

you know yourself whose support you'll have, but they will never forgive you for backing perestroika.

Gorbachev replied that he was tied to the policy of perestroika forever, but that he was against "big leaps" and dramatic gestures, and he was convinced that the people would understand him.

After some further discussion, Sakharov returned to his main point: "I'm very concerned that the only political result of the Congress will be your achievement of unlimited personal power—the 18th Brumaire in contemporary dress. You got this power without elections, you weren't even on the slate of candidates for the Supreme Soviet, and you became its chairman without even being a member."

Gorbachev: "What's the matter, didn't you want me to be elected?"

Sakharov: "You know that's not the case, that in my opinion no alternative to you exists. But I'm talking about principles, not personalities. And besides, you're vulnerable to pressure, to blackmail by people who control the channels of information. Even now they're saying that you took bribes in Stavropol, 160,000 rubles has been mentioned. A provocation? Then they'll find something else. Only election by the people can protect you from attack."

Gorbachev: "I'm absolutely clean. And I'll never submit to blackmail—not from the right, not from the left!"

The frankness of Sakharov's account of these meetings is extraordinary in the context of official Soviet reticence and the half-truths that pass for political memoirs in that country. One of the great virtues of his second volume is the light it throws on the negotiations of the Soviet political establishment in this time of turbulent change. For anyone interested in the vicissitudes of perestroika and glasnost it is essential reading, bringing the personalities and the forces alive with a clarity unmatched by any source I know.

This posthumous book also underscores the immense tragedy of Sakharov's death. It came too soon, cruelly depriving the opposition of its one figure of undoubted international stature. Allowing for the differences of detail, Sakharov's position before his death was analogous to that of other prominent former dissidents and human rights activists who have achieved power in ex-Communist Europe: Walesa, Mazowiecki, Havel, Dienstbier, Göncz, Tudjman, and Petre. All these men were in the forefront of the ideological struggle against communism during the 1970s and 1980s, all made the leap from dissident to political leader, all

progressed from wrestling with ethical, social, and human issues to grappling with affairs of state and the temptations of power, and all unexpectedly inherited the fruits of a lifetime of struggle, often against their own desires.

Sakharov did not exercise direct political power himself. The democratic revolution in the Soviet Union had made only partial gains by the time he died in December 1989. It has since been put into reverse. It is difficult to know exactly what Sakharov would have done when confronted with recent events in the Baltics. My guess is that he would have brought Russians out of their houses in the hundreds of thousands and challenged Gorbachev in the streets and the squares of the large cities. For he had predicted this outcome to Gorbachev's face, when he warned against his accumulation of power, and he would have fought it with his usual directness and stubbornness.

But in his absence, and in the present reaction in Russia, there seems to be no single figure with the moral authority and bravery to take his place.

What is left are these memoirs, and his example. And there are signs of a Sakharov cult developing in the Soviet Union. In Yerevan, a street and a university fellowship have already been named for him. In Moscow, the city council has announced a competition for a public statue, and a Sakharov museum is being planned. The Academy of Sciences, which treated him so badly while he was alive, has announced plans for a Sakharov medal to be struck, and is also setting up a scholarship fund in his name. (In Israel, at the urging of Soviet Jewish immigrants, a public park has been named for him.)

These memorials are all richly deserved. And yet, as Pushkin noted more than a century and a half ago, Russians have a penchant for honoring famous men after their death, having spat upon them while they lived. There can be little doubt that this noble, modest man would have abhorred a cult, and been indifferent to empty invocations of his memory. The monument that Sakharov would have preferred, as these memoirs show, is a democratic and peaceful Russia in a democratic and peaceful world. ●

Shattering Memories

By SIDRA DEKOVEN EZRAHI

Variable Directions

by Dan Pagis

translated by Stephen Mitchell

(North Point Press, 153 pp., \$21.95, \$9.95 paper)

The reconstruction of self and society in the wake of catastrophe involves heroic acts of containment and closure. Great walls are erected, monumental slabs and obelisks of granite and concrete, to contain the mourning, to keep the unburied dead from launching an untimely invasion. Memorial forests are planted to ground the remnants of former lives in a specific soil. Grandiose projects of restoration and regeneration are undertaken: parliaments and parks, buses and babies. Roles are assigned to the survivors of the catastrophe, specifying what to remember and what to forget, when to keen and when to leave off keening.

