

Saul Tchernichovsky

Saul Tchernichovsky (1875–1943) is generally acknowledged to be the most important poet after Bialik in the generation of Hebrew writers who first became active in the Odessa of the 1890's. Among the poets of this so-called Renaissance Generation, Tchernichovsky is perhaps the one truly renaissance figure: a man of immense vitality with a voracious hunger for life. Physician, naturalist, linguist, translator, he significantly broadened the scope of Hebrew vocabulary and of its verse forms in his attempt as poet to embrace the external world in all its minute particularity.

His whole literary career constitutes a similar effort to embrace Western literature and, as it were, to transfuse it into Hebrew poetry. The astonishing variety of Tchernichovsky's activities as translator gives some indication of the diversity of literary modes which he sought to naturalize to Hebrew. Though best known for his renderings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, he translated poets from fifteen different literatures, ranging from Sophocles and Horace to Shakespeare, Molière, and Pushkin, from the *Kalevala* to *Hiawatha*. The translations also suggest that Tchernichovsky was no modernist, at least not in technique. As a contemporary of Rilke, George, Yeats, and Eliot, he chose to translate Goethe and Heine, Byron and Shelley. In many of his own poems, we find him responding to the impact of twentieth-century violence, yet the poetry to which he was continually drawn was the kind that affirmed the stirring possibilities of human achievement. He was therefore especially interested in national epics and in the literatures of the Renaissance and Romanticism. He devoted many years to rendering into Hebrew such works as the Gilgamesh cycle

and large passages from the national epic of Serbia and the Icelandic Edda.

In general, both Tchernichovsky's sense of life and his experience of Hebrew culture set him apart from other Hebrew writers of his generation. He was born and reared in a prosperous village in the border region between Crimea and the Ukraine. The setting—both its fertile fields and the forbidding stretches of its great plains—loomed large in the poet's spiritual landscape throughout his life. (A poem written in 1923 begins: "Man is nothing but a little plot of land,/ Man is nothing but the image of his native landscape.") While nature often seems to be a consummation devoutly wished but rarely experienced by the ghetto-bred writers of Tchernichovsky's generation, his poetry remains more continually in touch with the rhythms and feeling of the natural world than theirs or that of any modern Hebrew verse before it.

Tchernichovsky did not undergo the induction into culture almost universal among his Jewish literary contemporaries—the one-room elementary school followed by the talmudic academy. Whereas Bialik, and virtually all European-born Hebrew writers, absorbed the language through the study of sacred texts, Tchernichovsky was taught the formal elements of Hebrew by private tutors and then was introduced to biblical and—in defiance of all tradition—modern Hebrew texts. As a result, his Hebrew lacks some of the indigenous quality of Bialik's. The sources of its vocabulary and the models for its syntax are sometimes foreign. This degree of independence from traditional precedents may have made it easier for Tchernichovsky to adapt Hebrew to so great a variety of European prosodic forms. Because of the remark-

able continuity of ancient and modern Hebrew literary experience, all Hebrew poetry tends to be allusive—but this is far less true of Tchernichovsky's work than of Bialik's. As one critic has observed, the poetry of Bialik brilliantly recapitulates all the successive historical stages of Jewish experience and fuses them into the poet's own deepest needs of expression. Compared to Bialik, Tchernichovsky was only superficially acquainted with the Talmud, the Midrash, the medieval commentators, and the mystic writers. The only Hebrew literary past to which his early poetry alludes with any imaginative richness is the Bible.

Circumstances forced Tchernichovsky to be even more of a wanderer than Bialik. Because of the restrictions against admitting Jewish students, he had to study medicine outside Russia, first in Heidelberg, then in Lausanne. After working within Russia as a doctor during the trying years of war and revolution, he discovered—as did everyone else connected with the Odessa literary group—that there could be no future for Hebrew writers

under the Soviet regime; and he left Russia in 1922. An unsuccessful attempt to get a medical post in Palestine led to a nine-year stay in Germany, interrupted by several temporary moves in the hope of finding more satisfactory positions elsewhere in Europe. Like Bialik, Tchernichovsky managed to settle in Palestine for only the final decade of his life.

But while the dark experience of exile—personal, national, and metaphysical—remains central to Bialik's poetry, Tchernichovsky's work generally conveys a sense of being at home in a natural world despite the physical uprootings and personal difficulties experienced by the man himself. It is not really surprising that Tchernichovsky was able to acclimatize himself poetically in many ways to the Palestinian setting after his arrival there in 1931. Unlike Bialik, he strove to adopt the Sephardic accent for his serious poetry, and some of the best work of his last years is a response to the physical presence of the Land of Israel and to the human effort of its rebuilders.

