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Inhalt

Dan Diner Editorial	9
----------------------------------	---

Allgemeiner Teil

Ruth von Bernuth, <i>Chapel Hill, N. C.</i> Zu Gast bei Nikolaus Selnecker: Der jüdische Konvertit Paulus von Prag in Leipzig	15
---	----

Elena Keidošiūtė, <i>Vilnius</i> Converting to Catholicism: Jews in Lithuanian Bishopies in the Late Russian Empire	37
---	----

Christoph Schmidt, <i>Jerusalem</i> Die Analogie und ihr Missbrauch in der Historie – Über Albert I. Baumgartens Biografie zu Elias Bickermann	61
--	----

Eglė Bendikaitė, <i>Vilnius</i> One Man's Struggle: The Politics of Shimshon Rosenbaum (1859–1934)	87
--	----

Jay Winter, <i>New Haven, Conn.</i> Jüdische Erinnerung und Erster Weltkrieg – Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis	111
---	-----

Peter Tietze, <i>Tübingen</i> »Zeitwende«: Richard Koebner und die Historische Semantik der Moderne	131
---	-----

Schwerpunkt Der Erste Weltkrieg

Natasha Gordinsky, <i>Haifa</i> , Carolin Kosuch, <i>Rom</i> Einführung	169
--	-----

*Reiterarmeen. Jüdische Kriegsliteraturen (1914–1918)**Herausgegeben von Natasha Gordinsky*

Maya Barzilai, <i>Ann Arbor, Mich.</i> Witnessing Dying in the Tongue of Revival: Shaul Tchernikhovsky's World War I Poetry	177
Eugenia Prokop-Janiec, <i>Kraków</i> Writing World War I: The Case of Polish-Jewish Literature	193
Ilse Josepha Lazaroms, <i>New York</i> Borderlands – Joseph Roth's Dystopian Imagination	215
Sabine Koller, <i>Regensburg</i> Jiddische Literatur im Krieg: Moyshe Kulbak und Yisroel Rabon	237
Glenda Abramson, <i>Oxford</i> The Return of the Soldier: S. Y. Agnon's Novels of the First World War	263
 »Die letzten Tage der Menschheit.« <i>Schriften aus dem Großen Krieg</i> <i>Herausgegeben von Carolin Kosuch</i> 	
Sigurd Paul Scheichl, <i>Innsbruck</i> Karl Kraus' <i>Weltgericht</i> – Eine Bilanz	285
Andreas Stuhlmann, <i>Edmonton, AB</i> Vom »Schlafwandler« zum Kriegsgegner: Die Wandlungen des Maximilian Harden	309
Judith Große, <i>Zürich</i> Patriotismus und Kosmopolitismus: Magnus Hirschfeld und der Erste Weltkrieg	337
Daniel Münzner, <i>Berlin</i> A Twisted Road to Pacifism: Kurt Hiller and the First World War	365

Elke-Vera Kotowski, <i>Potsdam</i> Den Ersten Weltkrieg denken: Theodor Lessings »Philosophie der Not«	389
Lisa Marie Anderson, <i>New York</i> “Sehenden Auges und mitfühlenden Herzens:” Ernst Toller’s Witness to the First World War	411

Gelehrtenporträt

Magnus Klaue, <i>Leipzig</i> Mit doppeltem Blick: Max Horkheimers bürgerliche Gelehrsamkeit und wissenschaftliches Unternehmertum	437
--	-----

Dubnowiana

Grit Jilek, <i>Berlin</i> Jenseits von Territorium – Jüdische Nation und Diaspora bei Simon Dubnow	463
--	-----

Aus der Forschung

Felix Pankonin, <i>Leipzig</i> Profil einer Renegatin: Ruth Fischers exemplarische Biografie	491
--	-----

Literaturbericht

David Kowalski, <i>Leipzig</i> Polnische Politik und jüdische Zugehörigkeit: Die frühe Oppositionsbewegung und das Jahr 1968	525
Abstracts	549
Contributors	559

Maya Barzilai

Witnessing Dying in the Tongue of Revival: Shaul Tchernikhovsky's World War I Poetry

Writing War in Hebrew

By 1914, Hebrew poetry was already reaching the tail end of its first wave of modernization, but the events of World War I raised dramatic new challenges for Hebrew writing, challenges both aesthetic and ethical. Among the war's many unprecedented aspects was the enthusiastic participation of Jewish soldiers on both sides of the conflict: "On this side and on that side stood Jews and Gentiles who were at war with other Gentiles and Jews," wrote S. Y. Agnon. "They did not know each other, but they were told that these were their enemies, and in all innocence they risked their lives to kill and to die."¹ If Jews suffered a representative share of battlefield losses and witnessed the same scenes of mass destruction as their non-Jewish comrades, they often chose to respond to these events in languages that were not the tongues of modern war and that could not be comprehended by the majority of society. Hebrew poets in particular needed to consider how their language of choice, possessed of a vast historical echo chamber, could be wielded in response to contemporary warfare. Complicating matters further, many nations prohibited Hebrew-language publication during World War I. As Joseph Klausner writes, "A short time after the war began, not only was the Hebrew word banned in Russia, but also the Hebrew letter."² When responding to the war at the time of its occurrence, Hebrew poets literally could not be heard or read, for their own minority audiences were denied access to current works in the language.

