BENJAMIN SILKINER

Among the new Hebrew poets who appeared in America at the beginning of the twentieth century, the career of Benjamin Silkiner was exceptional. His fellow poets wrote lyric poetry for many years before taking on longer narrative and epic forms. The discreetness of the lyric poem afforded an opportunity for the expression of a single moment of feeling or perception that need not be integrated into a more imposing framework of meaning; and this form of composition comported well with the experiments of young men finding their way in life and ~~in the~~ poetic vocation.

Silkiner, by contrast, made his debut as a poet in 1910 at the age of twenty-eight with *Mul ohel Timmurah* (Before the Ten of Timmura), a hundred-page epic about the struggle of Native American Indians against their Spanish conquerors. And what an ambitious work it is! In a powerfully elevated Hebrew style the poem addresses such large and noble themes as heroic suffering and renunciation, native myths, the fate of nations, and the grandeur of the American landscape. Silkiner's Indian epic is a difficult work, and we shall have occasion to analyze the poem and its mixed reception in Europe and Palestine in a later chapter. Yet despite the work's difficulty, it symbolic value was huge. As the major inaugural work of Hebrew poetry in America, *Mul ohel Timmurah* functioned like a broadside announcing the ambitions of this new cultural outpost to the international republic of Hebrew letters. The new Hebrew enterprise in America, it announced, would be *about* America, and the America it would be about would not be the teeming streets of the immigrant neighborhoods but a more remote and aboriginal American landscape.

His epic written and published, Silkiner walked away from the genre and returned to it, and then in a fragmentary and modest way, only at the end of his life. He began his career over again as a lyric poet and served as a mentor for a group of younger poets who were starting out in *their* writing live as lyric poets without the benefit or burden of a major epic poem behind them. Benjamin

Nahum Silkiner was born in 1882 in Vilkija, near Kovno, in Lithuania, the son of a merchant who allowed him some elements of a Western education alongside the immersion in traditional Jewish sources. At the age of eighteen, he moved to Odessa and spent several years in the circles of Hebrew renaissance ~~writers~~ dominated by Bialik and Ahad Ha'am. He married there and emigrated to the United States in 1904. Although he earned a law degree, he devoted his work life to Hebrew education as the principal of the Uptown Talmud Torah in New York and as a faculty member of the Teachers Institute of the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he taught Hebrew literature and Bible.

The group of poets who gathered around Silkiner's mentorship included Ephraim E. Lisitzky, Hillel Bavli, Shimon Ginzburg and Shimon Halkin. Although they were on average only ten years younger than Silkiner, they viewed him—with much esteem and affection—as their elder. He had been in America longer and had a large published work to his name; and he was conversant with the great figures of Hebrew literature in Europe. He corresponded with Bialik, who referred to him as *rosh hahavurah*, the leader of the group of Hebrew writers in America.[1] Silkiner began to provide this leadership at a time when the prospects for modern Hebrew literature in America remained extremely fragile. Although modern Hebrew novels and poems had been produces in great profusion in Russia in the second half of the nineteenth century, precious little of this spirit had been infiltrated into America in the mass immigrations that began in the 1880s. Here and there the odd maskil or the Hibbat Zion poet found his way to these shores and wrote bitterly of his crushing isolation.[2] Efforts at publishing Hebrew newspapers or journals were mounted and abandoned.

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[1] For this detail and for much information about Silkiner's activities, I am grateful to Jacob Kabakoff, "B. N. Silkiner and his Circle: The Genesis of the New Hebrew Literature in America," *Judaism*, Winter 1990, Vol. 39, Issue 1. For other biographical information, see Menachem Ribalow (ed.), *Antologiah shel hashirah ha'ivrit ba'ameriqah [Anthology of Hebrew poetry in America]*, (New York: Ogen, 1938), p. 55).

[2] For a survey of these early attempts, see Jacob Kabakoff..... One such complaining poet is vividly evoked in E. E. Lisitzky's memoir Eleh toldot adam

The turning point came in 1910. That year saw, in addition to the appearance of Silkiner's Indian epic, the publication of *Senunit* [Swallow], edited by Reuven Brainin, a miscellany that included poems by Silkiner, Lisitzky, Abraham Schwartz and other recently arrived Hebrew poets. The volume was the result of Silkiner's enterprise. Brainin was an older man of Hebrew letters who was active in Eastern Europe as an editor and critic; Silkiner contacted him several years earlier, before his arrival in America, with the purpose of persuading him to use his experience and prestige to draw together the inchoate Hebrew talents in the New World. The next year Brainin started a Hebrew weekly called *Haderor* [another word for swallow], which failed after a few issues. The fire finally caught with the launching in 1913 of the monthly *Hatoren* [The Mast], which appeared, although not always regularly, over the course of eight (?) years.[3] *Hatoren* was not the work of one man but of a group of Hebrew enthusiasts called Ahiezer; and it was Silkiner who served as the editor of the belles-lettres section of the journal.

