfortable with modernism. Their conception of poetry was based upon nineteenth-century maskilic notions of the lofty and refined, and they eschewed both subject matter which did not fit these notions, and literary developments which upturned their Parnassian views. Adhering to an extremely conservative poetics, they took few steps beyond the lessons they learned from the Ḥibbat Zion generation and the examples of Bialik and Tchernikhovsky. Certainly, their poetic development was also inhibited by the lack of a Hebrew-speaking public, whose linguistic evolutions might have nourished their literary efforts. Yet the limitations of the American Hebrew poets reflected a programmatic more than a linguistic poverty. They were resistant to the reality of the American city as a literary subject, and to the modernist techniques that allowed contemporary poets working in other languages to reflect

that reality in their writing. Ginzburg's use of free verse and his unruly subject were exceptions to the rule in American Hebrew poetry, and even Ginzburg's New York is rather encrusted in mythical motifs. It is often a catalogue of stock imagery, a demonic Babylon populated by Pharaohs, Molochs, and faceless slaves.[6]

If the urban poetics of Whitman and the modernist innovations of Pound were incomprehensible to many of these writers, an effort such as Longfellow's *Hiawatha* made sense to them. The epic form suited their Haskalah-conditioned expectations of what poetry should be, while the subject matter, centering on the tragedy of the native people's encounter with the white settlers, seemed appropriately lofty and decorous. (Even Tchernikhovsky took note of Longfellow, and translated *Hiawatha* into Hebrew, five years after the publication of Silkiner's poem.) And so, while their suspicion of modernism hampered a real poetic encounter with America, *Hiawatha* provided a model and license for the American Hebrew poets' flights into romanticism, exoticism, and stereotype. The aesthetic of these poets was, compared with American literature in English, anywhere from a generation to a century behind the times.

All this would make for a mostly quaint collection of literary curiosities, were it not for the existence of a further dimension to this poetry: the extent to which the American Hebrew writers used their Indian narratives to dramatize aspects of modern Jewish experience. The aesthetic limitations of these works are compensated for by their fascinating interweaving of contemporary Jewish realities with the stock tropes of the Red Man. These poets' interest in a "vanished race" reflected a range of Jewish national concerns, from cultural assimilation to the possibility of genocide. Their focus in all three epics on the displacement and demise of the Indians at the hands of the white settlers was a statement about antisemitism, European cruelty, and the plight of contemporary Jewry, just as it inevitably foregrounded Zionist passions concerning land and sovereignty. In the figure of the tragic Indian, these poets could express the individual immigrant's sense of impotence, loneliness and beleaguerment, as well as national outrage before the upheavals of modern history.

This is especially the case in Silkiner's *Mul ohel Timmura.* For Silkiner, the Indian was a dark mirror in which the poet could contemplate the most extreme Jewish hopes and fears. His poem is remembered today, and was praised in its time,

as the first significant attempt to incorporate "American" thematic materials into Hebrew poetry. It was taken by his contemporaries as a kind of programmatic model for the Hebrew poets of the United States to follow. Nevertheless, this is something of a misreading. The supposedly American subject matter of the poem certainly was a novelty. Yet to regard this as its defining feature misses the more fundamental aspects of the poem. *Timmura* is a highly personal, even idiosyncratic work, and its main referent outside of the soul of its author is not Native American or pre-Columbian culture, of which he seemed to know little, but rather the Jewish dilemmas of modernity. What Silkiner managed to do in this poem was to find a vehicle for national and personal concerns which was simultaneously perceived as American, and which, while unprecedented in its apparent subject matter, partook of the romantic aesthetic of Hebrew contemporaries such as Bialik and Frischmann.

In what follows I will first analyze Silkiner's poem, and then consider Efros's *Vigvamim shotekim* and Lisitzky's *Medurot do'akhot.* As I will show, what is most striking about each of these "Indian epics" is the way in which their authors interjected their own experience into the figure of the Indian—ironically transforming into a strange yet potent truth the misbegotten notion, still maintained in the nineteenth century, that the Indians were Jews.