Adding to the problem of writing in an outlawed language was the issue of bearing witness to atrocity, to mass death as it unfolded every day in the trenches. The complexity of Jewish witnessing has been most thoroughly explored and theorized in the context of World War II and the Holocaust, by writers and critics from Primo Levi and Victor Klemperer to Shoshana Felman and Giorgio Agamben. A number of their insights into the paradoxes of witnessing nonetheless prove exceedingly relevant for the analysis of earlier

1 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Me'atsmi el 'atsmi* [From Myself to Myself], Tel Aviv 1976, 250.

2 Yosef Klausner, *Shaul Tchernikhovsky. Ha-adam ve-ha-meshorer* [Shaul Tchernikhovsky. The Man and the Poet], Jerusalem 1947, 147.

history, such as the mass casualties on the battlefields of the Great War. In *Remembering War*, Jay Winter likewise contends that while the experiences of soldiers fighting other soldiers are in no way comparable to those of Jews incarcerated and murdered by the Nazis and their henchmen, the two groups of witnesses shared certain modes of narrating and approaches to testifying. Witnesses of the battlefield horrors of World War I were often determined to give the most truthful, even if necessarily harsh, account of their experience and their suffering. “Their testimony,” in Winter’s words, “had a moral purpose; they ensured that what they took to be a truthful story about the war was told.” In doing so, moreover, they were not trying to rake in any “political capital.”³

Levi argues, more radically, that the very fact of survival creates a “lacuna in every testimony,” since those who survived “are not true witnesses” and “did not touch bottom.” If “the past belongs to the dead,” according to Agamben, one therefore bears witness “in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness.” This essay intends to demonstrate a similar recognition of the impossibility of witnessing in Hebrew writing about the events of World War I. Because the medium of testimony is language, moreover, we need to bear in mind not only the irrecoverable nature of past events but also the history of the particular language and its capacity to represent the deceased on whose behalf the witness testifies. Toward the end of *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben revisits the paradoxes of witnessing in the particular context of individual languages and their histories. His basic claim is the following: when a poet decides to write in a long-“dead” language, to position himself as a speaking subject in this tongue, an act of testimony occurs whereby the dead language is resurrected, surviving those who once spoke it as a living tongue. Agamben generalizes this point to suggest that “to bear witness is to place oneself in one’s own language in a position of those who have lost it, to establish oneself in a living language as if it were dead, or in a dead language as if it were living – in any case, outside both the archive and *corpus* of what has already been said.”⁴

How, then, are we to understand poetic testimony in Hebrew, a language that had just begun to be used as an everyday spoken tongue at the turn of the twentieth century – and that only by small and highly dedicated groups in Palestine and the diaspora? As a language of scripture, prayer, and poetry, Hebrew never entirely “died,” but it still needed to be reworked and modernized in order to describe the phenomena of modernity: urbanization, industrialization, and, in our case, technological warfare. Furthermore, bearing

3 Jay Winter, *Remembering War. The Great War between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven, Conn., 2006, 244 f.

4 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz. The Witness and the Archive*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen, New York 2002, 34, and 161.

witness to death on the battlefield required Hebrew poets to place themselves in their own language “in a position of those who have lost it” even while remaining fully committed to the project of Hebrew’s literary “revival.” In other words, besides meeting the challenge of evoking modern warfare in a language that till then had depicted only ancient battlefields, these poets also needed to establish themselves outside the archive of what had already been said in Hebrew in a more fundamental way. By writing about the events of World War I in Hebrew, they bore witness not only to the horrors of that war, but also to the modernization of Hebrew and to the need to transform the language into an adequate medium for addressing current historical upheavals.