Silkiner's efforts on behalf of Hebrew publishing in America were unflagging. He established a series of imprints that sought partners in Palestine for printing new works by American Hebrew writers and reprinting classics. The first of these imprints was called Asaf, ~~which~~ during the World War One period brought out works by Brainin, Shmarya Levin and David Neumark. Asaf was succeeded in the 1920s by the Haverim publishing agency, which was responsible for two volumes of an important literary miscellany called *Nimim* [Strings]. After Bialik's visit to America in 1926, the Haverim group reached an agreement to co-publish with Bialik's Dvir Publishing Company, and it was under this imprint that Silkiner published his collected poetry, including a revision of *Mul ohel Timmurah* in 1926. The arrangement with Dvir was succeeded by a partnership with Mitzpa that resulted in the publishing of two more important collective volumes called *Massad*. Silkiner was the impresario for one of the most intriguing projects in American Hebrew letters: the putting

[3] On the cultural world of this journal, see my "A Sanctuary in the Wilderness: The Beginnings of the Hebrew Movement in America in *Hatoren*, in Alan Mintz (ed.), *Hebrew in American:*

Shakespeare in to English. Who better than Hebrew poets working in an English-speaking land, argued Silkiner, ~~should~~ take on ~~the task on~~ the high task of rendering the Bard into Hebrew? Silkiner conceived of the plan in 1911 and toiled until his death in 1933 to bring the project along and persuade poets to accept their noble assignments. Eventually, all the major plays of Shakespeare were translated by such American figures as Reuven Avinoam, Hillel Bavli, T. Carmi, Israel Efros, Shimon Halkin, and Ephraim Lisitzky. Silkiner's own Hebrew *Macbeth* appeared only after his death in 1939.[4]

Silkiner's lyric voice is in evidence in the slender 1926 volume of his collected poems *Shirim,* which also includes a revised version of *Mul ohel Timmurah*.[5] Already ill, Silkiner records his debt of gratitude in a front note to Bavli, Halkin and Ginzburg for their editorial assistance in his hour of need. Although there are some Zion poems scattered throughout the volume, Silkiner generally insists on observing a kind of separation of styles that calls for the lyric voice to speak without regard for fixed time or place.[6] The first poem in the volume is a motto poem titled "Bat Shiri" [My Muse], which is unusual in a body of verse that does not otherwise reflect on its craft. The poet identifies his muse as a myriad of skittish filaments of light that shine and vibrate all around him and emanate from a single source: his own tremulous tear. The solipsism of this premise proves a reliable overture to Silkiner's verse. The suffering is there all the time; it is the medium in which the poet lives his life. But it is also the inspiration for the refinement of suffering, for moments of beauty that erupt in the face of suffering, and for the respite from suffering afforded by the warmth of human regard.

Perspective and Prospects (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1993), pp. 29-67.

[4] For a complete listing of the Shakespeare translations, see the appendix to Ezra Spicehandler, "*Ameriqa'iuyut* in American Hebrew Literature," in Mintz, *Hebrew in America*, pp. 103-4.

[5] *Shirim*, (Eretz Yisrael: Haverim/Dvir, 1926).

[6] An exception is the very strong poem "Bein sela'im 'ilmim" [Among Silent Stones, p. 6], in which the speaker on a walk in the Connecticut woods encounters a mountain once holy to the Algonquins and meditates on their lost grandeur. The poem was written around the time of the publication of *Mul ohel Timmurah* and has obvious relevance to poet's connection to that project.

As an example of these contradictions we will take the poem "Ki gevul sam levavi ligoni" [For my heart has set a limit to my anguish. . .][7] Although the poem is not dated, from its placement in his chronically ordered collected verse, the poem belongs to year 1916. It is one of a number of poems—the best of his verse, in my estimation—that deal with the romantic relations between the speaker and a woman or women.

[7] *Shirim*, p. 40.

PARAPHRASE

[. . . For my heart has set a limit to my anguish and it will not exceed that measure—my sigh; and the complaint of my lips will not disclose the silent source of my misery. Ask me not about my wanderings and the injury my strength has dealt along the way, or about the calamity I feared that made me seek refuge in the blessed corner in which you dwell. . . Be for me like a star in the firmament: silently radiate consoling light and wordlessly assuage my devastated soul. Then I shall accept with gratitude your gracious help, my daughter, and abide in your shade and rest exhausted in your bosom, murmuring the whisper of my blessing. Then, when the pallid light of my day darkens and night closes in on my soul, you will inherit the wealth I have gathered and saved this long time—my tear. . . .]

