

# Vistas of Annihilation

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THE murder of more than a third of the Jewish people in six years of unspeakable horror continues to impose a disturbing dilemma on the kinds of political, intellectual, or spiritual lives Jews try to make for themselves as Jews. To turn their gaze from these events is to ignore the abysmal potential of the realm of history in which the Jewish people and humanity at large are, perforce, profoundly involved. But to ponder the vistas of annihilation too much may lead, as I argued in these pages not long ago,\* to a kind of pornography of horror that distorts one's vision of what Jews have been or might become and that, in both academic life and in the popular media, has already produced a veritable Holocaust industry.

Perhaps some of the deplorable consequences of excessive concentration on the Holocaust have stemmed from the strong tendency to define it as an awesomely unique event in Jewish history. I hardly want to deny that in Hitler's war against the Jews genocide reached an order of magnitude, and ideologically-grounded evil attained a systematic pervasiveness, that have no equals in the previous experience of the Jewish people. But to insist, as so many have, on the imperative uniqueness of the event is to encourage seeing it in a vacuum, thus reducing all the variegated stuff of Jewish history to a prelude to the gas chambers.

The ghettos of Warsaw and Lodz, which have lately been receiving renewed attention,† were not symbolic theaters of destruction set against the backdrop of eternity, but dense intersections of all the richly contradictory forces that made up modern Polish Jewry—Bundism, Zionism, Hebraism, Yiddishism, assimilation, Hasidism, neo-Orthodoxy—together with the variously selective memories and forgettings of antecedent Jewish experience that each of these groups fostered. The Jews brought with them to the arenas of destruction all their sundry internal divisions, their individual and collective defects, and, one must surely add, their various inner resources, whether recently acquired or developed over the centuries. An awareness of such continuities and such complicating backgrounds may make it possible to see

that, however traumatic the Hitler years were, Jewish history neither ended nor began with them.

Given this urgent need to set the Holocaust in a larger context, two new books on Jewish literary responses to historical disaster\*\* are particularly welcome corrections to critical discussions that have tended to represent the world exclusively in ghastly black-and-white photos illuminated by the baleful light of the crematoria. *Hurban* and *Against the Apocalypse* are clearly conceived as coordinate studies. The authors, Alan Mintz and David Roskies, are close friends and fellow editors of a new academic quarterly, *Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*. Both books use the phrase "responses to catastrophe" in their subtitles, and in his preface Mintz indicates that he and Roskies have divided up the territory, he concentrating entirely on Hebrew materials and Roskies chiefly on Yiddish. There are certain differences in tone, historical scope, and critical strategy between the two books, though both deserve praise for their lucidity, their carefully made critical distinctions, and the balanced historical perspective in which they place their subjects.

Mintz focuses his argument through critical readings of a limited number of major texts, beginning with Lamentations and then moving rapidly through Midrash to the Middle Ages, but concentrating on modern works by Mendele Mokher Seforim, Chaim Nachman Bialik, Shaul Tchernichovsky, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Aharon Appelfeld, Dan Pagis. Roskies begins his main story with the reactions in Yiddish literature to the pogroms of 1881 and advances by stages through the sundry disasters of the earlier 20th century to the Holocaust, offering a more panoramically detailed overview than does Mintz. Both share the conviction, which they succeed in making persuasive, that there exists not an absolute catastrophe, 1939-45, but a complicated history of responses to catastrophe, in some ways continu-

\* "Deformations of the Holocaust," February 1981.

† The best recent book on the Warsaw ghetto is Yisrael Gutman's *The Jews of Warsaw 1939-1943* (Indiana, 475 pp., \$24.95). The monumental *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto, 1941-1944*, edited by Lucjan Dobroszycki, has just been published (Yale University Press, 608 pp., \$35.00).

\*\* *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, by Alan Mintz, Columbia University Press, 283 pp., \$26.00; *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, by David Roskies, Harvard University Press, 352 pp., \$20.00.