THE SILENT TRIBE OF BENJAMIN NAHUM SILKINER

By all accounts Silkiner was something of a polymath, fluent in a range of languages. Lanky and painfully shy, he enjoyed nothing so much as spending his time reading through a personal library that included thousands of volumes. (Shimon Halkin even tells of a poem of his that was lost when Silkiner made the mistake of slipping the manuscript into one of his books, which was then swallowed up by his enormous library and never seen again.) Born near Kovno in 1882, he made his way at the turn of the century to Odessa, where he was briefly involved in the Aḥad Ha'am circle. In 1904, he emigrated to the United States, where he fervently hoped to help establish a durable Hebrew literary culture. To this end he was involved in a number of short-lived publishing projects, the most important of which was the journal *Hatoren,* launched in 1913.[7] Silkiner worked tirelessly to further the cause of Hebrew poetry in America until his untimely death in 1933. Mordecai Kaplan, who worked

alongside Silkiner at the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, wrote the following in his diary after Silkiner's death:

> He was a rare type of man, gifted and modest, a genuine poet with a beautiful soul which found expression in all he did. Both he and Hoschander [another member of the JTS faculty] were unknown, uncelebrated men yet far more noble and heroic than most of those whose names are on everybody's lips.[8]

Mul ohel Timmura, Silkiner's first published work, is a strange and poignant long poem in fourteen cantos and over 1500 lines. Silkiner's language is heavy with the stock phrasing typical of nineteenth-century Hebrew poetry, and the plot can at times be silly and quaint. Nevertheless, the poem remains fascinating. Its sentimentality and aesthetic limitations are easily offset by its startling refractions of modern Jewish experience, as well as the intriguing psychological dimension of the work. The poem's overt subject is the downfall of a native tribe at the time of the Spanish conquest of the Americas. Though vaguely reminiscent of nineteenth-century works such as Prescott's histories of the Spanish Conquest, the events of the poem do not appear to be based on specific historical models. Instead, they take place in Silkiner's romantic and highly generalized imagination of New World geography and history, veering frequently into the supernatural. Yet this safely distant framework of a mythic, fantastical Indian past allows Silkiner to work over the traumas of recent Jewish history and of his own life. In the poem, the evildoings of the Spaniards, who were persecuting Jews in Europe at the same time as they were colonizing the Americas, not only allude to Jewish suffering in medieval times, but powerfully reflect the contemporary hardships of the Jews in Eastern Europe from where Silkiner fled.

The poem entertains a number of other subjects as well. There is a proto-ecological theme, as the tribe's downfall is linked with the exploitation of natural resources. The conflict between the tribe's chief and its spiritual leader reflects a long-standing tension in Jewish history between politics and religion, a tension which, since the Haskalah, was made to reflect modern issues. Yet the poem's main concern, which, while never trumpeted, saturates the work with anxiety and despair,

is with the possibility of a people's disappearance. By projecting such a catastrophe onto an Indian tribe, Silkiner can meditate on the possibility of Jewish annihilation, whether by genocide or by assimilation.

In this regard it is significant that, though the poem centers on the chieftain, Mugiral—whose name recalls his people's bitter fate (*goral*)—Silkiner uses the first and final cantos to frame the work as a story told by the aged Indian Timmura to his young daughter. Opening with a lovely invocation of sunset, the poem describes how Timmura's daughter, standing by her father in the dusk, is frightened at the sudden appearance of a bent-backed old man with wild, white hair and blazing eyes. Timmura reassures his daughter, explaining that the man is not dangerous. "I alone," he says, "know the events of his past and his present life; lean / Upon my arm and incline your ear to me and I will recount to you the Song of Mugiral."[9] In this way, Silkiner places the events of the poem in an obscure, remembered past, converting the immediacy of Mugiral's epic into the pathos of a fading tribal memory preserved by a single old man. The poem begins balanced precariously between the possibility of cultural continuity (Timmura will recount to his daughter the history of the Silent Tribe) and the rapacity of time and loss (Timmura is the only one alive who knows this history).

The tale proper begins in the second canto with the story of Mugiral's cursed patrimony and doom-shadowed birth. His father swears, in response to an ominous prophecy, to kill his own child "as he comes forth from his mother's womb" (94). Yet, when she feels her labor coming on, Mugiral's mother flees into the mountains and delivers her son. Rather than face her husband's reprisals for her disobedience, she leaves the child in a crevice in a rock, and throws herself into a ravine. This tragic story (and all the love relationships in the poem end in death) is followed by the history of the Silent Tribe and their curious precursors. Before the existence of the Silent Tribe, their "blessed valley" was home to the savage Tribe of the Rocks, a proud and martial people who made war on the other peoples of the region. Silkiner depicts their barbaric rites in not unadmiring tones, as we are told how the tribesmen marked their victories with wild celebrations in which they danced about ecstatically with the skulls of their enemies. When their chieftain is slain in battle, the Tribe of the Rocks soon fades into oblivion. Not for the last time, we see Silkiner's concern with the disappearance of peoples, as he writes how "this nation

of heroes, whose memory is preserved in the howling wilderness, / And whose steps are etched in the flinty crags" eventually "vanished / From the Jacinth Valley . . . the force of their deeds had gone to waste" (101).