A first reading of the poem readily identifies it as an address by a male speaker to a women within the context of a relationship whose nature is not easily defined but we imagine to be romantic. The abundance of references to suffering in the first half of the poem draws our attention to the pathos of the speaker's ordeal, which he seeks *not* to impose on the woman. The second half of the poem focuses on the consolation he will find in her arms and on the blessings he will bequeath to her ~~when he dies~~ after his death in return for ~~her~~ the solicitude she has shown him. The conventionality, even banality, of these sentiments, might lead us to read this poem within the traditions of romantic poetry and to approach it as essentially a tender communication between a man and a beloved.

But A closer look at the rhetoric of the poem should lead us to think otherwise. The first two lines of the poem, before there is any indication that this is a speech addressed to a women—this comes with *lakh* in line 4—describe a willed act of restraint and containment. He has set a boundary that the

expression (*anhati*) of his suffering will not be allowed to cross.[8] Now, what may first have seemed like a heroic renunciation turns into a quite different kind of utterance in the context of the relationship with the woman. The determination not to complain becomes a stance of withholding and self-concealment. He will not disclose to her the source of his anguish, the hurt he caused others, and, most importantly, the crisis that led him to seek refuge in the blessed corner in which she dwells. That corner may indeed be blessed for him, but the characterization of their relationship as a temporary resting place may not be very consoling to her. The three dots in the middle of line 9, in addition to breaking the poem in half, reinforce the sense of something missing or deleted: a painful history of lost loves that could be told—that is, shared--but will not.

The exhortation to the woman to shine like a star in the firmament, which begins the second half of the poem, is a romantic gesture that, once offered, immediately rings hollow. He will bask in her healing radiance, but only if that radiance is silent and non-inquisitive. The *'az* ("then") that begins line 13 indicates the paratactic structure of the poem as an utterance and the negotiated, conditional nature of the relationship he is proposing ("*If* you will do so and so for me, *then* I will do so and so for you."). The speaker is laying down a set of terms on which the relationship, at least from his point-of-view, can proceed. If she agrees not to contest his reticence, then he will gratefully accept her ministrations. Furthermore, in return for her compliance and for the respite from travail he will enjoy in her arms, he is willing to be generous, at least rhetorically. He not only murmurs blessings to her, but he ennobles the refuge he finds with her (*uvetsilekh etlonen*, l. 14) by invoking the shelter of God described in the familiar opening line of Psalm 91: *betsel shadai yitlonan* (He will abide in the protection of Shaddai [=God]).

The real reciprocation, however, will come later on. When the darkness finally brings his ordeal to an end, she will become the recipient of the fortune

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[8] It is his heart (*levavi)* that sets this policy. Silkiner may be using "heart" in its biblical

he has patiently amassed. He will make up for then what he cannot, or will not, bestow upon her now. The speaker's sole capital (*hon*), however, turns out to be his tear, the metonym for the sum of anguish and suffering that has been distilled through the burden of his experience.

Is this tear a precious legacy or a fool's prize? The answer is not unambiguous. The sophistication of Silkiner's poem lies in its playing off romantic topoi against a desperate rhetoric of self-interest. The sigh, the desolate soul, the tragic resignation, the radiant star, the refuge in the embrace of the female other—all these staples of the romantic tradition lead the reader to expect the poem to be about great-souled expressions of ideal love and devotion. Instead, the speaker appropriates these gestures and exploits them to mount an argument aimed at persuading the female addressee to take him in and minister to his wounds without offering in return the self-disclosure that intimacy requires. Is the speaker wrong to want what he wants? Our acceptance of his intentions depends, I think, on the exigency of his suffering. If his past ordeals have been as horrendous as he claims, then we may grant him the unreciprocated refuge he seeks as a necessity of psychic survival. But here the plausibility of that extremity is limited by the same limitation he presents to the woman. Just as he will say nothing to her about the substance of his travails, he will say nothing to us as well, and so these afflictions remain merely announced and postulated. The redemptive tear that he has distilled from his suffering and bequeathed to her similarly remains vague and elusive.

