

BETWEEN SILENCE AND SCREAMING

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IN the spring of 1949, when the echoes of the battles of the War of Independence had fallen silent, two prominent literary works were written, furiously and feverishly. They were, perhaps, the most important of the works of literature to be born as the storm subsided: *Hirbet Hiza'h* by S. Yizhar, and *Farewell to the South* by Abba Kovner.

Hirbet Hiza'h (a short story) reads like a journalistic report, describing the displacement of Arab villagers towards the end of the War of Independence and their expulsion from their village over the "border" into a life of squalor and misery in the refugee camps. It sees this as an act of incursion and desecration on the part of a group of invaders that broke their way through the primal existential spheres of simple workers of the land, obliterated them and killed along with them the very essence of innocence. It was a raging, painful protest against the disfigurement of the Zionist enterprise, against its distortion under the pressure of war and as part of the obtuseness and inflexibility that grew out of the conflict.

Farewell to the South (poems) is a modernistic series that moves between reality and nightmare along a broken, sometimes confounding continuum of informational gaps linked by bursts of illusion and symbol. The collection raised in its full pictorial and sonorous power the battle in the country's south at the height of its fury and terror.

The war is depicted principally on its existential – both personal and national – and not its moral side. Even so, here too appears the nightmare picture of the Arab village, empty of its inhabitants, going up in flames, and perhaps also a picture of the Arab city that does not perceive the destruction awaiting it at the hands of "the children of iron in chariots of fire." It concentrates on the figures of fighters who are not conquerers and expellers, but rather individuals risking

their lives, boys rising up against their murderers to kill them, and in the end are either killed or saved.

Despite the decisive differences, which led to quite different public fates (*Hirbet Hiza'h* became the focus of a raging public debate that took many years to die down, while *Farewell to the South*, which was understood and absorbed by only a small number of readers, became over the years the classic poetic work of 1948 that was evoked by a later literary generation and taken as an example of the potentialities of a modernist Hebrew poem), the two works, written and published at the same time, exhibit certain similarities. These are general: first, in the lyrical molding of reality, as reflected in the two works from the point of view of an agitated and emotional narrator who has taken part in the events described and yet also examines them as if from a distance; second, in the rich and flexible literary language and its complex but sweeping rhythms; lastly, in the fiery pathos awakened in the narrator, which ignites the language and its rhythms in the presence of the cruel reality of the war. More specifically, the similarity is evident in the conclusions of both works – conclusions that one could describe as exercises in false assuagement which come only to bathe the reader in tranquility, a kind of mental muscle relaxation that multiplies the stunning force of the last sentence, a dissonant, final, shrieking chord.

In the period following the 1948 war and in the early 1950s – the "morning after" as it was called by Nurit Graetz – a spiritual-cultural seam was sewn in the fabric of life in the young state and in the Israeli society that was then beginning to consolidate. One of the prominent rhetorical-poetic features of this seam was the oxymoronic "silent scream." It is no coincidence that this theme appears in many works of literature located in Israel's literary history on that same seam. These works constitute a kind of conclusion of the literature that reflected a spiritual reality which became fully realized in the struggle prior to establishment of the state, and particularly during the war. Yet they are also the beginning of the Israeli literature that would achieve its first full definition in the 1950s. The silent

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scream appears in one way or another in many of these works, and even serves as a thematic, structural and rhetorical foundation.

It is not my intention to list these works here. It is sufficient to state that they can be found at all levels and in all types of the literature of the period. The theme functions on levels and in contexts that are completely different in their genre, meaning, and aesthetic value. The spectrum of levels and contexts can be illustrated by mentioning its two extremes: on the one side, journalistic reportage with little literary, aesthetic pretension, and on the other personal lyricism intensely concentrated and dense in its literary-aesthetic expression.

The functioning of this theme in manifestly personal lyricism, whose literary value is not in doubt, can be illustrated by Amir Gilboa's *Early Morning Poems*, a collection of Gilboa's poems of the years 1950-1952. In fact, the theme functions not only in the individual poems, but also in the collection as a whole, where the ongoing striving for a poetic culmination comes up against a counterforce; shouts and loud cries frequently encounter a kind of barrier that requires a lowering of the voice, or even silence.

The theme can also be found in Gilboa's poem "And My Brother Said Nothing" with the same sharpness. It reappears here in all its details, including the oxymoronic closing chord that sounds like thunder, coming after the poem has prepared the reader for the opposite:

And My Brother Said Nothing

My brother came back from the field
dressed in grey. And I was afraid that
my dream might prove false, so at once
I began to count his wounds. And my
brother said nothing.