באתי עדיך. אל ושכח מעולם.
אל ירחיק קדם וימים אחרים.
מולך על ורמי בני-אדם רעננים.
משברי-אונם בשפעת עלומים!
אל דור אדירים ונפילים בארץ.
כובש בורעו גם גבול שוכני רמים
למשכב גבורים בבניו בעצרת
עלי-הדפנה על מצחם הגאה.
רודה באיליו ונרמה להמה.
לשית נוספות על סוד מושלי תבל;
דור אל בארץ. שכור שפע החיים.
נכרי לגוי חולה ולבית הפואבים.
אל-נער, נאדר, רענן, כלי-יפי.
חולש על שמש ומסתרי-חיים
בערפלי השירה ובגנוי-גוניה.
בים הננונים באלפי גלימו;
אל גיל החיים בכל עשרם והדרם.
תקפם וצפוני משכיות גוניהם.
באתי עדיך - האם הפרתני?
הגוי היהודי: ריב לנו לעולמים! ...
ממי-אוקינוס בין חלקי יבשת
תהום הרובצת בינינו יבצר
למלא עד פיה בשאונם והמונם.
שתקים ורחב-ערכות הן קצרו

מהשתרע בפרץ. המסריד
תורת אבותי מדת מעריציה.
עינה הרואה בי! יען הרחקתי
לכת מכל אשר היו לפני
ואחרי בנתיב יתע אדם בן-תמותה. -
הגוי הראשון לשבים אליה.
רגע בו קצתי בנסיסה לדורות.
במועד בו אשבר אוקי הנפש.
נפשי החיה, הדבקה בארץ.
וקן העם - אלהיו וקנו עמו!
רגשות נצמחים בידי חדלי-אונים
קמו לתחיה ממסגר מאת דורות.
אור-יה לי! אור-יה! - בי קורא כל גרם.
חיים, הוי חיים! - כל עצם, כל עורק.
אור-יה וחיים!
ואבא אליה.
באתי עדיך, מול פסלך אקדה.
פסלך - סמל המאור בחיים;
אקד, אכרעה לשוב ולנעלה.
לאשר הוא נשא במלא כל העולם.
לאשר הוא נהדר במלא כל הבריאה.
לאשר יש מרומם בסוד-סודות היצירה.
אכרע לחיים, לגבורה ולטיפי.
אכרע לכל שכיות-החמדה, ששדרו
פגרי אנשים ורקב זרע אדם.
מורדי החיים, מיד צורי שדי.
אל אלהי מדברות הפלי.

Saul Tchernichovsky

MY ASTARTE · AŞTÓRTI LI* · עֲשֶׂתְרִתִּי לִי

עֲשֶׂתְרִתִּי לִי, הֲלֹא תִסִּיחִי לִי: מֵאֵן
הִנֵּא אֵלֵינוּ בָּאתָ? הָאֵם בֵּיד כְּנַעֲנִי צִידוֹן
מַעִיר לְמַעַז יָם, בֵּין גְּלִי שָׁבוּ וְכַלְצִידוֹן?

הָאֲרָבוּ לוֹ בָּהָר וְעַם-לַיִל אֱלֹפִי דָן?

Aştórti li, haló tasíhi li: meán
Hagáy eylénu vat? haím beyád knáani
Meír lemáoz yam, beyn gáley şvo [tsídon
[vehaltsídon?

4 Heárvu lo bahár veím-leyl alúfey dan?

The pagan world exercised a continuing fascination over Tchernichovsky. He spent much of his life imaginatively exploring the pagan roots of many cultures: Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Russia, even Finland. But it was to the ancient Canaanite cult that he gave the greatest place in his poetry, for it offered him a clear alternative image of what the later Hebrew-speaking inhabitants of Canaan could have been if freed from the limitations imposed by Judaism and the God of the Jews. Tchernichovsky, then, sometimes uses the pagan gods for strictly polemic purposes in protest against Jewish tradition. Thus, in "Before the Statue of Apollo" (1899), the first important statement of his pagan "program," he describes the Jewish people as rebels against a Nietzschean god of life, a "God, Lord of the wondrous deserts,/ God, Lord of the conquerors of Canaan by storm—/ And they bound him in phylactery thongs."