To understand better this set of unique conditions on Hebrew writers, this essay turns to the Russian Jewish poet Shaul Tchernikhovsky (1875–1943). Often mentioned in the same breath as Ḥayyim Nahman Bialik, Tchernikhovsky is considered one of the “founding fathers” of Hebrew poetry in the revival period (late nineteenth to early twentieth century). Having studied medicine in Switzerland and passed his medical examinations in Russia, Tchernikhovsky enlisted as an army physician in the Russian army upon the outbreak of the war and served from 1915 to 1918 in a hospital in Minsk. As the hospital’s chief medical registrar, he made numerous trips into the war zones; he was a close observer of the harsh conditions on the front despite never participating in the battles himself. Tchernikhovsky was thus a privileged witness, one who did not “touch bottom,” even if his own life was sometimes endangered by his activities. According to his biographer, Klausner, the doctor-poet received many letters of gratitude from soldiers whose lives he had saved as well as medals of commendation from the Russian government for his courageous work on the frontlines. During the war, his original literary output was limited to a handful of poems. Toward the end of the hostilities, Tchernikhovsky was hard at work on two translations: a modern German anatomy book for “*Mada*,” a publication society that prepared educational materials and science books for the Hebrew University, and the *Iliad* for A. Y. Shtibel and David Frishman, a translation he began in 1917 and completed only in 1924.⁵ Hence, in addition to treating wounded soldiers (and often saving their lives), Tchernikhovsky was also pursuing the revitalization of the Hebrew language along two quite disparate translational tracks: contemporary medical terms and ancient, classical literature. In his original compositions, however, he was repeatedly returning to the themes of dying and the powerlessness to save lives, thus pitting the futility of the physician’s “craft” against the art of reviving poetic forms in Hebrew.

5 Klausner, Shaul Tchernikhovsky, 144 f.

In 1916 Tchernikhovsky composed *Mi-manginot ha-zeman* (From the Melodies of the Time), a poem bitterly addressed to contemporary affairs. The poem opens with the notion of personal sacrifice for the speaker's homeland or birthplace (*mekhorati*): "I shall sate you with my blood in my time / Oh, my birthplace."⁶ In the second stanza, Tchernikhovsky localizes this sacrifice to the specific context of this war, of its trenches and tunnels, but he portrays the forfeit of the "blood of [his] heart" as a pathetic and miserable variety of death, rather than a heroic act.⁷ The battlefield is depicted as an arena of death, a place where the "carcasses of the killed" are found alongside men who, though alive, are bent solely on killing. The poem's speaker does not know where he belongs, among the dead or among those still fighting and killing. He perceives himself as one about to die, posing a series of questions about the details of his future death: "Where shall I silently lie, / Among the dead, and the killers in their innocence / And where my last bed will be, / Who will witness my dying?"⁸ Not knowing when "his place and hour" are to come, the speaker is also unable to affirm the presence of witnesses who might communicate his death to others. In place of human witnesses, then, Tchernikhovsky enlists the inanimate elements of nature – "morning stars," "silver mists," and a "setting sun" – as the possible companions to the man dying in a "forsaken trench" (*maḥporet 'azuvah*). But these celestial objects offer no comfort and no sense of continuity; they suggest only degeneration and loneliness, prolonged from earliest morning till sunset.

Running through a list of the baleful and unholy places where he can see himself dying, the speaker also depicts the "corner of a suffocating, stinking hut / on the cloth of the stretcher." Tchernikhovsky, a physician, imagines the speaker in this place as a patient in the throes of death; he portrays a man who does not receive medical attention, dying in the corner of an abandoned hut. The rhetorical power of this second stanza thus derives above all from the paradox of witnessing. The speaker is a kind of living dead: though still alive and capable of communication, he broods on his forthcoming death, knowing full well that he cannot survive as a witness to his demise but nonetheless conjuring multiple possible images of his own death. This soldier yearns to die a more honorable death, declaring in the following stanza that

6 Glenda Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*, London 2008, 115.

7 During this same period, Tchernikhovsky also wrote *Manginah li* (I have a Melody), in which the speaker declares that he would rather die on the battlefield, in self-defense, and not be passively murdered. He compares his restless blood to that of the Canaanites, describing a melody of "blood and fire." Shaul Tchernikhovsky, *Shirim u-baladot* [Poems and Ballads], in: idem, *Kol kitvei Shaul Tchernikhovsky* [The Collected Poems], 10 vols., here vol. 1, Tel Aviv 2004, 184f.

8 Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*, 115.

“no holy, warm drop will have reddened in vain [...] without breaching the walls of slavery / and the generations’ chains.”⁹ At the same time, it is not the speaker’s own Jewish sister, brother, or beloved who will reap the fruits of his sacrifice, but rather “strangers, only strangers.” The poem ends with a foreboding image of suffering in exile: a field grown over with thorns and thistles, instead of flowers and wheat; the man’s blood having been shed in vain, his sick mother must shuffle her feet in exile while the thorns tear at his father’s banished flesh.¹⁰

The absence of a witness has severe consequences for the Jewish soldier in particular: not only will his manner of dying never be known, but his death will do nothing to prevent the subsequent oppression and persecution of his people. The pessimistic speaker would like to believe that his blood will not be shed in vain, but he knows otherwise. Using rhyming couplets and alternating long and short lines, Tchernikhovsky tempers his disillusionment – with the ideals of homeland, community, and sacrifice – through the use of a highly structured Hebrew poetics. Glenda Abramson suggests that in this poem “he ignored modernism and retained traditional structures, images and language.”¹¹ The effect is a dissonant one: Tchernikhovsky’s formal choices clash with the chaos of the battlefield. His strategy is one of containment through form, rather than of expression through the disruption of formal conventions. But the end result in no way mitigates the horror of anonymous and futile death on the battlefield; it intensifies it. The overall cohesiveness of the poem’s structure, alongside the dialogue promoted between long and short lines, frames and accentuates the speaker’s battlefield solitude and underscores the absence of any witness who, by relating his manner of dying, could ensure that his kin will be protected from persecution.