Their place in the valley is taken by the Silent Tribe who, unlike their savage predecessors, live in near-perfect tranquility. The only event which interrupts the placid calm of their lives is their annual sacrifice. Every year, the chief randomly designates one member of the tribe, who is slain and whose blood nourishes the "Red Rock." After the tribe witnesses the event, they assemble at their temple (*heikhal haraḥamim*) in order to view the statue of their deity, the Great Spirit or "Spirit-God" (*elnefesh*), an image described only in terms of its smiling countenance. When, after a few days, a flower blossoms at the base of the Red Rock, the tribe knows it will be a year of blessing. Silkiner's almost anthropological imagination is evidenced in this canto, as he seems to imply that the continual violence of the Tribe of the Rocks has been channeled by the Silent Tribe into a single yearly sacrifice.

The enemy arrives in the fourth canto, as "the white men of Spain descend / From the Mountains of Flint and stream into the Jacinth Valley" (105). As soon as they appear, Silkiner reminds us of the Spaniards' historical cruelty, in a bitter reversal of the biblical image of saving pillars of cloud and fire: "Rivers and rivers of blood and tears the men of Spain have already spilt— / By day clouds of smoke mounting skyward from the debris of ruins, / By night the light of pyres built for their god, who demands / Sacrifices by the *thousands.* . . . " Innocently, the Silent Tribe welcomes the "Children of the Sun" with flowers, bowing down before them in respect. Peace is declared between the two peoples, though the chief of the Silent Tribe already has premonitions of danger. Unsurprisingly, it is not long before disaster strikes.

Potera, the sinister Spanish lord, wants to take possession of a horse belonging to a member of the Silent Tribe. In the manner of a Shakespearean villain (Silkiner was an enthusiastic reader of Shakespeare and translated *Macbeth*), Potera slanders the horse's owner to the chief, persuading the chief to pick him as the spring sacrifice—a direct violation of the random selection that the ritual requires. When the hapless tribesman is sacrificed, the premeditated slaughter angers the Great Spirit, who causes a horrible drought to seize the valley. Gripped by famine, the tribesfolk pray to the offended deity, but receive no response. Potera then offers the

starving tribe a deal: if they will excavate gems from beneath the valley, the Spaniards will give them bread in exchange for the precious stones. Desperate for food, and indifferent to the value of gems, the tribe accepts his offer. Yet this arrangement further corrupts the natural order of the valley. Personified throughout the poem in feminine and maternal terms, the valley is described here as being penetrated and violated by her children, the tribesmen mining for gems. Her loss of innocence then parallels that of the tribesfolk, who begin to fight one another for the gems, the weak losing out to the strong, as "a chip of stone became more precious / In each man's eyes than his own soul, than the soul of his neighbor" (117).[10] The Spaniards are not simply oppressors; they have introduced exchange-value into the valley—a taste of the tree of economic knowledge—and this creates competition, strife, and injustice. The exploitation of the earth and the exploitation of human beings are intertwined.[11]

The Silent Tribe now requires a savior. Hearing their "bitter cry," Mugiral bursts forth from the Red Rock, in which he had been mysteriously ensconced since his birth (121). Now a handsome young man, he stands before the tribe and explains to them that the Great Spirit, angered by the corrupt sacrifice, has abandoned the valley. He tells them that they must descend into the earth and extract "black iron," and that with this metal they will make weapons: "Then a song of vengeance, sung / By the Tribe of the Rocks long ago, all of you shall learn, and you shall exact your vengeance / Upon the strangers who came and turned the heart of the Great Spirit from us" (121–22). It is indicative of the ambivalent role played by the poem's protagonist that Mugiral's first instruction to the tribe—to excavate metal from the earth—closely resembles the Spanish demand for gems. Moreover, the "song of vengeance" he teaches to the tribe resurrects the savagery of the extinct Tribe of the Rocks, an atavistic violence whose consequences Mugiral does not anticipate.