But paganism is more than an ideological

drumbeat in Tchernichovsky's poetry. Like his younger English contemporary, D. H. Lawrence, Tchernichovsky had an unusual gift of imaginative response to the idea of a free life of the instincts. And for him, as for Lawrence, the pagan world was a vivid embodiment of the natural existence men supposedly had led before they were maimed by repression and inhibition.

"My Astarte," subtitled "an idyll," is in a quieter mood than most of his pagan poems. The speaker is a woman, praying to the fertility goddess Astarte. Apparently a village-dweller, she addresses a newly acquired statuette of Astarte which has been brought from afar:

(1) *My Astarte, won't you tell me: from where*
(2) *Did you come to us in the valley? Was it in the*
hand of a merchant (Canaanite) of Sidon (3)
From [the] city stronghold of the sea, through
waves of agate and chalcedony? (4) *Did the chief-*
tains of Dan lie in ambush for him [the merchant]
on the mountain (and) at night?

הָאִם בְּצִרְרוֹת בַּד עַל דְּבִשּׁוֹת גְּמָלִי דָדָן
וְנֶאֱקוֹת מַעְלוֹת חוֹל הָפֹז בְּנִיעֶן וְנִידָן
נִשְׁאֵת עִם אֶרְחַת שָׁבָא, נוֹשֶׁקֶת רוֹמָה כִּידוֹן.
וְלִפְנֵיהֶם מִטְרָטֵר קוֹל רְמוֹנִים וְסִהְרֹן רָן?

נִפְלְאוֹת לִי, מֵה־נִּפְלְאוֹת עֵינֶיךָ אֶסְמְרָגְדִּים,
אִף כָּלֶךְ עֲשׂוֹךְ שֵׁן, יִצְוִרֶיךָ כֹּה מִתְלַפְדִּים.
וְאֵין אִישׁ מְגִלָּה סוֹד, מִי נִתְנֶה לִי — אֵין אִישׁ!

סִלְסִילַת תְּאֵנִים לָךְ — חֲפָנִי קֶמַח סִלְתִּי,
מִשְׁמֵן זֵיתִי לִג — — אֵלֶיךָ הִתְפַּלֵּלְתִּי:
« נִהְיֶה, נַעַר צַח, אֵלֶי תְּבִיאֶיהוּ חֵישׁ! »

Ha'im bitsrórot bad al dábsot gmáley dedán
Uneákot máalot ḥol hapáz benían venídan
Niséṭ im órḥat šva, nošeket róma kídon,
8 Velifnéyhem metárter kol rimónim
[vesáharon ran?

Nifláot li, ma-nifláot eynáyiḥ ismarágdím,
Af kúlah ásuḥ šen, yetsuráyiḥ ko mitlákdím.
11 Veéyn iṣ megále sod, mi netáneḥ li—eyn iṣ!

Salsílat teéynim laḥ—ḥafánti kémaḥ sólti,
13 Mišémen zéyti log — — eyláyiḥ hitpalálti:
“Nahagiḥu, náar tsaḥ, eyláy tevíihu ḥiṣ!”

(5) *Was it with (in) bundles of linen on the humps of Dedanite camels* (6) *And she-camels raising the golden sand with their swinging and swaying* (7) *[That you] were borne with a Sheban caravan, armed with spears lifted high,* (8) *And before them the sound of pomegranate [bells] tinkling and singing crescent [ornament]?*

(9) *Wondrous to me, how wondrous to me are your eyes that are emeralds,* (10) *Indeed all of you they have made of ivory, your limbs link together so.* (11) *And no one reveals the secret, who gave you to me—no one [lit. no man]!*

(12) *A little basket of figs for you—I have scooped up my best flour,* (13) *A log [a biblical measure] of my olive oil— —I have prayed to you:* (14) *“Lead him, a shining (pure) lad, bring him to me swiftly.”*

Tchernichovsky seems to have deliberately set this poem as a challenge to his own virtuosity. He wrote many idylls both early and late in his career, but the form as he used it was expansive and narrative; typically, he would take many hundreds of hexameter lines to give a leisurely, detailed account of the pleasures of village life. Here, on the other hand, he tries to convey the idyllic sense of broad, sun-warmed vistas through the rigorously restricted form of a Petrarchan

sonnet. And while he observes the Petrarchan conventions scrupulously, he also seeks to endow his Canaanite woman with convincingly dramatic speech.