Dan Pagis was an Israeli poet and a survivor of the Holocaust who refused to stay within the assigned boundaries between lamentation and celebration, between past and present, between dis-

persion and repatriation, between poetry and prose, between the living and the dead. The dislocation and the loss that Pagis experienced as a child are transformed from events that can be contained, remembered, and superseded into a poetry of radical displacement.

Pagis was born in Radautz in 1930 and died in Jerusalem in 1986. Like Paul Celan, he grew up in the German-speaking Bukovina section of Romania and survived the Nazi occupation in various labor camps. Celan settled in France and continued to write in his native tongue, in what became, over the years, a restive German idiolect. The other displaced poet from Bukovina arrived in Palestine in 1946 and found his home in Hebrew poetry.

They met briefly on holy ground, in the holy tongue. Celan came to Hebrew gingerly, reverently, as he came

to Jerusalem in the year before his suicide, on pilgrimage. The untranslated Hebrew words that punctuate the poems of his last decade are scattered references to the possibility of homecoming. In an address, in 1969, to the Hebrew Writers' Association, Celan acknowledged a sense of congruence between "inner and outer" landscapes, "the pride in every bit of green you planted," and "the joy over every newly won, felt, and fulfilled word." He seemed almost ready to surrender what he called "Jewish loneliness" to such an encounter. But, like so many Jewish wanderers who touch down on the ground of a possible homecoming, he could not linger.

Celan, whose "Todesfuge" acquired canonical status in postwar Germany, was to become increasingly sealed within the hermetic structures of his own poetic universe. Pagis, less widely acclaimed during his lifetime, remained at the most fundamental level a poet embedded in his culture. The German-Jewish poet who maintained that the only thing that had survived the war with him was his language had to reinvent that language to keep it his own: Celan performs his alchemy at the most basic linguistic unit, the neologisms in his later poems are barely communicable, and his image of poetry as a message washed ashore in a bottle posits his reader as a haphazard beachcomber. Pagis's dislocation occurs, by contrast, within the syntax of the social contract. His poetry is composed of—and decomposes—cultural archetypes and public rhetoric. Pagis never became the official poet whose words would be read on ceremonial occasions by the flicker of memorial candles; and yet, by blasting a hole in the culture so large that it exposes and undermines its deepest structures, his poetry claims a radical public presence.

In Pagis's work, every theological or ideological commonplace is dismantled by a sleight-of-hand:

Draft of a Reparations Agreement

All right, gentlemen who cry blue murder
as always,
nagging miracle-makers,
quiet!
Everything will be returned to its place,
paragraph after paragraph.
The scream back into the throat.
The gold teeth back to the gums.
The terror.
The smoke back to the tin chimney and
further on and inside
back to the hollow of the bones,
and already you will be covered with skin
and sinews and you will live,
look, you will have your lives back,
sit in the living room, read the evening
paper.

Here you are. Nothing is too late.
As to the yellow star:
it will be torn from your chest
immediately
and will emigrate
to the sky.

The wit that rescues this poetry from the pathos of its subject also deprives every sacred discourse of its compensations. Conflating the debate about German reparations in Israel in the 1950s with Ezekiel's eschatological vision undermines both politics and prophecy. In "Siege," a casualty of the Roman-Jewish wars of the first century prepares, from his ossuary, to answer a call-up of the Israeli reserves: "I gather myself, lift my bones, / put on skin and muscles, my full-dress uniform, / and report to the regiment / right now, in the end of days." That nothing in historical time can provide reparation or restitution for disrupted lives is manifested in the poet's defiance of the historical procession itself. Suspended haphazardly between the beginning and the end of days, the present moment is robbed of its sovereignty.

Within the highly charged Zionist celebration of history and territory as the instruments of Jewish redemption, Pagis's embrace of an undifferentiated universe, timeless and placeless, defined him as a kind of exile in the Holy Land, and his poetry as an exile from the poetry of homecoming. In a society in which utopian lenses are designed to secure the separation of past, present, and future, and to foreclose the imagination of alternative worlds, the persistence of realms not safely contained at a temporal and geographical distance is subversive. Pagis's countertexts defy not only historical consciousness, but also a teleological reading that grants history a destination.