This violence is not described directly and unfiguratively. Never in the poem do we witness a Spaniard slaying an Indian or vice versa. Instead, we have an exaggeratedly nightmarish fantasy of blood, in which the night of the Indians' war of vengeance on the Spaniards is represented as a mythical tidal wave of carnage, in which "streams and rivers of boiling, reeking blood" inundate the valley, turning it into a "mighty sea . . . its red waves, capped and checkered with carmine brain" (123). One is reminded of Bialik's poem, "On the Slaughter," written a few years

before *Timmura* in response to the Kishinev pogrom of 1903. "Let the blood pierce through the abyss!" Bialik cried. "Let the blood seep down to the depths of darkness, and eat away there, in the dark, and breach all the rotting foundations of the earth." Indeed, it would not be going too far to propose that the violence in Silkiner's poem also draws on the nightmare experience of the pogroms, when streets literally did stream with blood.[12] Silkiner seems to delve into the emotional, pre-rational, even mythical dimension of the massacres, portraying a fantasy of revenge so intense it resembles a volcano. Mugiral and the Silent Tribe show here what desires can be nursed in the hearts of the humiliated. Even when the last of the enemy have been slain, Mugiral and his tribe are found kneeling by the piles of Spanish corpses, "for vengeance and blood still yearning, craving" (124)—a parallel to the voice of unslakable Jewish rage we hear in Bialik.

The modern Jewish resonances of Silkiner's Indians are heard even more distinctly in the canto that follows. In the aftermath of the battle against the Spanish, the tribal priest responds to a crisis of discontinuity, as the tribe's temple and the statue of its deity have been destroyed. Silkiner depicts this crisis in terms that cannot but call to mind the cultural dilemmas faced by the Jewish writers and thinkers of his generation. Tomiya, the priest, appears as a kind of Aḥad Ha'amist, grappling with the fundamental questions of Jewish culture in modernity, with the uncertainty that follows the loss of tradition. Gathering together the builders and sculptors of the tribe, he observes that the temple and its statue had bestowed peace and unity upon the tribe for centuries. In the absence of their restoration, warns Tomiya, the old generation will die and "a new generation [will be] born not knowing its fathers and their God" (127). This concern resonates throughout the poem which, as we have said, is framed as the history recounted by Timmura to his daughter—an attempt to restore generational continuity through knowledge.

Tomiya goes on to assert that the most difficult task falls to the sculptors, who must embody not the form but the essence of the Spirit-God. The subsequent inability of any of the sculptors to accomplish this task is nothing other than a reflection of conundrums of modern Jewish culture:

לַשָּׁוְא הַפַּסָּלִים, בְּעָזְבָם הַפֶּלֶג־הַמִּדְבָּר, נָפוֹצוּ
וַיִּלְכוּ לְשׁוֹטֵט בֵּין תִּלֵּי־חֳרָבוֹת שֶׁל הֵיכַל־הָרַחֲמִים,

לִכְרוֹת וְלַחְפּוֹר מִתַּחַת לְעִיֵּי־מַשׁוּאוֹת וּלְהוֹצִיא
מִגַּלֵּי מִכְתּוֹת־הַהֶרֶס שִׁבְרֵי הַפֶּסֶל וּרְסִיסָיו,
וּלְסַדֵּר הַקְּטָעִים וּלְעָרְכָם וּלְחַפֵּשׂ בְּעֵינַיִם עֲיֵפוֹת
אוֹר־נַפְשׁוֹ הַטָּמוּן וְגָנוּז בְּבֵת־צְחוֹקוֹ, לְפֵרוֹרִים נִשְׁבָּרָה;
לַשָּׁוְא אֶת בִּקְעָתָם עָזְבוּ וַיֵּלְכוּ לִקְצְוֵי הָאָרֶץ
לָשִׁים בְּמִקְדְּשֵׁי הַשְּׁבָטִים לֵילוֹת כַּיָּמִים וְלִשְׁקוֹד
עַל פְּסִלֵי הָאֵלִים הַזָּרִים וְלַחֲרוֹת עַל לוּחַ לְבָבָם,
הַדּוֹפֵק וְרוֹעֵד מְגִילָה, קַוִּים וְשִׂרְטוּטִים בְּלִי מִסְפָּר . . .

In vain did the sculptors, when they left the talking brook, disperse
And go roving among the ruined heaps of the temple,
To prod and dig beneath the piles of debris, and withdraw
From the heaps of smashed fragments chips and splinters of the statue,
And order the pieces and arrange them and seek with tired eyes
In these broken bits for the secret, hidden light of his spirit in his smile;
In vain did they leave the valley and go to the ends of the earth
And sit day and night in the temples of other tribes, keeping watch
Over statues of strange gods, and carving upon the tablets of their hearts,
Beating and pulsing with joy, numberless lines and sketches . . . (128)

What is a viable Jewish culture to look like in the wake of modernity's upheavals? Is it to be a repetition of the past, of tradition? Silkiner suggests that this is not possible, as he depicts the failure of the sculptors who "prod and dig beneath the piles of debris" and "seek with tired eyes / In these broken bits" for a glimmer of true divinity. He similarly disparages the assimilatory impulse to copy from non-Jewish culture, as the creators who "sit day and night in the temples of other tribes" also fail in their task. In each case, Tomiya sadly rejects their efforts as inauthentic. Silkiner describes here the anguished period when the tradition has been destroyed, and a living continuation has not been found.