Her first words sound naturally direct in the Hebrew, though the language is, appropriately, biblical rather than modern. (The vocabulary in general evokes the more exotic and archaic usages of the Old Testament, although there are a few post-biblical words in the poem.) Enjambment is used in at least half the lines of the octave, and all pauses are dictated by the dramatic sense, so that the sonnet form is not felt as an impediment to the speaking voice which dramatically questions Astarte. The sestet is more symmetrically formal. As the speaker moves from questioning to fervent praise and supplication, the lines are all strongly end-stopped, with a cesura occurring regularly after the third foot, suggesting the choreographic rhythm of ecstatic ritual.

The poem selects its “idyllic” details with the greatest effectiveness. The speaker wonders (1-4) whether the Astarte originally came by sea from Sidon in the north, or overland from Sheba in the far south (5-8). Thus the octave calls forth a whole ancient

Near Eastern world, where after disembarking Tyrian merchants run the danger of attack from Danite—significantly, Israelite—marauders, and where armed caravans cross the Arabian desert, to the tinkle of pomegranate-bells (suggesting fertility) and crescent-shaped ornaments (again associated with Astarte, often thought of as a moon-goddess).

The general effect the poem aims at is to crystallize the magic lights of an exotic world. There is a cultivated quality of strangeness in the vocabulary—"chalcedony," "she-camels" (*nakot*, derived from the Arabic), the biblical epithet "stronghold of the sea" for Sidon.

Until the final tercet, almost everything is seen as artifact: the sea is a jewelled surface, the sand is gold, the caravan is a parade of finely wrought ornaments. Astarte, of course, is literally an artifact (9-10), but the poem establishes an equation that works both ways. The Canaanite woman, we sense, is addressing the real Astarte, not just a piece of carved ivory, and the real Astarte is as exquisitely beautiful as the statuette which

represents her. The poem has captured a distinctive mode of ancient Near Eastern poetry in rendering the work of nature in terms of the splendor of art. Compare the description of the lover in the Song of Songs, 5:14-15: "His hands are rods of gold set with beryl; his body is polished ivory overlaid with sapphire; his legs are pillars of marble set upon sockets of fine gold." At the same time, the sexual images are inescapable—the undulating female camels, the pomegranate shapes, and the intertwined limbs.

Only the last tercet places the idea of artifact in the background. Here the poem passes from visual and auditory images to taste and smell as the woman enumerates the items of her simple sacrifice—fine flour and olive oil (a standard offering prescribed in the Pentateuch), and figs, associated with fertility. The change in sensory focus is appropriate, for this is the most humanly immediate moment of the poem. The woman prays for a "shining" (*tsah*) lad, like the "shining and ruddy" lover of the Song of Songs 5:10.

— ROBERT ALTER

- act of strangeness, defamiliarization
- counter-history
- Paganism } - objects
- modernity } - fertility, nature - rejection of Biblical resources, e.g. Hama

Poem as obj. itself:

beautiful
+
sublime

abba, aaba, ccd, eed

Saul Tchernichovsky

TO THE SUN: 7,8 · LASÉMES* · לשמש

בְּעֶמְדִי בֵּין הַחַי וּבֵּין הַגּוֹסֵס כָּבֵר
(אֲמָנוּת מַה-נּוֹרָאָה!) וְאֶזְמַל חֵד בְּכַפִּי,
יֵשׁ בּוֹהֶה מִתּוֹךְ גִּיל וְיֵשׁ מְקַלֵּל בְּאִפִּי,
סַפְּגִיתִי אַחֲרוֹן אוֹר תּוֹךְ אִישׁוֹן גּוֹסֵס זָר.

אֶל רַעַם תּוֹתֵחִי-אוֹן מִתְגַּלְגְּלִים בְּכָר,
לֵאשׁ נּוֹצֵצָה בְּאֶשׁוֹן מְנַהֲרִי לִי בְּגַפִּי
הִתְוִיטִי אַחֲרוֹן-קוֹ, מַחְקָתִי חֵי מִדְּפִי,
מִסֵּף מִשָּׁהֶם כֶּף תַּעֲקֹר אֶבֶן-יֶקֶר.

