

In Praise of the Hebraists in America¹⁵

[1-5] Like a sparse string of lights, scattered but connected/ belonging to a strange and darkly snowy train station/ that suddenly pops up among the winter fields,/ forgotten somewhere between New York and Cleveland,/ I have imagined you, Hebraists in the expanses of America.

[6-11] No one knows who planted your seed, a holy seed, here in this land/ or who is the lost father and the lost mother who left you/ on your own here in this winter night of snow and stars./ Yet—I swear by this vastness—the warmth of your breath/ will dispel its secret melancholy/ and light up and sweeten the darkness of the night.

[11-21] Alien to your brethren, to yourselves and your families and misunderstood by your children,/ you keep a holy compact with Peretz Smolenskin/ and you carry this covenant with you at your peril through the din of life/ and through the forty-nine gates of impurity you bear it the song of Eden./ As you march to your own lights on the road of life, with a psalm or Bialik singing hidden in your souls, the Potomac River will give heed to you and the Mississippi will look on astonished:/ For passing before them is something surpassingly handsome/ and sad and exalted,/ which has no match and will remain unique forever.

[22-32] John, the Yankee shopkeeper, settled among his people,/ sits in his easy chair blowing smoke rings with his pipe/ and, confused, listens to the barkings/ of Hitler giving his blessings to the slaughter,/ and, sorting things out in his mind, he hesitates to take a stand./ Yet when one of you happens to pass by him,/ with the light in your eyes and your modest gait, John, with a radiant look, suddenly directs the smoke of his pipe aloft,/ like one who has intuitively sensed the presence of a figure drawn from the same ancient sources/ from which his own ancestors drank.

[33-43] But you, alike men of action and princes of dreams,/ John's complacency is not for you,/ and not for you either is the frozen majesty of these fields/ or the Lord of the Forest's great wintry tranquility./ Every day and every night, whether at work or leisure,/ the horrid curse of Exile and the cry of your brethren from the corners of the earth mortally wound you,/ like the venomous bite of the snake that darts out from its lair to pursue its prey./ Answering you are the frustrated dream of redemption/ and the messianic vision that hangs arrested on the brink of the abyss.

[44-48] Then will come the sound of the beating wings of an eagle,/ screeching, wounded, proud, above the of the Judean Hills./ You stand there momentarily dazed, as if you yourselves were eagle offsprings, though far removed,/ and your soul goes out to this wondrous sign/ given to the generation and the world, and, behold, it is again hidden away.

[49-52] Your heart drips blood with your brethren caught in the grip of Cain/Haman, your oppressor,/ yet in your eye, that reservoir of pent-up tears, there will forever shine, trembling and divine, the sun-drenched prophetic dream.

¹⁵ I have broken the prose translation into paragraphs for easier comprehension; this division does not reflect the Hebrew, which is divided into only two units, the first ending with line 32.