Then I rummaged in the pockets of
the trench-coat and found a field-
dressing, stained and dry. And on a
frayed postcard, her name – beneath a
picture of poppies. And my brother
said nothing.

Then I undid the pack and took out his
belongings, memory by memory.
Hurrah, my brother, my brother, *the*
hero, now I've found your decorations!
Hurrah, my brother, my brother *the*
hero, I shall proudly hymn your name!
And my brother said nothing. And my brother said nothing.

And his blood was crying out from the ground.

Translated by T. Carmi

In a certain way, the rhetoric of the "silent scream" theme is turned upside down. If at the conclusions of *Hirbet Hiza'h* and *Farewell to the South* the tranquil or monotonic orchestration sets the reader up for the dissonant conclusion by relaxation, in "And My Brother Said Nothing" the groundwork for the surprise is laid through an orchestration of ever-increasing suspense. The narrator of the poem can be seen as a figure disconnected from the poet's apparent and direct autobiography, seeing his brother, who returned "dressed in a grey" from "the field" – that is, from the battlefield. The manifestation of the brother takes place not in waking but in a dream. The speaker experiences the living presence of his brother, thought to be lost, and in so doing is aware, at least in part of his consciousness, that this presence is nothing but a dream. This is the source of the agitation that pulses through the entire poem. The narrator is inside his dream, but is also afraid that his dream "might prove false," that he will wake up and return to the certainty of his brother's absence. This fear induces him to evince feverish activity, with the goal of confirming the brother's presence, to impart to him solidity and certainty and so turn him from dream to reality. But his brother does not cooperate. The dead can be seen and touched, but only movement, and even more so, speech, a voice, can prove absolutely that the brother who seems to live is actually, in reality, alive. Yet the brother does not move and does not talk. Until (but not including) the last lines of the poem, he remains a passive entity and leaves all activity to the narrator. Moreover, he remains silent, and his silence weighs down on the narrator more than anything else. The poem's tense stillness is rooted in the brother's silence, and this stillness amplifies the tension from verse to verse.

The brother seems to hate the narrator's cheer, "Brother, brother," and especially the word "hero." Medals, pride, and poetry are foreign to him, and he remains still, bombarding the narrator with his silence. Until the sham of cheering bursts like an abscess that has ripened and then the narrator realizes that his brother's silence is active and not passive, that in fact it is a great and horrible noise that he had not made out before but his now attentive ear hears. The silence is, in fact, a scream, a scream of stillness that cannot be silent.

The narrator, directly quoting God's words to Cain ("What hast thou done? The voice of thy brother's blood cries to me from the ground." Gen. 4:11) has been freed of all vagueness and illusion. He intentionally chooses the verse from Genesis, not only because it speaks of the cry of the spilt blood of a dead man, but also because it is part of the story of two

brothers, one living and one dead, because it fits the narrator's personal story. Clearly, then, in "And My Brother Said Nothing," beneath the stormy psychological surface of the dream story takes place an additional drama, even stormier, which is a variation of the story of Cain and Abel.

Agitated movement between silence and shouting is also characteristic of Haim Guri's work at the literary and historical moment under discussion. In 1950, Guri published his second book, *Until Dawn Rises*, which collected journalistic prose pieces ("The Path of Fire"), describing firsthand the final and decisive campaigns of the Israel Defence Force in the War of Independence as well as poems ("Wedding") written at the end of the war when the poet took part in those same campaigns as a soldier. As with the other collections mentioned here *Until Dawn Rises* was one of the books of "the morning after." A year earlier Guri had, like Amir Gilboa, collected his previous poetry. The resulting book, *Flowers of Fire*, quickly became the most popular book of poetry of the period. It contained his best war poems, those which had roused the generation and were imprinted on its memory, even though most of them were written at a distance (Guri was sent on a mission to Hungary and Czechoslovakia until the end of 1948). The prose and poetry of *Until Dawn Rises* were written from a different point of view than those of *Flowers of Fire*. Despite the detailed descriptions of battles and marches, the spiritual world reflected therein was already that of the awakening after the dawn, the hour that the book itself described as "the hour of the great release," but also as "the middle time."

We should not be surprised to find that as a "middle time," the spiritual present of the book hangs not only between the past and future, but also between stillness and noise, between the silence and the scream. This theme stands out in most of the poems included in *Until Dawn Rises*. In the main, these poems reflect a single mood, with a thin layer of the joy of victory covering the "sorrow," "fear," "bitterness," and weeping. As in the prose pieces, the poet does not know how he will get safely through the night of war and into the morning of peace. First and foremost, he suffers from the blow of the absence of dead friends. As in Kovner's poems, this experience of absence imposes both silence and paralysis.