וְאוֹלָם בְּאוֹתוֹ זִיק בְּעֵין הָעוֹמֶמֶת,
בְּאוֹר הַסּוֹפֵג אוֹר וּבִטְרָם קָם לְעֵד;
וְאוֹלָם בְּאוֹתוֹ בְּרַק אֵשׁ קוֹדֶחַה וְצוֹרֶמֶת,

— בְּאֵשׁ הַקּוֹרָאָה לֵאשׁ, הַמְּצִיָּה אִיד וְשָׂמֵד,
— הֵייתָ אֵתָּה כָּם; זֶה הוֹדֶךְ הַמְּמַנִּי;
הָאֵם קִדְמָתִי כֹא אוֹ אַחֵר צוֹר בְּרָאִנִּי?

Beómdí veyn haḥáy uvéyn hagóses kvar
(Umánut ma-noráa!) veízmel ḥad behápi,
Yeš bóhe mítoḥ gil veyeš mekálel beápi,
4 Safágti áḥaron or toḥ íṣon góses zar.

El ráam tóṭṭhey-on mitgálgelim bakár,
Leéš nótssetsa veéṣun minhárti li vegápi
Hitvéyti áḥaron-kav, maḥákti ḥay midápi,
8 Misáf mešóham kaḥ teáker éven-yekár.

Veúlam beóto zik baáyin haomémet,
Baór hasófeg or uvtérem kam laád;
11 Veúlam beóto brak eš kódḥa vetsorémet,

Baéš hakór'a leéš, hamtsáva cyd ušmád,—
13 Hayíta áta vam; ze hódḥa hamamáni;—
Haím kidámti vo o éḥar tsur braáni?

The sonnet has almost as long a history in Hebrew poetry as it does in Italian; it was introduced to Hebrew literature in the 14th century by Immanuel of Rome, a contemporary of Dante. But for all the venerability of the Hebrew sonnet, no poet had put it to so wide a variety of uses or displayed such virtuosity in handling the form as Tchernichovsky. He published in Berlin in 1922 *The Notebook of Sonnets*, a volume of verse which also included a historical essay on the sonnet and a poetic tribute "To the Hebrew Sonnet." In both the essay and the tribute, Tchernichovsky makes clear that he turned to the sonnet partly in response to the neglect of formal beauty which he felt was encouraged by critics of modern Hebrew verse.

"To the Sun," the first and most impressive section of the *Notebook*, is composed in a particularly demanding form: the sonnet corona. A corona is a cycle of fifteen Petrarchan sonnets in which the last line of each poem is repeated as the first line of its successor; the fourteenth sonnet ends with the first line of the first poem and is followed by a concluding sonnet made up of the first lines of all the previous poems, in sequence. The cumulative power that can be generated by this difficult form with its virtuoso conclusion is extraordinary; one understands Tchernichovsky's pride in reminding us, in his dedicatory note, that "this sonnet corona [is] the first in our literature."

Ideally the first cycle should be read with

"On the Blood," a corona completed the year after the publication of "To the Sun." The two titles, in fact, are in a sense interchangeable, for "To the Sun" develops an equation between sun and blood, or fire and blood: "You Who are present in the hiding-place of being, I beseech You, guard the blood for me./ Do not put out Your fire, which You kindled in me, with Your compassion," (Sonnet 5). "On the Blood" wrestles with history while the poet of "To the Sun" wrestles with his own soul. But it should be kept in mind that the historical foreground of the later corona is a dramatic background for the earlier one: Russia and Europe from 1914 to 1922, world war, revolution, pogroms, civil anarchy, a widening circle of uninhibited violence. "On the Blood," in proposing art as the answer to the madness of history, suggests one possible reason for the adoption of the difficult corona form in both cycles: the poet is trying to shore up his sense of beauty against the moral chaos around him with an artistic convention that demands restraint, control, balance, complex interweaving.

One of several themes that is repeated with fugal intricacy in "To the Sun" is the speaker's vacillating sense of himself as a sun-blessed creature rooted in the earth's timeless life-energies, and as an outcast in time, engulfed by the violence and heartlessness of an alien age. This double sense of self is perhaps hinted at in the opening line of the cycle: "I was like a hyacinth and a mallow to my God, . . ." Mallow, according to the Talmud, is a flower that turns and opens to the sun; the hyacinth, according to Greek legend, springs from the blood of murder, and its petals bear the letters AI AI, the syllables of woe. Sonnets 7 and 8 of the corona present an exciting transition from lamentation to sun-fired song. The speaker of Sonnet 7 is an army doctor, working by lantern light in a makeshift underground operating room. (Tchernichovsky saw considerable frontline action as a medical officer in the Russian army from 1914 to 1918.)