We should not be surprised that Silkiner offers only the most obscure of resolutions to such perplexing challenges. In the ninth canto, "Secrets of the Sea," the fulfillment of Tomiya's task is conveyed through an extremely private symbolism that must remain somewhat opaque to the reader. Yet even if the precise meaning of

these events is impossible to determine, we can discern its important outlines. The canto centers on Eitzima, an orphan who was taken in by the Silent Tribe after the mysterious death of his parents. When the Spaniards arrive and trouble besets the valley, the waves of the sea sing "an ancient song" to him, describing the downfall of another tribe, the Benei Rikvah, who are slaughtered by an enemy tribe on Mount Gahleh. Rather than be brought to the enemy's altar, the Rikvah chieftain defiantly leaps to his death, and on the spot where he dies a rock issues "springs of reddish-black blood" (134). For centuries afterward, the Benei Rikvah drink from this source and grow strong, dominating the tribes around them. Eventually, though, a "new generation of Gahleh"—the name recalls the Hebrew word for exile—"stopped fortifying their bodies / In the blood of the rock of wrath." They grow weak and passive, the "rock of wrath" crumbles apart, and the Benei Rikvah soon fade into oblivion—the second tribe in the epic to disappear.

After hearing this tale from the waves, Eitzima goes to the place where the Rikvah chief died and takes fragments of the rock, from which he carves the image of the Spirit-God. When he takes it to the temple, Tomiya joyfully approves: "This is my God majestic in holiness! Before Him on your knees bend down!" (136) Yet Eitzima is suddenly astonished to see that the statue's smile resembles his own. Strangely distraught, he sneaks away from the temple, and when messengers later tell Eitzima that Tomiya has died, and that his last request was for Eitzima to take his place as priest, Eitzima remains silent, caught up in his own gloom. His decision to accept the priesthood comes only after a further supernatural and mysterious episode. When the messengers depart, he listens to the desert howl its forlorn entreaties to the sea. The desert claims that it will become a fertile, creative paradise, if only the sea will embrace it. A lovely girl rises from the waves and petitions the rocks which hem the sea to let the waters pass through to the desert. When she is ignored, her features become monstrous and she bites the "stone heart of the rocks" with "venomed teeth" (139). Still, the rocks still refuse her entreaties, telling her that if the sea wants to meet the desert, it must find subterranean passages "*beneath the foundations of the earth*" (140, Silkiner's emphasis). When Eitzima hears this, he goes to the temple to take up the priesthood.

All of this is cryptic enough, yet a certain logic can be discerned in the canto. Eitzima is clearly a figure for the poet, for the creator who must interpret the

mysteries of existence and nourish the spirit of his people. He is the one who successfully fashions the image of the deity, drawing on the elemental wisdom of nature (the song of the waves) and the inspiration of history (the rock of the Rikvah chief, a legacy of national strength and defiance through martyrdom). Yet, like many of the American Hebrew poets, he is a lonely figure, living on the margins of his society. Like a number of his literary contemporaries, from Bialik to Lisitzky, he experiences the pain of early orphanhood and abandonment. He is tormented by self-doubt and self-consciousness, as when he sees the resemblance between his statue and himself—a motif well-known in romantic poetry, in which the melancholy poet is often burdened by the inability to experience a divinity unmediated by his own mind. (Think of Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge.) Yet despite this doubt and depression, Eitzima accepts the role of leader, and does so in response to an allegorical conversation that centers on the image of the parched desert and its stifled creative forces. Silkiner here appears to be meditating on his own creative powers—and on America as a cultural desert?—which must be nourished through subterranean channels. This longing for creative inspiration also reflects the concerns of modern Jewish culture as a whole, and its searches for spiritual renewal.