Yet it is not only the deaths of friends that is laden with pain and frustration. The "wedding" marches with the land are also wrapped in sadness and loneliness. The land is depicted as a tight-lipped virgin, kissing her bridegroom on the forehead with cracked, rocky lips and bedecking him with flowers of blood; or she is seen

as a goddess ("Anat"), whose whereabouts are forever lost on dirt paths and the poet can only gather her bones into "the grave of his memory." The poet's poetic sense of purpose also becomes problematic here, and as he hears God's voice he falls paralyzingly mute. His heart prophesies within but his mouth is sealed and his hand cannot write.

Over or under all this, harsh but undefined emotions pulse within him. Waves of anger well up from unknown sources. The collective "blood fears" of the fighters in battle return to him in circumstances that seem not to justify the fear. The anger, the fear, the sorrow all demand channels of expression and they attach themselves to negative phenomena in the Israeli life now just forming, or, in contrast, are drowned in a sense of integration with that same society, which will now shower the "boys of thunder," the fighters who returned from battle, with the rain of love and admiration.

But whether the poet is protesting the betrayal of the fighting group and condemning social distortions, or whether he is celebrating the festival of a victorious society, his speech is distorted with pain and fear. His hysterical happiness and his anger – a foaming-at-the-mouth anger – quickly return us to the basic depression, to the shock and confusion and the warped sense of time. The poems, in any case, mostly fit into the bipolar model, and try to convey "the silence of no-battle."

The oxymoron does not appear in whole in all the poems. It rather encompasses the entire book. One could say that it divides the majority of the poems into two groups or categories. In the first, a single narrator appears in an empty and silent landscape, a desert, or in a night wrapped in clouds and fluttering with bats. He marches here, walks, "Walking and still, walking and soundless/For there are no friends to be fearful and no companion for sorrows." Whether he is walking towards "the mountain of God" in the desert, or trying to return to the land of peace and habitation, it is a march of mourning wrapped in silence. In the poems of the second type, the narrator is part of a large human group, the group of fighters, and he makes much use of the first person plural. The group is also marching through the desert or on mountain ridges or in the streets and squares of cities. The march, of mourning or celebration, is generally encompassed by the same constantly rising noise we have already described. There are poems that contain within them both possibilities or both registers. The most prominent of them is the long poem, "The Path of Fire," whose title (identical with the title of the prose part of the book) testifies to the poet's intention of expressing the experiences that accumulated along that long path. But in the poem,

unlike in the prose expository pieces, the path runs not along the concrete events of the end of the war, but along a series of internal events along the poet's way from war to peace:

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And he shall come
and the heavens shall walk on the hills,
and the citizens of the day will be us,
the dead and the living till that day.

Graves will open their dry dust mouths,
and the skeletons as in the prophecy shall gain flesh,
and to the sound of giant drums
we shall move forward.

By day we shall be lit by torches of the great sun,
and night – smoke torches.

Our holy wounds
shall bleed at the tumultuous main road.
The flowers of fire, children of the battle,
shall blossom many wreathes
toward the masses!
And the tears will be tears of laughter
and the cries of primordial happiness.
And the noise and joy shall be awakened by the tar of torches,
and the women pretty in holiday clothing,
in embroidery and in children.

And into the bosom of the blessed land
with tears and singing we will stick an antique sword
as a token gravestone and reward.

And tomorrow approaches borne at the head of Harel,
I see him, indeed, I see!

Translated by Linda Zisquit

Both groups of poems in *Until Dawn Rises* have in common the act of marching, of endless walking, which is the basis of the sense of life, the sense of time, and even the understanding of the creative process that brings about the writing of poems like Guri's, and this early one in particular. Nevertheless, it is fascinating to see that in *Until Dawn Rises* the march fits into the oxymoron of screaming or thundering silence. It is clear in this book that the poet expresses not only his unique and fundamental sense of existence but also the objective and collective cultural-historical moment, what is generally called "the sense of period." This is the uniqueness of *Until Dawn Rises*, and its conspicuous contrast with Guri's other poetry, especially that in *Flowers of Fire* and *Concluding Poems* (1954) – a contrast of tonality, style, prosody, and the character of the speaker. *Flowers of Fire* is characterized by the attempt to express feelings of youth, fear of death and the shock

and grief of war, together with the effort to calm and silence emotions.