(1) *As I stood between the living and the already dying* (2) *(What a terrible craft!) and a sharp scalpel in my hand,* (3) *Sometimes weeping for joy and sometimes cursing in anger,* (4) *I soaked up the last light from the pupil [of the eye] of an alien (stranger) dying man.*

(5) *By the thunder of mighty cannons [lit. cannons of might] rolling through the meadow,* (6) *By the fire flashing (flickering) to me alone in the darkness of my tunnel* (7) *I marked the last line, I wiped out a living creature from my page,* (8) *So from an onyx threshold a precious stone is ripped out.*

(9) *And yet in that spark in the fading (dulling) eye,* (10) *In that light soaking up light and before it goes blind;* (11) *And yet in that flash of scorching and screeching fire,*

(12) *In the fire calling to fire, commanding disaster and destruction—* (13) *You, You were in [all of] them; this glory of Yours stunned me;* — (14) *Have I come too early or was the Rock [God] late in creating me?*

To the reader familiar with the reference in line 1 (to Numbers 17:13), the poem begins on a note of great breadth and grandeur: "And he [Aaron] stood between the dead and the living and the plague was stayed." The underground operating room of the octave is a kind of grave. The doctor's craft is terrible because futile: he is forced to be a macabre parody of God, helplessly crossing out lives from his book. But the "darkness of the tunnel" is punctuated with images of light—the dying light in the eye, the lantern, the flashes of artillery, the hardened flame of the jewel—which will flare up in the sestet.

The turning from despair to affirmation is signaled by the initial "And yet" of the sestet. Lines 9-12, as the progression of images indicates, should be read in a crescendo, reaching a peak in line 12, with its heavily accented long-ey sounds and final thud of *eyd ušmád* ("catastrophe and destruction"). Lines 13-14 bring a marked rhythmic change. The sound and sense of line 13, with stressed alliteration of *h*'s and *m*'s, force us to read it

הָאֵם קִדְמָתִי בָּא אוֹ אַחֵר צוֹר בְּרָאֲנִי
'אֱלֹהִים' סָבִיב לִי וּמַלְאִים כָּל הַיָּקוֹם.
כּוֹכָבִים אֱלֹהֵי, אֶתְפַּלֵּל לָמוֹ, קְסוּם-
פְּנִיכֶם, מְאוּר-יוֹם וְסֶהַר חוֹרֵנִי.

כִּי בִלְתֶּךָ אֵין כְּלוּם, הוּא שֶׁמֶשׁ חֲמָמִנִי!
בְּנֵי-שֶׁמֶשׁ אַתֶּם לִי, הַגְּלָמִים תְּלוּיִם רוּם,
בְּנֵי-שֶׁמֶשׁ — עַץ הַפִּיל וּקְלָפוֹת כָּל הַשּׁוּם,
גִּלְגֻלֵי אוֹר וְחֵם — הַפָּחַם הֶרְתַּחֲנִי.

וְהָיָה כָּל הַיָּקוֹם קוֹל תְּפִלָּה, תְּפִלַּת-כָּל:
לָךְ קוֹרְאוֹת אֲמוֹת-תַּנִּים, גִּירִיהֶן כִּי תְּפַלְחָנָה,
לָךְ יָרֵן שׁוֹפֵר-קָרֵב עִם הַנֶּץ אוֹר בְּמַחְנָה,

הַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת בְּגִלְגָּל-עַל, כִּי יִגְרַפֶּם הַקּוֹל.
בְּמַקְהֶלֶת אֵין-הַסּוֹף אֶרְנָה וְלֹא אָדָם:
עוֹד בְּלִבִּי לָן הַטֵּל, הַיּוֹרֵד עַל שְׂדֵה-אָדָם.

Haím kidámti vo o éħar tsur braáni?
'Elóhim' sáviv li umléim kol haykúm.
Koħávim elóhay, etpálel lámo, ksum-
4 Pnéyħem, meór-yom vesáhar ħivaryáni.

Ki vílteħa cyn klum, hoy sémeš ħimemáni!
Bney-sémeš átem li, haglámim tlúyim rum,
Bney-sémeš—ets hapíl uklípót kol hašúm,
8 Gilgúley or vaħóm—hapéħam haratháni.