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ous, in others composed of certain radical departures, and this history enters significantly into the effort of most Hebrew and Yiddish writers to apprehend imaginatively the latest and worst of the disasters. In both cases, the discussions of pre-modern texts are less compelling than the investigations of materials written in the last hundred years, but one sees why the larger historical frame of reference was important for both writers.

The centerpiece of Mintz's book is the series of astute interpretations and evaluations he offers of poems by Tchernichovsky ("Baruch of Mainz"), Bialik ("In the City of Slaughter"), and Greenberg ("Streets of the River"), and of short fiction by Appelfeld. In all these readings, he is attentive to formal issues like style, poetic or narrative form, imagery, and genre, but he keeps steadily in view the question of how the deployment of these formal elements may be judged as an adequate or authentic response to the historical predicament addressed by the writer. In other words, though Mintz sometimes conjures with current critical terms such as the metaphor-metonymy opposition made popular by Roman Jakobson, his underlying concept of the task of criticism goes back to Lionel Trilling and other New York critics of the 40's and 50's.

Roskies, although he evinces some concern for such evaluations, is less interested in critical readings of individual works than in evoking a set of illuminating contexts for modern Yiddish literature. Thus, his exposition becomes at many moments a condensed and incisive social or cultural history of East European Jewry in recent generations. He gives a sense of the class background of literary activity, the relation between poetry and folk song, the new iconography developed by Jewish visual artists (the volume is illustrated), the shifting ideological currents in this century of crisis. His survey offers a vivid picture of the extraordinary boldness and uncompromising extremeness of much Yiddish literary response to historical violence from World War I onward.

Roskies's initially puzzling title has a double meaning: some of the writers he considers—perhaps most notably, the great Yiddish poet, Avraham Sutzkever\*—have used their work to resist an apocalyptic understanding of the terrible events; more generally, Roskies's own decision to recoup a historical tradition implies a refusal of the apocalyptic perspective:

The Jewish people are at the point of . . . allowing the Holocaust to become the crucible of their culture. I have set out to challenge the validity of this apocalyptic tendency by arguing for the vitality of Jewish response to catastrophe, never as great as in the last hundred years. And responses to the Holocaust do not mark the end of the process.

OF COURSE, it is not easy to say what precisely might constitute "vitality" in an activity so grim as literary responses to mass

murder. I would like to propose and illustrate one direction in which an answer might lie, but in order to do that I want first to stress an important assumption about what the imagination makes of catastrophe that is suggested in somewhat different terms by both Roskies and Mintz. As these overviews of Yiddish and Hebrew literary history reveal, there is an inescapable conservative bias built into literary expression. To respond to a set of historical circumstances, however radically disturbing, through a poem or a story or a play, is to invoke your own consciousness of a whole literary corpus with its conventions and norms, and of any number of individual poems, stories, or plays. Even the aggressive iconoclast somehow uses the images he shatters and scrambles, so that all literature proves to be in some way a superimposition of the past on the present. An especially instructive instance of this phenomenon is the powerful presence in the Warsaw ghetto, documented by Roskies, of Bialik's 1903 poem on the Kishinev pogrom, "Upon the Slaughter." Yitzhak Katzenelson, the leading Yiddish poet of the ghetto, could go so far as to say, "Thanks to Bialik, our most profound [experiences] have been given eternal form and this has lifted a great burden from us."

This formal conservatism of literary expression raises questions about the authenticity of literary response to the disruptive and shifting movements of historical experience. The obvious advantage of such conservatism is that we preserve in acute adversity a sustaining sense of continuity with what we have been before, drawing on sets of images, systems of explanation, even the tonal nuances of particular words and idioms, inherited from the past. The fundamental disadvantage is that the redeployment of all these inherited resources may lead us to lie about the present, or at least to misapprehend in some way its terrible differentness. Literature ineluctably works with what Roskies calls "archetypes" and Mintz calls "paradigms," which by their generalizing character may go too far in harmonizing present experience with past assumptions.