In *Until Dawn Rises*, however, the poet, caught up in the revulsion of the "middle time," allowed himself freedom and bursts of emotion, exaggeration, and abrupt and extreme tonal transitions. He wrote poems that were longer than usual, driving and loud. He frequently did without rhyme and stanza, and often took on the role of the angry prophet, pouring out a flood of uncontrolled rhetoric on his surroundings. In all his poetry, which generally tends towards a minor tone, we find no other manic high of the kind realized in *Until Dawn Rises*. As much as the poems in the book are organic continuations of their predecessors and preparation for what will come after them, they also bring about an unexpected leap in Guri's poetry, one that brings a change or "distortion" of the models familiar to us in the poems written before and after this same special "middle time" that was, as we have noted, a "time of release" but also a time of oscillation between two incompatible registers.

Interesting from this viewpoint is the change or "distortion" that took place in developing Nathan Alterman's motif of the dead-living in the poems of *Until Dawn Rises*. The dead-living symbol appears in Amir Gilboa's poem "And My Brother Said Nothing" in the form of the dead-living brother. The poem both exposes and even attacks the great Altermanic symbol, but also adopts and integrates it. Gilboa gives prominence not only to the lie in the blurring of the difference between the living and the dead, but also the deep inner need for such a lie, without which it is hard to live.

Guri, Gilboa and others of their generation used the motif largely in order to achieve mental balance in the face of death and injury. Alterman used it to convey his "asensualist" metaphysical viewpoint. They searched for refuge from the terror of destruction while still trying to express an idea that transcends all materialism and, therefore, also the destruction that is part of material existence. But despite the deep differences, both Alterman and Guri – for different reasons – committed themselves to developing the motif in very similar molds.

The most obvious of these is that of the march that brings the narrator from life to death, or the opposite, from death back to life. Alterman found it necessary to make use of this ambivalent and almost unseen transition from sphere to sphere in order to make evident the continuity and ongoing nature of death and life as spheres that exist one within the other. Guri needed to blur the transition from life to death, because he had to leave his dead-living characters bathed in the

ambivalent twilight. This was necessary so that they could function as a comforting and calming symbol. Both clear recognition of their deaths and exaggeration in the description of their vitality would negate this. For both poets the use of the symbol of the dead-living was based on the assumption that crossing the border separating the land of the living from the land of the dead – in both directions – could be accomplished secretly and regularly, in a personal context and as an everyday act.

In *Until Dawn Rises*, Guri went beyond the agreement based on this assumption. The march of the dead involves an eschatological exultation, thundering acts of the opening of graves and the skeletons' re-assumption of flesh, the procession of shattered bodies, flowing with "holy" blood, through the city squares. None of these can be reconciled in any way with the Altermanic ethos of the dead-alive. First, the eschatological context determines more than anything else the singularity of the event that returns the dead to life. This messianic singularity is the direct opposite of the persistence and discretion of the transition between life and death and back in Alterman's poetry, and also in *Flowers of Fire*. Second, the eschatological context establishes that the return to life from death is in fact impossible in any situation that does not involve a world-shaking messianic suspension of all the laws of the universe. More than anything else, the eschatology always emphasizes, in a frightening way, the reality of death. The greatness of the miracle of the resurrection and its theological significance are grasped precisely through the presentation of the dryness, decay, and nothingness of the body to be resurrected. All these clearly prove that, in the absence of a dimension of the end of days, death is final, horrifying, entropic.

The eschatological dimension, accompanied by the pseudo-prophetic expressiveness that it required, was demanded by the poetry of the 1950s. The hour was right for the eschatological vision of the resurrection of the dead and had a need for it. The spiritual-literary atmosphere demanded the stimulus and the shock of, for example, A. Hillel's description of the mangled and decaying war dead rising from their grave in his poem "The Plundered:"

There is a day for the coming of the murdered boys from their waves
to visit the fields that grew their blood and to weigh their harvest.
And here is pus.
A rattlesnake runs at the head of streams, and the Yarkon-feces.
Jerusalem is serene and Haifa degraded,
and Tel Aviv's flesh is scored with a large golden knife,
and at the gate of every city bribery rides a rat.

Then the boys sought peace and were met with strife.
Then they sought their friend, and were told he ascended
the government-ladder!
Then they asked their commander.
And were told he was robbed.
And their mother –
and their responder was silent.

Silence filled Israel
as a sea is filled with sea
and as vinegar is filled with the bitter
and as commerce is filled with – deceit
and as shame is filled – with shame.

Then the dead approached as if eye to eye with life,
and the living in the dead didn't see
that none of the money was startled by the dead
and the eye of the living like a rat in the temple was money -
startled.