Heirs to a literary and philosophical tradition with its primary source in biblical lamentations, modern Israeli poets continue to engage that tradition even through thick veils of irony. The rhetoric of religious consolation that served centuries of Jewish survivors found its most powerful secular expression in Zionism, specifically in the Zionist narrative of destruction and rebirth. Most Hebrew writers have not shared the mystical historiography of the late "poet laureate" Uri Zvi Greenberg, who established causal links between the death of the Jews in Europe and the birth of the Jewish nation in Israel, but there is a basic common regard for the redemptive agency of Jewish memory. Whereas modern literature tends to focus on the birth and death of the individual as liminal events in the otherwise fragmented biography

of the self, in much of contemporary Hebrew writing the composite body outlives, and continues to salvage meaning from, the demise of its parts.

The Holocaust is the source, rather than the object, of Pagis's slantwise view of the world. Few of his poems are specific enough to be identified as "Holocaust poems." Most of them lack either the referential or the confessional substance that generally characterizes the writing of survivors. Pagis chose to engage neither the testimonial language of witness nor the archetypes of martyrdom. In some instances, the reality invoked in the title of a poem ("Draft of a Reparations Agreement," "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car," "The Roll Call," "Testimony") seems to confer a documentary status against which the poem itself rebels:

Instructions for Crossing the Border

Imaginary man, go. Here is your passport.
You are not allowed to remember.
You have to match the description:
your eyes are already blue.
Don't escape with the sparks
inside the smokestack:
you are a man, you sit in the train.
Sit comfortably.
You've got a decent coat now,
a repaired body, a new name
ready in your throat.
Go. You are not allowed to forget.

The unmentioned event is the fulcrum of a vision that locates progress in intergalactic, evolutionary, or anatomical spheres, rather than in any humanly constructed scheme. General historical and specific Jewish terms of reference are supplanted by the language of an ape who "emigrates" ("The Readiness") or a human brain in "exile" ("Brain").

Pagis exercised poetic options that may have marginalized him within the Israeli literary world and limited the scope of his readers. Leaning beyond irony to parody, beyond displacement toward decomposition, beyond colloquial to depersonalized speech, Pagis both participated in and deviated from the modernist project in Hebrew poetry. His conceits, fables, riddles, and parables may often have appeared thematically



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and formally archaic—or futuristic. A few of his poems were widely read in his lifetime, but the real conversation with Pagis is likely to begin when his collected works appear posthumously later this year—partly, no doubt, due to the hagiography that accrues to dead poets, but also because Israeli society, under the press of circumstance, is re-examining some of its primary myths.

Because Pagis, like Kafka, does not create a universe that is either mimetically coherent or allegorically insistent, his words are constantly reattaching themselves to changing reality, and are not exhausted by any historical moment or interpretive act. They are restless presences in his culture, even when they appear to be indifferent to public discourse. In a late poem, the machinery of death seems to find poetic justice in the lamentations that have turned to gallows humor:

An Opening to Satan

As he waited in front of the new invention, Danton said, "The verb to *guillotine* (this brand-new verb of ours) is limited in the tenses and persons of its conjugation: for example, I shall not have a chance to say *I was guillotined*."

Acute and poignant, that sentence, but naïve.

Here am I (and I'm nobody special),
I was beheaded
I was hanged
I was burned
I was shot
I was massacred.
I was forgotten.

(But why give an opening to Satan?—
he might still recall
that, morally at least,
for the time being, I've won.)

This lesson in the competing grammars of martyrology reads at first like an innocent (if somewhat whimsical) update of the medieval laments that still form a part of the Jewish liturgy. But present political realities place a new construction on the poem: the poet's untimely death spared him the pain of recording the transformed grammar of a people some of whose passive verbs have learned to become active. Still, running as an undercurrent throughout his verse is an implicit recognition of the dialectics of power and powerlessness. In "Brothers," Cain dreams that he is Abel; presumably, in this world of infinite complementarities, his brother is having the corresponding dream. Indeed, the repeated appearance in Pagis's poetry of Cain and Abel as the composite figure of victim and victimizer may be seen as a significant replacement for Isaac as the Jewish sacrificial and covenantal victim.

Pagis's unraveling of the chronologi-

cal order, his free-floating images that are referential in origin but unmoored from historical context, denote a radical exercise of the poetic prerogative:

Ready for Parting

Ready for parting, as if my back were turned,

I see my dead come toward me, transparent and breathing.

I do not consent:

one walk around the square, one rain, and I am another, with imperfect rims, like clouds.