Although the poem is a single instance in small body of work, it can serve to underscore some of the patterns we shall see in the lyric poetry of Silkiner's younger contemporaries. To begin with, this is a poetry written out of a great deal of pain and loneliness. While there may be moments of mitigation in nature, fellow feeling or art itself, this anguished modal state is always returned to. The source of this pain, to be sue, is rooted within the human condition that affects all people; but its special pathos surely derives from the redoubled isolation of being a Hebrew poet on American soil, that most invisible and

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meaning as the seat of the intellect rather than its romantic connotation as the organ of emotion.

freakish of figures in the teeming immigrant milieu. Second is the stunted capacity for love. The speaker in Silkiner's poem seeks a refuge in the bosom of the female addressee, but it is unlikely that he seeks anything more there. Like many of the male heroes in the literature of the Hebrew Renaissance (Tehiyyah), the poem's speaker presents himself as so damaged that he cannot give of himself to another.[9] The fact that he addresses her as *yaldati* ("my daughter," line 14) is not insignificant; while this is a standard term of endearment, it also implies that it is non-sexual tenderness that will characterize the relations he is inviting her to partake in.[10]

Third is the question of style. Readers of such contemporary poets as Yehuda Amichai and Natan Zach, whose verse attempts to represent the simplicity of direct speech, may find the Hebrew of Silkiner's poem ornate and difficult. But it is really no more so than the norms of other Hebrew poetry written during the Renaissance period that began in the 1880s. A poem of 1916, to be sure, is already located on the later verge of that period and looks forward to the aggressively modernizing trends of Symbolism and Expressionism, which will dominate Hebrew poetry in the interwar period in Palestine. In relation to the avant-garde waiting in the wings, the conservatism of Silkiner's poem signals the position of principled resistance that will be assumed by American Hebrew poetry. As a preliminary generalization, we may fairly say that although American Hebrew poets created within the poetic paradigm of the Hebrew Renaissance, they sought to simplify that norm into a refined classicism. We will point out developments and variations in the formation of this American style in the works of the individual poets as we proceed. For now it is enough to notice the modified biblicism of Silkiner's

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[9] For a fuller treatment of the theme of erotic insufficiency in the turn-of-the-century generation, see my *Banished From Their Father's Table: Loss of Faith and Hebrew Autobiography* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), especially chapter 4.

[10] Bialik famously implores his beloved to take him under wing and be for him as a mother and a sister in a poem that set the tone for Silkiner's. See "Hakhnisini tahat kenafekh" in Dan Miron et al. (ed.) *H. N. Bialik: Shirim* [Ch. N Bialik; Collected Poems 1899-1934] (Tel Aviv: Machon Katz and Divir, 1990), p. 216.

poem. He has done away with the biblical tense signature that converts future into past and vice-versa, but he has availed himself of the elliptical concision of biblical syntax. There is none of the ornate periphrasis of Haskalah poetry, yet the lexical register remains high, although an educated reader familiar with the Hebrew Bible would encounter few obstacles. The poem is not, however, without its lexical rarities. The use of *ya'areh* in line 4 for "reveals" is uncommon though not obscure. The use of *neshiyah* for "cosmos" or "firmament" in line 10, however, is indeed abstruse. *Neshiyah* is connected to a verb designating forgetting, and it also occurs in the construction *erets-nehiyah* in Psalms (68:13), where it is an epithet for the grave or Sheol. It is only in the language of medieval liturgical poetry (piyyut) that it carries the meaning it bears in this poem. Yet it is crucial to point out that, despite the erudition of Silkiner and his implied reader, this learning is not activated in a chain of complex allusions to classical sources as is so famously the case in Bialik's poetry. Because Silkiner's language is essentially biblical, there are naturally biblical echoes throughout the poem. Yet aside from the single reference to Psalms 91 in line 14, none of these echoes becomes a focused signal to the reader to make meaning out of a phrase in the poem by playing it off, ironically or non-ironically, against a specific passage in a classical source. In this restrain, or, one may say, in this revision of Bialkian practice, Silkiner set a tone for the American Hebrew poets who followed him.

Finally, there is the dynamics of the lyric situation. Lyric poetry, as was discussed in the introduction, is a kind of "overheard speech." In expressing feelings, describing an interaction between the self and the natural world, addressing inanimate objects, or painting a verbal picture of nature, the poet is engaging in a kind of reflexive utterance or sending a message for which there is no concrete addressee. By the act of publication, the poet puts the reader in the situation of being allowed, even invited or solicited, to overhear and be witness to this utterance, although the reader per se is not its targeted recipient. In Silkiner's "Ki gevul sam levavi ligoni" the recipient is clearly the woman whom he is trying to persuade to accept him on the term he is offering. Yet the

fact that she is addressed in the poem does not necessarily mean that she is addressed in real life. Unless we visualize the poem as a text that is actually given to the woman or read before her, we would be led more naturally to take the poem as a *substitute* for that event. So despite the presence of an addressee, the poem remains a reflexive utterance and a linguistic event within the self-system of the poet. As readers we are called upon to imagine the existential and emotional situation of the speaker that would result in the lyric discourse of the poem.