The problem of such schematization, however, is more pervasive in ritual and the various shorthands of collective memory than it is in individual literary expression. Roskies, commenting on the memorial plaques for the destroyed towns of Lithuania that have been placed in the Choral Synagogue of Vilna, observes: "When Jews now mourn in public, . . . they preserve the collective memory of the collective disaster, but in so doing fall back on symbolic constructs and ritual acts that necessarily blur the specificity and the implacable contradictions of the event." Mintz makes a similar remark about the way Jewish historiography and liturgy tend to reduce disasters to a chain of dates and place-names ("Auschwitz" as a

\* For a consideration of Sutzkever's life and work, see Ruth R. Wisse, "The Last Great Yiddish Poet?," *COMMENTARY*, September 1983.

designation for the entire Holocaust): "In Jewish history the serial linkage of paradigmatic years and places makes a clear statement about the way in which discrete historical catastrophes are drained of their discreteness and absorbed into a larger tradition."

The literary imagination, I would argue, has the possibility of transcending this dilemma because it does not merely use inherited symbolic constructs but constantly disturbs them—and the activity of disturbance has become the more prominent with the emergence of literary modernism. (In Hebrew and Yiddish, modernist tensions become visible after 1881; the process in Hebrew begins in prose with Mendele's vehemently ironic allusivity and takes another two decades to surface in poetry with Bialik and Tchernichovsky.) There is, of course, a broad spectrum of varying literary responses to catastrophe that many readers will feel to be valid, but most of the texts discussed by Roskies and Mintz, whatever the styles and rhetorical strategies of the writers, in some way swerve from the neatness of inherited archetypes, and use literary language to resist the foreclosure of meanings encouraged by ritual, theology, ideology, and the sheer laziness of popular consciousness.

Mintz, at the end of the survey of Israeli literature about the Holocaust with which he concludes his study, spells out this underlying principle: "Literary art has succeeded in stimulating a deeper encounter with the event and thereby put a brake on its premature absorption into a preexisting framework of meaning." What Mintz has in mind specifically in referring to premature absorption is the tendency within Israeli culture to make political capital out of the Holocaust, but his generalization holds for many of the major texts of Hebrew and Yiddish literature of the past hundred years. My one small reservation concerns the phrase, "a deeper encounter with the event." Literature leaves us, willy-nilly, with an elaborate verbal mediation of any historical event, and for this particular event, those of us lucky enough to have been born in another place or time have reason to be grateful that we did not and cannot "encounter" it. What we should not avoid confronting is the idea—or rather, the many competing ideas—of the event, the multiple reverberations it continues to send through our collective and individual lives. In precisely this regard, the varied imaginative responses of literature can be salutary by enabling us as readers to make the precarious yet indispensable effort to effect some alignment between the event and the symbolic constructs of the Jewish past. It is here, I think, that the "vitality" of response of which Roskies speaks is chiefly to be found.

GENERALIZATIONS about a process like this, which depends on the specificity of the individual literary text, will not be very meaningful, and so I would like to illustrate the

principle through three very different poems by Israeli poets. The texts I have chosen all relate, but only obliquely, to the horror of the Holocaust. I of course do not mean to imply that this is the only valid way to write about the subject, but obliqueness does have its advantages—because it avoids the sado-masochistic excesses of sensationalism and because for the most part the Holocaust now persists in our experience through aftershocks of consciousness and indirect effects on our inner lives and our collective existence. As it happens, two of the three poems I will translate (none of them is discussed by Mintz) are by writers who are not at all thought of as important Israeli poets. Malachi Bet-Aryeh is an archival librarian who has also published poetry; Shulamit Har-Even is better known as a novelist. The third poem is by the leading Hebrew poet, Yehuda Amichai. Of the three, only Bet-Aryeh is a native Israeli, Amichai and Har-Even having been brought as children to Palestine, from Germany and Poland respectively, as the Holocaust began to unfold.