Also with its Jewish resonance is the poem's clash between political-military action (represented by Mugiral the chief) and spiritual purity (represented by Eitzima the priest). When, in the middle of the night, word arrives that the Spanish are returning to take vengeance on the tribe, Mugiral is surprised to find the tribesfolk with Eitzima in the temple, praying to the Spirit-God. The priest tells Mugiral that the midnight prayers are necessary since the valley has been tainted by the "night of Potera's vanities, and the night of Mugiral's wrath" (152). Mugiral is indignant at being blamed along with the Spanish for the tribe's predicament, and chief and priest begin to argue, pitting the demands of profane action against those of spiritual purity. Eitzima tells the chief that, whatever his intentions, his violent lessons have made his people and their land impure.[13] Mugiral defends himself: "You know that to save the valley, not to harm its spirit, I came. . . . You know that, had I not appeared, [the tribe] would have perished at the hand of the evil governor—" "*As the Silent Tribe,*" Eitzima interrupts, "yet the earth would be full of their glory forever" (153). Eitzima prefers a spiritually elevated death to a spiritually

corrupt resistance, but Mugiral does not accept this argument. Passive acceptance of fate, particularly when it would lead to his people's destruction, makes no moral sense to him. "The song of dying maggots in the dung has never filled the earth," he retorts, "And a mean death would only be the object of heaven's scorn."

For Mugiral, the only sensible response to the situation is physical action and military resistance—not prayer. He tells the tribesmen that they must uproot trees and carry rocks in order to build fortresses and fend off the Spaniards. (Note that every time Mugiral acts, he alters the natural state of the valley; first it was the excavation of iron, now it is the construction of battlements.) The tribe is swayed by his words, and the priest falls silent. The dark conclusion to this conflict occurs when Mugiral tells Eitzima to leave the temple, which his soldiers are going to turn into a fort. The priest balks, telling Mugiral that he knows their doom is imminent and only wants to spend his final days in the temple. When the furious king kicks the statue, which falls and shatters, Eitzima falls too and breaks his neck, fatally enacting his ultimate connection with the statue.

The conflict here is familiar to us from the biblical tug-of-war between the realpolitik of kings and the suprahistorical faith of prophets. In particular, we hear in the exchanges between Mugiral and Eitzima the fateful clash between Zedekiah and Jeremiah. Moreover, these very biblical themes had already been reframed and reworked by Haskalah writers such as Y. L. Gordon. As Silkiner's fellow American Hebrew poets Eisig Silberschlag and Hillel Bavli both pointed out, the Mugiral-Eitzima conflict clearly recalls Gordon's poem, "Zedekiah in Prison." Writing from Zedekiah's point of view, Gordon was sympathetic to the king, who sought to protect his people through military and political action, in contrast to the pious resignation of Jeremiah, whose passivity, Gordon implies, has shackled Jewish existence up to the modern period. Mugiral's stance also resonates with the value Bialik places on Jewish self-defense in his poem "City of Slaughter." On the other hand, Eitzima's emphasis on the spiritual over the political might reflect a touch of Aḥad Ha'amism. Shimon Ginzburg, meanwhile, saw in the Mugiral-Eitzima conflict echoes of the tensions between the young Jewish revolutionaries and their more traditionalist elders during the Russian revolution of 1905.[14] It must be emphasized that in his dramatization of these Jewish concerns, Silkiner does not allow the fate of the Silent Tribe to reflect a single, unambiguous ideological

position. Sympathetic to both Mugiral and Eitzima, he does not seem to argue that either one could have ultimately saved the tribe.

Indeed, Silkiner makes the poem's denouement contingent on supernatural elements. On the eve of the tribe's destruction, Mugiral is visited by a mysterious and beautiful young woman who seems uncannily familiar to him. She tells the chieftain that they have long known each other, explaining that, as Mugiral descended into sorrow and depression: "I grew from the ground of your hut, like a child of darkness I grew, / You trembled with joy over me and spread your palms upon me, / And a vow of friendship and trust you swore to me, in the darkness of your soul" (175). In many ways, this mysterious figure is an externalized embodiment of Mugiral's melancholy—his doubt and his despair, his nihilism and his solitude—as well as of his awful fate. She is a "child of darkness," of his darkness, and as his end draws near he cannot escape her. She asks Mugiral to come with her to the "Palace of Joy," and live there forever as her lover. When Mugiral refuses to abandon his people, she tells him that the Silent Tribe is already fated to be slaughtered by the Spanish. And when he says that he prefers in any case to die honorably with his people, she replies in a low whisper: "The twinkling stars know / Nothing of your death, and after you are gone the mighty sea will not mourn with its roaring" (176).