Gray in the passing town, passing and glad, among transitory streetlamps, wearing my strangeness like a coat, I am free to stand

with the people who stand at the opening of a moment

in a chance doorway, anonymous as raindrops and, being strangers, near and flowing one into another.

Ready for parting, waiting awhile

for the signs of my life which appear in the chipped plaster

and look out from the grimy windowpane. A surprise of roses.

Bursting out and already future, twisted into its veins—

a blossoming to every wind. Perhaps

not in my own time into myself and from myself and onward

from gate within gate I will go out into the jungle of rain,

free to pass on like one who has tried his strength

I will go out

from the space in between as if from the walls of denial.

The "denial" (*kefira*) is cosmic, a naysaying that dismantles every idiom into its component parts and then recombines them to expose their status as purely verbal constructs. The denial extends to the poetic subject, the lyric possibility, the language of human emotion. The idioms, like the people, are tested by dislocation; the imperceptible transition from one state (of being, of mind, of territory) to another is effected by an interchange of time and place. The "passing town" and the "transitory streetlamps" are not the fixed objects of a nostalgic mind yearning for home. The self is not grounded by gravitational forces, nor is it contained in the signs of its private existence—"chipped plaster," the "grimy windowpane," "a surprise of roses." It is an undefined, unbounded entity let loose in the galaxy "like clouds" (or, elsewhere, like a wind from "variable directions"). A centrifugal force liberates the speakers in these poems—and they are voices more than persons—from the burden of consistency, of integrity, of memory. In a subtle exchange, things remember better than people do.

The language itself is, on the surface, as light and playful, as free of gravity, as

the beings who move weightlessly and diaphanously between the living and the dead. "But what's this, my good angel is stirring, he lectures and finally shouts: 'What [nerve] . . . it is to swim among the drowned, / and you make this into a sport? For shame!'" The reader of these poems may be similarly chagrined by the unruliness, the impiety of one who traffics shamelessly with the dead and does not respect their otherness. Within the terms of the debate over the status of poetic language that has focused on Celan's "Todesfuge," and was inaugurated by Adorno's much-misquoted dictum ("after Auschwitz, to write poetry is barbaric"), Pagis's recombinant imagination generates both keen pleasure in the dazzling display of verbal antics and a shock of recognition that leaves nothing in the reader's world quite intact.

Pagis's poetry is marked more by absence than by presence; it is a poetry of the empty page that dismantles the story that Israel writes, that effaces the tale that the survivor tells. And yet it appears that, at the end of his days, there was a dramatic change. In his final work, Pagis instructed his reader that the empty page was an effacement, and seemed even on the verge of deciphering the code that would make the banished words visible:

You ask me how I write. I'll tell you, but let this be confidential. I take a ripe onion, squeeze it, dip the pen into the juice, and write. It makes excellent invisible ink: the onion juice is colorless (like the tears the onion causes), and after it dries it doesn't leave any mark. The page again appears as pure as it was. Only if it's brought close to the fire will the writing be revealed, at first hesitantly, a letter here, a letter there, and finally, as it should be, each and every sentence. There's just one problem. No one knows the secret power of the fire, and who would suspect that the pure page has anything written on it?

Such an intimation, from one who was not only a master of modern Hebrew poetry but also the greatest modern scholar of medieval Hebrew poetry and, in his last work, of the riddle literature of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, was enough to reilluminate the texts. The passage above not only announced, it also enacted, a new poetics: the last volume published in Pagis's lifetime included a number of such "prose poems," and papers discovered in his estate and published posthumously form part of a larger prose work titled *Abba* (Father).

As Pagis's taut poetic line gave way to a looser, less textured, decidedly prosaic surface, the possibility of historical dis-

course could be invoked. In time, acts of private memory might have followed. Addressing the riddle of the absent father in the poetry—the father who had left his young family in 1934 and emigrated to Palestine, the father with whom the poet was reunited after the war but with whom real communion seems to have begun only in the short interim between the father's death and the son's—*Abba* appears to have been Pagis's first attempt to exercise, almost conventionally, the literary prerogative of reclaiming the past.

For those Hebrew readers who had become accustomed to meeting Pagis in his no man's land between the living and the dead, his posthumous works, and the incipient change of direction signaled by the last manuscripts, feed the illusion of a historically particular voice speaking from beyond the grave. But the reader of *Variable Directions* would hardly know this. Poems and prose passages are presented here not chronologically, but in loosely thematic order, conveying little or no sense of the evolution of the poet's voice.