Bet-Aryeh's poem is called "Between Flesh." The title in Hebrew makes an untranslatable pun essential to the meaning of the whole, since *beyn besarim*, between flesh, pointedly echoes *ha-brit beyn ha-betarim*, the Covenant Between the Cleft Animal Parts recorded in Genesis 15. The poem:

Your velvet nakedness, in this gloom,  
there is no God, you. All me, all you.  
The blood's high tide.  
The fragrance of the flesh.

And behold a great dark dread descends  
in this gloom, your flesh in my eyes,  
in one smoking day was cleft,  
flesh  
and blood,  
in this gloom, your velvet nakedness  
your flesh—and theirs.

This is a strangely exalted erotic poem, the exaltation deriving in large part from the abundant verbal and imagistic recollections of the covenant between Abraham and God. That formative event of Israelite history takes place in the "gloom" (the unusual word *'alatah*, used twice here) of nightfall, Abraham sunk into a trance, sitting on one side of the cut animal pieces and God on the other. The first line of the second stanza here reproduces integrally the last clause of Genesis 15:12, and the "smoking oven and flaming torch" that mysteriously pass between the pieces in the biblical story are alluded to in the telescoped phrase, "one smoking day." Most daringly, the cleft parts of Genesis are transformed in the poem into the cleft flesh (the same verbal stem, *b-t-r*) of the naked female body.

It would seem, then, that the sexual encounter has radically displaced the covenantal one. The lover affirms his purely human sense of solemn connection, experiencing, in the exaltation of carnal consummation, Abraham's fear and trembling.

There is no God in this ecstatic moment, everything being absorbed in the "all" of the man speaking and of the woman addressed, the very linkage of the biblical idiom "flesh-and-blood" broken down to the imperious immediacy of its physical components: blood, flesh. The mystery of the scene in Genesis suffuses the poem, but it has become, most urgently, the mystery of carnality.

The poem, however, is more disorienting than I have so far suggested, for its very last word opens up a vertiginous new horizon of signification. Who are the "they" whose flesh so uncannily interrupts the absolute twoness of erotic intimacy? The last two words in the Hebrew are literally "your-flesh—their-flesh" (*besareikh-besaram*), so the meaning of the poem turns on the referent of a final possessive suffix. It is unlikely that it could refer to the flesh of the slaughtered animals in Genesis 15 because the inert creatures have no vital presence in the biblical story and are never designated in it as flesh; the poem's transformation, moreover, of cloven animal parts into woman's flesh: would become confused by a suggestion at the end that the biblical *betarim* were also *besarim*. In the terrific compactness of the poem, the smoking day, the descending darkness, the recollection of the word "oven" (which appears along with "smoking" in Genesis 15 though not in the poem), and the heavy stress on blood and flesh lead inexorably back to the landscape of the death camps where murdered millions were shoveled into the flames in an awful reversal of God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:5) that his seed would be multitudinous as the stars. A very different prospect of meaning for "there is no God" now comes into view.

Psychologically, the poem records the flickering intervention of a nightmare image in a moment of ecstasy. The woman's lovely nakedness, so rapturously evoked by the lover, triggers a recollection, associatively mediated by the images drawn from Genesis 15, of naked bodies in the crematoria. The disturbance of archetypes in the poem makes it a very private text with strong public reverberations. Not all of us may be visited by the particular nightmare hinted in the poem's last word, but this astonishing fusion of disjunct realms intimates how, as a fact of consciousness after the Holocaust, the shadow of horror can at any moment pass over the heart of joy, and, simultaneously, how the supposed heirs of covenantal assurances may find themselves lost in the wilderness of a history without God.