The central anxiety of the poem finds its starkest expression in these two lines. Silkiner meditates here on the possibility that a people's sufferings, and even its destruction, might take place unnoticed, undocumented, and unmourned by any higher power. Mugiral wants to redeem himself through a noble death in service of the tribe, and assumes unquestioningly that his death will win him "awe and reverence." But from whom, the mysterious maiden asks? "The twinkling stars know / Nothing of your death." While the stars remind Abraham of his eternal covenant with God, and the sea of the psalmist declares the divine glory, we have here a morally, humanly indifferent landscape. Silkiner's work contemplates this chilling possibility, but ultimately tempers it, framing the destruction of the tribe in tragic, but *chronicled,* terms, letting Timmura tell the story to his daughter, who, having been told, will be moved to admiration and pity for Mugiral. Nevertheless, Silkiner's epic is a compelling reminder that, before the Holocaust, Jewish writers contemplated the vanishing and the eradication of peoples. Silkiner is not focused

solely on the event of genocide, but also on the long-term historical processes which have seen certain groups pass from the earth and others remain. Such concerns were certainly relevant for a group of Jewish literati who were ambivalent at best about their new home in America, and who often despaired of the possibility of a viable Jewish culture in the United States.

The woman silences Mugiral's protests with a passionate kiss, and he follows her on an ominous journey through the wasteland, to the "Palace of Joy." (To be lured away from one's people and their distress certainly would have had resonance for the émigré poet in America.) As they walk, Mugiral notices mysterious mounds rising from the arid land, and the woman tells him that her "treasures are hid therein" (177). Finally, they reach the desert's edge; beyond all is wrapped in fog. Mugiral turns to the young woman, and finds her transformed into an old crone. Rheumy-eyed and smiling with rotten teeth, she tells him to enter the mist, in which her palace lies. Understandably, Mugiral hesitates, saying he wants to see his people one last time. The "Silent Tribe is lost, not a single one remains," she says (178). She shows him an awful vision of what he has left behind: the tribe has been destroyed by the Spaniards, and snow covers the blood-streaked ruins of the valley. This vision culminates in a particularly bitter and poignant scene of the Spaniards celebrating their victory in a newly-built church. "Peace descended with You to earth," sing the killers, accompanied by the sound of "an organ playing sweetly," while the last two surviving tribesmen slowly freeze to death in the winter storm outside (180).

Mugiral, pale and sickened, pleads to return, and he sets off through the desert accompanied by the old woman. This time he hears disturbing groans emanating from the mounds in the desert, and his companion tells him that he is hearing the weeping of her victims. When they arrive at the Valley, she bids him farewell, and asks for a final kiss. He recoils, though he sees that she has become young and beautiful once more. She tells him she is going off to "another valley," and when Mugiral shouts that he will warn others about her, she responds with a smile: "And what is my name, which you would tell / Them?" (181) Outraged, he draws his sword, but as he strikes, she vanishes, disappearing into the morning air. The melodramatic, almost operatic, ending of Mugiral's saga is marked by bitter rage against the murderousness and hypocritical piety of the Christians. The last pair of

tribesmen become cruelly emblematic of suffering which is, literally, white-washed as snow covers the bloody work of the killers. Moreover, the canto is permeated with Silkiner's anguished doubt in any ultimate sense of justice, a doubt felt in the ironic reversal of the biblical narrative that we see in the canto's final lines. Moses, the reluctant redeemer, asks God what he is to tell the people when they ask for His name, whereupon he receives the answer: "I am that I am." Here, Mugiral, the failed redeemer, is gently mocked by a mysterious avatar of transience and death whose name he never learns.

In the last canto, however, we return to Timmura and his daughter, who allow us a glimmer of hope at the end of the gruesome tale. Timmura finishes the history of Mugiral, explaining how he stole back into the valley to mourn over the ruins of his murdered people. Now he is only waiting to die, says Timmura. In his heart is a unique and mighty song, the "Song of the Sunset," but "it will never pass the lips guarding its secret" (186). It seems that Timmura's chronicle, the "Song of Mugiral"—and, by extension, Silkiner's epic—is a substitute for the never-to-be-revealed poem locked in Mugiral's broken heart.