Veháya ħol haykúm kol tfila, tfilat-kol:
Laħ kórot ímot-tánim, guréyhen ki tefaláħna,
11 Laħ yáron šófar-krav im hánets or bamáħne,

Hašmášot begálgál-al, ki yígrefem hakól.
13 Bemakhélat cyn-hasóf aróna veló édom:
Od belíbi lan hatál, hayóred al sde-édom.

much more slowly, at a lower pitch, than the preceding line. "Stunned me" (*hamamáni*) implies a physical blow, and one hears a kind of muffled thunder in the whole line. Despite the dominance of death, the presence of light—even dying and destructive light—avows the existence of vital, inexhaustible energy. The cannon fire calls for answering fire and it also calls to the fire or light in the dying eye (9), and, echoing the "abyss calling to abyss" of Psalm 42, it imposes itself in the poem as a force of cosmic dimensions.

The speaker concludes the sonnet with a sudden, and for the moment, enigmatic, question. As the child of an age to whom fire means only destruction, should he have been born in a much earlier period when the vital principle of fire (or sun) was worshipped? Or perhaps he has come to the world too early, before the fulfilment of the vision when "a generation will create . . . its next god, and we shall worship Him in exultation" (Sonnet 10). Standing "between the living and the dying," is not only dramatic but symbolic as well. The speaker finds himself between a

moribund age and the eternal sources of life which were accessible in the past and, hopefully, will be so again in the future. Sonnet 8 repeats the question which ends the previous sonnet, then goes on with the affirmation of life:

(1) *Have I come early or was the Rock [God] late in creating me?* (2) *"Gods" are around me and fill the whole universe.* (3) *Stars are my gods, I pray to them, bewitched* (4) *By your faces, light of day and pale moon.*

(5) *For there is nothing without (except) You, O Sun that has warmed me!* (6) *You are children of the sun (sun-creatures) to me, [you cloud] masses hung on high,* (7) *Children of the sun (sun-creatures)—the elephant tree and all the garlic skins,* (8) *Avatars of light and heat—the combustible coal.*

(9) *And the whole universe will be a voice of prayer, the prayer of all:* (10) *To You, mother-jackals call as they give birth to their whelps,* (11) *To You, the battle horn sings as light breaks in the camp,*

(12) *[To You] the suns in the sphere above, as the sound (voice) sweeps them.* (13) *In the choir*

*of infinity I shall sing and I shall not be still: (14)
In my heart the dew still reposes that descended
[lit. descends] on the field of Edom.*

Many of the English equivalents offered here are inadequate. The diction and grammar of the poem are more elevated, more biblically poetic, than our version can indicate. Note also that the Hebrew here for "gods" (*elóhim*), which the speaker, living in a post-pagan world, feels compelled to enclose in quotation marks, does not suggest an absolute cleavage between polytheism and monotheism, for this plural noun is used in the singular sense for God throughout the Bible.

After the credo of the first quatrain, the poem runs up and down the scale of sun-saturated creation in two series—5-8, 9-13—culminating in the "choir of infinity" (13). Everything that exists is an "embodiment of light" (8), containing seeds of the sun's life-energy, from the cloud masses (*glámim* implies formlessness) and the aromatic elephant tree down to the garlic skin, a proverbial equivalent in Hebrew for something worth next to nothing.

The second series, which ends in a sun-worshipper's version of the music of the spheres, is appropriately more elevated in style than the first. It begins (9) with the verb "to

be" in prophetic future, as if the speaker were setting out to say, "And it shall come to pass on that day . . ." The poem's vision of unity becomes so intense that its language approaches the language of eschatology. The epiphany of the sun-god came, we remember, in the blast of cannons. The vital energy that is praised in the poem exists beyond all moral categories: the same force is present in the dimming eye of the dying man and in the first trumpet of war.

Line 14—like many of the terminal lines in the corona—is a sudden reversal in tone and perspective. Line 13 triumphantly ends with a jubilant trumpet-blare: *aróna veló édom* ("I shall sing and I shall not be still"). Line 14, by contrast, is a still, gentle voice. From the celestial grandeur, the speaker turns to his own heart; from fiery cosmic power to the dew on a Near Eastern desert; and from a vision of life-present to a fantasy of life-past. The "field of Edom" is the desert through which Moses led the ancient Israelites. In the next sonnet the speaker will identify his own religious consciousness with that of his desert-dwelling ancestors, whom he imagines as having lived close to the primitive vital forces of nature.

— ROBERT ALTER