**I**N CONTRAST to the passionate intensity of "Between Flesh," Shulamit Har-Even's "Noah in the Regions of the Sea" seems relaxed, engagingly satiric, even jocular. This difference in tone is possible because the poet is dealing not with the irruption of an image of the horror into the present but with a survivor's difficulties in coping with the quotidian reality that is the aftermath of catastrophe:

Noah, skinny as a pump-handle,  
still with his flood-legs,  
goes tottering through the sunset  
like a walking sail, and hears  
the crunching of his neighbors' bones  
in the vast sand, *tzakh-tzakh*.

The gentle waters  
brought him coppery light, and a buoy,  
and his reflection  
which is never clear.

His feet churn through the sand  
and the salt earth, patiently. His love  
is doomed to be temporary.  
As yet he has no fixed address.

Noah is learning a new language,  
learning noon and stone and bow.  
Since landing, he's grown a mustache,  
gotten his Agency bed and two blankets,  
is still not used to the thorns  
and doesn't understand his dreams, as though  
there were a mistake, no dream, not his.

Maybe the next wave will wipe out  
everything, pain and ruined mouth, for  
childhood doesn't grow, no never,  
it is covered up in layers like a thickening conch.

Noah walks between seasons,  
through the mother-of-pearl and the skeletons.  
Were he questioned, he'd repeat the question  
with startled concentration. In the sand  
the language of answers is crunched,  
*tzakh-tzakh*.

Noah goes off. He's getting used to things,  
only the mosquitoes. As to the matter of  
lightning,  
he's been assured it is over.

The persistent presence of allusions to the Bible in even the most colloquial or avant-garde Hebrew poetry has often been remarked. In many instances, such allusions have been crucial in poems responding to the Holocaust because through allusion an imaginative confrontation is effected between the symbolic instruments used by tradition to define meaning and the event that seems a disruption of all meaning. In the pre-modern period, Hebrew poets facing catastrophe sought in one way or another to harmonize their awareness of the biblical background with their perception of the grim historical foreground. In our own century, beginning strikingly with Bialik's Kishinev poems, poetry has become a theater of antagonism between classical text and contemporary trauma. In such antagonism there is no simple winner: for the most part, the biblical text is not flatly rejected but rather tested, shaken, unsettled, wrenched into a new orientation.

That process works equally but differently in "Between Flesh" and "Noah in the Regions of the Sea." In the former, the biblical past eerily invades the present; in the latter, a moment of the biblical story is entirely reconstructed in the

image of the present. For this reason, allusion in the Har-Even poem is solely to the narrative situation in Genesis, not to its language or images (the only distinctive term from the biblical Noah story in the entire poem is "bow" at the beginning of the fourth stanza). Obviously but effectively, Noah here has been recast as a survivor of the European catastrophe who has arrived in Israel, been given his new immigrant's basic equipment by the Jewish Agency, and who can't get used to the mosquitoes—or to a world where everyone he knew is dead. Disproportion, incongruity, grotesqueness are prominent in this portrait of Noah floundering through the sand and crushed bones, skinny as a pump-handle, like a walking sail, for the poem enacts an experience of total disorientation of a man who finds himself, after the cataclysm, cast up, virtually alone, on the shore of an unfamiliar world.

In what way is this reshaping of the Noah story more than just a clever literary trick? In one respect, the poem might be thought of as a kind of midrashic fleshing-out of the biblical story, showing in contemporary terms what it must have been like for Noah to begin life again after the whole world he had known was wiped out. The Deluge in Genesis, as the story of divine wrath against humanity that destroys all but a tiny handful of survivors, may be a plausible emblem for the Holocaust, but if it begins with God's anger, it ends with His covenantal promise to Noah never again to devastate the earth with a flood. In "Noah in the Regions of the Sea," God is absent either as the agent of destruction or as the guarantor of the future. Indeed, even Noah's family, the nucleus of biological regeneration, is absent, so that he is alone with his neighbors' bones and the ambiguous language of the crunching sand. The only hint of other human presences is the bureaucracy that has given him his bed and blankets and that, in its characteristically impersonal language ("As to the matter of lightning . . ."), promises him that the Deluge will not come again. This is a kind of assurance utterly different from God's ringing and repeated promise to Noah (Genesis 8:21-22; 9:11-17) that there will be no second cataclysm—different not only in its impersonality but in its evasive vagueness, which leads us to suspect it may be worth no more than any other bureaucratic promise.