The final words of the poem are given to Timmura's nameless daughter. Having heard the tragic story of the bent-backed, gray-haired stranger, she is moved to pity, and utters the tender, lyrical prayer for Mugiral which concludes the work. This small moment of brightness—and even, perhaps, of quiet hope—offered by father and daughter at the end of Mugiral's tortured life calls to mind an anecdote recorded by the poet Hillel Bavli. Bavli recalls Silkiner's words after the death of his daughter, who died before she reached the age of two:

> "I would like to know what happened to all the love and light we gave the little one," he asked, and then continued: "I can't believe that it's all lost forever. No!" He made similar remarks when, in moments of gloom, we would speak of the fate of Hebrew literature in America: "Is it possible that all we have done here in the field of our literature, with such boundless love and self-sacrifice, will really come to naught? No! I believe that every seed of beauty that we sow, no matter where, will not go to waste."[15]

Certainly, *Mul ohel Timmura* was Silkiner's most personal poetic expression. It was not in his lyric verse, but rather in this long narrative poem, with its exotic subject, set in a distant, quasi-mythical past, that he was able to be most autobiographical and revealing. For Silkiner is Mugiral, is Timmura, Eitzima, and Tomiya. These are various aspects of his personality, giving expression to his sorrow, his rage, his uncertainty, and his tenuous hopes, as a young Jewish poet who had crossed half the world, trying to find a refuge for himself, and trying to imagine a refuge for his people and their traditions. What so many of his contemporaries judged as an exploration of aboriginal America was a chronicle of his own soul.

HEBREW INDIAN EPICS AFTER SILKINER

The Indian epics of Israel Efros (1891–1971) and Ephraim Lisitzky (1885–1962) are both different from *Mul ohel Timmura,* as they are from each other. Neither Efros nor Lisitzky sought to use their tribal stories as vehicles for the author's individual, internal psychology to the extent we find in Silkiner's poem. These later Indian epics are instead comparatively more earnest in their attempts to use Native American motifs and subject matter in a naturalistic way. Nevertheless, in both Efros's *Vigvamim shotekim* and Lisitzky's *Medurot do'akhot,* the image of the Indian remains a product of the author's personal concerns, colored and often obscured by his cultural horizons, and deeply inflected by contemporary Jewish history.

Born about a decade after Silkiner and writing in the 1930s, Efros uses a far more modern Hebrew than Silkiner. Silkiner's Hebrew was largely a nineteenth-century idiom, cobbled together from biblical phrases, and so, while the internal, emotional dimension of his poem was highly individual, the language itself yields up images which are often vague or crudely realized. When we turn from Silkiner's Indians to Efros's, the effect is akin to bringing a fuzzy picture into focus. Moreover, this picture shows us a very different set of cultural models than those used by Silkiner. While Silkiner turned to the civilizations of Central and South America—his Indians, when they were not expressions of his own anxieties and aspirations, distantly resemble the populations depicted in Spanish discovery narratives and early ethnography—Efros, writing a quarter-century later, draws from popular

American stereotypes of the Indians familiar from western movies and frontier novels. We have the beautiful and passive Indian maiden with dark braids and deerskin dress; the taciturn chief; the shifty, warlike brave; the primitive, childlike (and sometimes animal-like) tribesfolk; and, of course, the blond-haired, blue-eyed, white hero. In this we see a more open relationship to American popular culture than was possible for Silkiner, whose epic was written only a few years after his arrival in the United States and long before the widespread presence of commercial films. In many ways, reading Efros's book is like watching an old film, silent or early sound. It is extremely sentimental and anything but politically correct, yet its kitsch, like all kitsch, is not without a certain attraction.[16]

On one level, *Silent Wigwams* seems to express Efros's conflicting emotions toward the American environment. The plot centers on Tom, a young English painter living in seventeenth-century Maryland, and his tragic love affair with Lalari, the daughter of the chief of a tribe of Nanticoke Indians (an actual tribe). When Tom is taken in by the Nanticokes, his long-dormant creative impulse comes to life. The ways of the Indians fascinate and inspire him, and he begins to paint scenes of their way of life and their myths. Amazed by his canvases, the Indians take to calling him "white god." This America nourishes and lauds the artist, who experiences a regeneration which is both creative and erotic. On the other hand, the white village from which Tom is viciously expelled is also a facet of the America portrayed by Efros, and its denizens can be cold, unfeeling, and even violent. Early in the poem, Efros describes the peaceful sabbath of the colonists, but then notes that "there were also many hoodlums and crude folk, / Who profaned the New World silence / With wild shouts, with quarrels and challenges, / Amongst themselves and against the redskins [*adumei-panim*]."[17] This reflects the harsher, more brutal side of the American environment, with little place for the sensitive soul.

Efros's poem follows many of the conventions of American literature and popular culture regarding the Indian. The most glaring of these is the taboo against miscegenation. Tom cruelly betrays his Pocahontas, abandoning her and returning to England to marry his English lover. When he subsequently comes back to America to find Lalari, she commits suicide rather than take revenge. In fact, the two female, Indian characters who cross the boundary of race—Lalari and her