The foolishness of the city parasites and its vampires
and city salesmen and their merchants
pass by the people in the robbed limosines of glamour
and their women dirty their faces with makeup and the smile is
smuggled
the cloud of petrol is running from their tails, like slander
whore's money will chase them
and the perfume rising from the abandoned citrus groves like
the
perfume of theft.
And the aroma of the vines like the laugh of a plague,
the jackals have a sharp and yellow tooth!

This is the sickness of Israel burning with no sound,
like the moon which diminishes silently,
like the mother of the dead who is torn apart.

There's only endless crying for the criers to cry
and the non-speaking fist for the repressed and the erased!

Thus the shamed looked toward heaven
and lo, they were deceived,
looking to the blue of Judea
like lowly mud.

Then the eyes of the plundered full of dark fire
and wonderful sun cheered their bones
and they sang human suffering till the riddle's light.

Translated by Linda Zisquit

The raising of the dead heroes from their graves is based, then, on many precedents in Hebrew poetry, but this does not negate the need to ask what brought the poets of 1948 to return to this topic at the beginning of the 1950s. This question needs to be directed and focused. It does not concern itself with the actual poetic encounter with the dead heroes who metaphorically rose from their graves. There can be nothing more natural in the work of poets who had just lost their best

friends. The question at hand is the need for this motif in its romantic form from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries – that is, the revival of a “realistic” vision of the rise of the dead, the opening of the graves, and the festive or angry march of the band of warriors in the real course of events (in the framework of the poetic invention), and which may be described physically and naturalistically.

The answer that emerges, at least from superficial contact with the poems, is that the motif in its familiar romantic version was able to serve as an effective rhetorical device, with an immediate effect, for the expression of anger and bitterness, criticism, and even vituperation. The dead, who sacrificed their lives to achieve a higher collective goal retain, as it were, the primary, unquestionable moral right to stand up for that same goal, already achieved, but now degraded and corrupted by the various “messiah-eaters.” The poets, who speak in the name of the dead, assign an “absolute value” to the criticism within them against the State of Israel, whose image, as it forms, is not compatible with their desires, or with their dreams.

It is also reasonable that such a motif should be appropriate to poets who were themselves fighters, such as Guri and Hillel, because they had the right to speak in the name of their dead comrades, to use their voices, and to plead in the name of their sacrifice. One certainly cannot read the poetry of this period without taking into account the social contexts noted above. In the framework of these contexts, the tendency towards a rhetoric of pathos and matter-of-factness of the generation’s poets gained strength as they aimed all their rage at the vermin who did no good and declared of them explicitly: “I hate them greatly.” From this was born the need for a “God of vengeance” and “the plundered” and the rest of the Biblical-prophetic expressions. Likewise, the need intensified for speech from the dead. So the oxymoron of silence/scream became the rhetorical foundation of the speech of the speechless, or, in other words, the speech of the dead.

Yet this explanation of the group of literary phenomena under discussion touches only their surfaces. As we have seen, the oxymoron expresses deeper foundations of guilt, fear, and sorrow. It reveals, in essence, the dissonance that contains a need for the internal enlightenment of the repressed collective spiritual life of the young society just then founded. The return of this society from the trauma of war to the sudden “stillness” of thereafter was so difficult that all the cheers and victory cries were not sufficient to gloss over the growing melancholy, anger, frustration, and fear that were concretized as a “thundering” stillness and attributed to the dead – to the silent brother, to the

shadows accompanying the fighters on their way north, even to the abandoned Arab villages that break out in a noontime song of savagery. From this point of view, the literary-symptomatic importance of Guri’s “The Path of Fire” is great. The course of the poem reveals the primary sources of the need to resurrect the dead, which are unconnected to political or social criticism, but are rather in the sphere of the spiritual difficulties of the stunned man, who has trouble adjusting himself to a balanced life. As noted, this torment consists not only of longing and sadness, but also, and mostly, of the sense of guilt. This sense is what paralyzes the speaker on his way to the emotional and sexual intimacy and satisfaction he so much desires. Again and again he tries, by force, even roughly, to break through the spiritual barriers, to be swallowed up in the experience of “the love of women/and a feast of lamb with fire and flutes,” but he does not succeed. This brings the feeling of intermediacy, of confusion, the loss of the thread of time, the distortion of “the calendar of hours,” that Guri and other poets report. This confusion, arising from the past’s invasion of the present, is cured, as it were, by its direct and dramatic opposite: the utterance of the mantic knowledge of the future – prophecy. The early 1950s were certainly ready for poets like Guri – poets mentally far distant from the prophetic utterances of H.N. Bialik and Uri Zvi Greenberg – to make use, in time of need, of such utterances, and it goes without saying that the same was true of poets closer to the prophetic pose in their natural spiritual tendencies.

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