The archetypal background of the biblical Deluge story makes this contemporary Noah not just a special case of survivor but a sort of Jewish Everyman after the Holocaust, while a principal theme of the original archetype has been unsettled because the new Noah must begin again uneasily, pondering the vanished world from which he came, wondering what havoc the next wave will wreak, clinging to a tenuous promise of futurity. There are, of course, many other possible constructions of the Jewish condition after 1945, but "Noah in the Regions of the Sea," in so vividly embodying the outward uncertainties and inner

bafflement of the survivor who nevertheless strives to go on, illustrates the nuanced effectiveness of poetry as a response to collective disaster.

MY FINAL illustration, a poem from Yehuda Amichai's most recent Hebrew volume, *The Hour of Grace* (1982), evokes a postwar setting—one assumes, in Germany—without any recourse to biblical allusion. The poem is called "The Inn of the Sun":

The Inn of the Sun in the mountains. We stayed there  
a day or two. People talked by great windows  
toward the darkness.  
The high grass wanted us to cry  
and in the hazy valley elegant tennis players  
silently played, as if with no ball.  
And the sad-eyed ones came to the clear-voiced  
ones  
and said: you are living in my house that was  
my house. A big tree grew here. What did  
you do to it?

The Inn of the Sun. We stayed there  
two or three days.  
And in the white rooms remembrance and hope,  
night and eternal salvation  
for those who will never return,  
the pallor of death on the great curtains  
and a golden giggle behind the walls.  
Planes passed overhead  
and above them a camouflage net made of stars  
so we won't see no God is there.

But below, at the heavy table  
Amid the smoke and alcohol fumes,  
a heavy Christian and a light Jew  
work together on a new faith.

The Inn of the Sun. "A light rain then fell."  
That's all that remains of the Inn of the Sun.

The poem is in several ways uncharacteristic of Amichai. The displacement of his usual emphatically personal first-person singular by the unspecified first-person plural, the use of fragmentary narrative, the vaguely located Central European setting are oddly (if inadvertently) reminiscent of the fiction of Aharon Appelfeld. The poem is a kind of ghost story, and most of its details are quietly orchestrated to produce the appropriate ghostly effects. The Inn of the Sun, one gathers, is a gracious, old-fashioned European mountain resort recalling the prewar era, with great curtained windows looking out on the mountain landscape and on the tennis courts in the valley below. But the lighting is arranged so that everything in the scene dissolves into shadows and fog. The guests at the windows seem to be speaking, in the oddness of the syntax, not to each other but "toward the darkness." There is haze in the valley where the tennis players, eerily, play "as if with no ball." The heavy table stands in a cloud of smoke and alcohol fumes, the curtains glimmer with a deathly pallor, and the only indications of brightness are in the disquieting "golden giggle"

behind the walls and in the mere name of the Inn of the Sun, which is actually swathed in night.

Coordinated with this play of darkness, haze, and smoke is a blurring of temporal indications. The stay at the inn is a day or two, then two or three; the suggestion of a scene at nightfall or perhaps late afternoon in the first stanza is succeeded by an intimation of things occurring, not necessarily sequentially, late at night in the rest of the poem. At the end, the recollection dissolves in a remembered remark about rain, like some evanescent hallucination melting in the sea of real time.

What is also noteworthy, especially if one considers that Amichai is a poet who depends a great deal on the brilliance, even the extravagance, of his inventive use of metaphor, is the muted quality of figurative language in the poem. Apart from the personification of the grass in the first stanza (where the otherwise buried pathos of the speaker surfaces) and the epithet "golden" attached to "giggle," the poem is devoid of clearly figurative language—with the exception of the camouflage net made of stars at the end of the second stanza. This is the kind of metaphor, which juxtaposes contemporary military reality with a religious or metaphysical realm, that Amichai has made one of his poetic trademarks. Here it is reserved for the thematic climax, while in the rest of the poem the supernatural character of spectral presences is conveyed in a series of literal utterances, as though what is eerie might have become merely melodramatic by too much metaphorical elaboration.