The book suffers also from the absence of the original texts, which one has come to expect as part of the contemporary apparatus of translation. In 1981 Stephen Mitchell published translations of Pagis in a bilingual edition; produced in collaboration with the poet, those translations became sanctioned interpretations or versions of the original. Armchairs that had appeared humbly in the Hebrew salon were upgraded and transported to hotel lobbies in the English—providing, on facing pages, a glimpse into the translator's workshop. That such a format is even more essential for translations undertaken after the poet's death goes without saying. Mitchell's versions often attain an admirable transparency, but the cultural transaction is weighted in favor of American spaces. One of the verses I cited above reads, in Mitchell's translation: "What chutzpah it is to swim among the drowned, / and you make this into a sport?" The decision to leave "chutzpah" as a lone survivor of the original is a sign of the word's migrant status in the American lexicon, not of its centrality in the poem.

Still, if Pagis's subversion of the codes of his culture lends his poetry a unique translocal force, Mitchell's translations grant it the mobility it deserves. For nothing in Pagis's poetic universe really stays put. The disruptive power of this work, which remains outside the paradigm that has evolved in Israel to contain the Holocaust, will not diminish with time. As the formulas and the ritu-

als of remembrance proliferate, it is the numbing effect of convention, the banality and the predictability of commemorative practices and passages, that this poetry rails against. Forty-five years after the liberation of Auschwitz, the average participant at a Holocaust Day memorial ceremony in Israel merely yawns in anticipation of the "dry bones" passage from Ezekiel that inevitably precedes one of those pyrotechnical poems in which the last embers of the Warsaw Ghetto ignite the torches of redemption in the new state. The yawn catches rudely in the windpipe, however, when instead we stumble upon that "scream [returned to] the throat, / The gold teeth back to the gums. . . ." Just as we think that we have entered the

"safe" precincts of historical narrative or "collective memory," Pagis shifts the lens just enough to deprive us of the comfort of such formulaic resolutions. We wander through Pagis's poems thoroughly exposed, facing over and over again, without the consolations of convention, the shock of events never quite recounted:

I won't mention names
out of consideration for the reader,
since at first the details horrify
though finally they're a bore . . .

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The Longer March

BY ARTHUR WALDRON

China's Crisis:

Dilemmas of Reform and Prospects for Democracy

by Andrew J. Nathan

(Columbia University Press, 242 pp., \$24.50, \$12.95 paper)

Why has democracy failed, thus far, to take root in China? During the nearly twenty years that Andrew Nathan has taught Chinese politics at Columbia, he has repeatedly returned to this question, and so does *China's Crisis*. Indeed, as we learn from this collection of his essays, Nathan has taken seriously the possibility of Chinese democracy from the time he entered the field of Chinese studies, in the days of the Cultural Revolution. His first book, published in 1976, dealt with the failure of constitutionalism in the early Chinese republic. At that time it seemed a slightly odd topic, for many believed that issues of constitutionalism and democracy were irrelevant to China; typical was the assertion, which Nathan quotes, by a Quaker delegation visiting the People's Republic in 1972: "The American social experience of pluralism and diversity and relatively ungoverned U.S. economy do not constitute a lens through which Americans can successfully examine the basis of Chinese society."

Nathan has always rejected such relativism. Partly, perhaps, this is a matter of personal conviction (he is active in Amnesty International), but also, no doubt, it owes much to the way he pur-

sues his subject and his discipline. Like others, Nathan seeks Chinese friends and is trusted by them. He listens very carefully, and unlike more journalistic students of China, Nathan checks what his friends tell him by systematically plowing through acres of documents, official and unofficial. Moreover, as a political scientist, he tests what he finds against models, particularly against models that suggest whether and how authoritarian societies can become democratic. He has always understood that the question of Chinese democracy is as much about democracy—how and why democracy develops in some societies but not in others—as it is about China.

A reader unfamiliar with Nathan's work, however, might get well into *China's Crisis* before glimpsing the author's true originality. "Confessions of a China Watcher" provides an engaging account of his own intellectual evolution (though Nathan is hardly the first China-watcher to confess), and "A Factionalism Model for [Chinese Communist Party] Politics," which was first published in 1973, is straight political science, applying to China a model derived from the study of France, innovative at the time but now thoroughly absorbed by his field. His analysis of political risk, written in the