The words of the sad-eyed ones—obviously, the specters of the murdered or banished Jews—to those who have displaced them seem deliberately chosen for their simple predictability, and turn on an expressive redundancy, "you are living in my house that was / my house," as if through repetition the speakers were trying to assimilate the stubborn fact that remains unassimilable. In any case, the sense of spectral flickering and dissolution that pervades the poem is a perfectly apt correlative for an ex-European Jew's perception of Europe one generation after: a world has vanished as though it never was, but the memory, real and fantasized, of those who once inhabited that world floats back over it, still trying to take in the actuality of irrevocable uprooting.

I NOTED earlier that Jewish literary responses to modern historical disaster are made up of both continuities with the past and radical breaks from it. Perhaps one may see that most clearly in the changing absences of God in our three poems. I suspect that when a Jew writes a poem about the Holocaust, at least if he is writing in Hebrew or Yiddish, it is hard for him not to make God in some way an issue, however implicitly. (This is true even of a poet with so thoroughly secular a perspective as Dan Pagis.) The speaker in "Between Flesh" intransigently declares "There is no God"—because He has been

burned to nothing by the fires of human passion, or of the crematoria; and yet the theologically fraught language of the poem suggests that perhaps He nevertheless exists, in some terrific unlooked-for refraction, in man's imponderable capacity to desire, to suffer, to destroy. God is never alluded to in "Noah in the Regions of the Sea." The biblical story has been emptied of divine presence, nothing more remaining than the shadow of the idea of God, for which the supervising bureaucracy of the contemporary Noah's world is a sad substitute, indeed. Amichai's poem, like Bet-Aryeh's, includes an explicit declaration that there is no God, but in a very different tone and with very different implications. The beauty of the stars, once a token of God's presence, as in the magnificent creation-poem that is Psalm 8, is, in this place where a whole people has been driven out or murdered, camouflage for His abysmal absence.

Nevertheless, at a table far below the deceptive canopy of the night sky, a Christian—"heavy" by metonymic contamination from the piece of ponderous German furniture at which he sits—and a Jew—"light" by way of obvious antithesis to his Christian counterpart, and perhaps because he is not more than a wraith—sit and try to concoct a new religion. This highly elliptical and vaguely absurd scene brings us close to the heart of Amichai's peculiar version of post-traditionalism. The emptiness of the cosmic spaces beyond the stars has been confirmed by the terrible events whose afterimages flit through the poem. Yet we do not easily dispense with the idea of faith. The imagination pushes, if only in the realm of fantasy, as a gesture of impossible nostalgia, toward an encounter between Christian and Jew not as murderer and victim but as co-workers in the shaping of a new faith after the foundations of faith seem to have been destroyed.

The enigmatic character, the fragmentation of both form and theme, the plain spookiness of Amichai's poem make it an extreme case of the general phenomenon I have tried to describe: as readers, we are left with a sense of uneasiness because uneasiness is one of the important things one has to feel about this subject. The Holocaust has often been reduced to a shorthand of horror—"Auschwitz," boxcars, gas chambers, lampshades, soap. The distinctive value of poetic response is that it subtly resists stereotypes, insists on complexity of feeling and indeterminacy of vision, unsettles the very frameworks of interpretation that we might otherwise uncritically bring into play. Although the destruction of European Jewry is not an event without precursors, it remains the most unfathomable of experiences in Jewish history. Poetry's special power simultaneously to dislodge and intensify inherited texts, terms, concepts, and values reminds us that all projects for fathoming the event presume to conclude where, for a long time to come, we need to question and to brood.