The Doctor as Guilty Witness

With his corona of sonnets *La-shemesh* (To the Sun) – composed in Odessa in 1919 during the Russian civil war and published in 1921 – Tchernikhovsky took the aesthetic system of formal constraints several steps further. Consisting of fifteen rhyming Petrarchan sonnets, the corona cycle displays an intricate pattern of repetition whereby “the last line of each sonnet becomes the first line of the next one, with the fifteenth sonnet made up of

9 Ibid., 116f.

10 Tchernikhovsky, *Shirim u-baladot*, 187f.

11 Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*, 117.

all the first lines in sequence.”¹² While returning to and celebrating the European humanistic tradition through this form, as well as drawing on a highly archaic Hebrew diction, Tchernikhovsky still uses his poetry as a means for addressing the violence of modern war. His revival of the corona-sonnet form was an act of defiance and transgression in face of the ruptures and discontinuities occasioned by World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the ensuing civil war. The poet also dedicated the entire corona to his brother, Dov-Ber, “who died in the war in the year 1914.”¹³ Though he prevented the deaths of so many others, Tchernikhovsky could not save his own brother, and he had to come to terms with both the latter’s death on the battlefield and his continued absence. The corona, with its delicately interwoven structure, is a verbal mourning wreath placed on his brother’s grave; its momentous form and content match the solemnity of the occasion and the poet’s desire to erect a lasting cultural memorial to his deceased brother.

In its broad geographical-temporal scope and its adherence to the intricate and strict Renaissance poetic form, *To the Sun* shows Tchernikhovsky’s overall faith in Hebrew as a flexible and precise instrument of poetic expression and historical remembrance. In these fifteen interlocking sonnets, Tchernikhovsky invokes, according to Robert Alter, “the whole range of history, from the cultic practices of early man to his own recent memories of trench warfare on the Eastern front.”¹⁴ The poem traverses a vast geo-cultural world and evokes the different realms of science, art, religion, and history; all its pronouncements are filtered through the viewpoint of a first-person speaker, a poet or creator. At the very heart of the cycle, in the line shared between the seventh and eighth sonnet, Tchernikhovsky repeats the question: “Did I come too soon or was the Rock late who created me?” This temporal uncertainty is intimately related to Hebrew’s status as at once an ancient and belatedly resuscitated language. Precisely through its contemporary ambiguous status and long historical standing, Hebrew becomes the poet’s tool for accessing a past that would otherwise belong to the dead. Tchernikhovsky strives not only to renew Hebrew, therefore, but to explore the possibility of bearing witness in that language.

12 Robert Alter, Saul Tchernikhovsky’s “To the Sun.” A Corona of Sonnets, in: *Literary Imagination. The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* 3.2 (2001), 159–178, here 168. As Alter explains, “Oddly but also instructively, Hebrew was the first language after Italian in which sonnets were composed, beginning with the fourteenth-century poet Immanuel of Rome (to whom Tchernikhovsky would devote a 1925 Hebrew monograph) [...] Tchernikhovsky was affirming the continuing vitality of the European humanistic tradition he cherished and was also announcing [...] his own role as its supremely accomplished heir.” *Ibid.*, 169.

13 Klausner, Shaul Tchernikhovsky, 161.

14 Alter, Saul Tchernikhovsky’s “To the Sun,” 170.

To the Sun chronicles the maturation of a speaker – a poet; Tchernikhovsky opens the entire cycle with the image of an angel addressing the speaker, bidding him: “Rise and grow, sproutling, and burst forth / with your song, festive song, in the jagged thorn.” The song here is that of the anointed individual, and it will burst forth (*u-fetsah*) in or through the thorn, rather than in the “hyacinth or mallow” of the opening line. In the sixth sonnet, Tchernikhovsky similarly identifies the production of song with manual labor and its sharpened implements. He depicts the harvest, when “the shovel’s ring split[s] furrow and scythe sing[s] in the grain.” It is these sounds, the song of the thorn and the scythe, which the speaker has “soaked up” in his native village and which stand “by [him] in straits, in the battle [...] as [he] stood between the living and one already dying.”¹⁵ While these sounds are all connected to ancient agriculture rather than modern war, they are nonetheless sounds produced by “jagged,” piercing tools. The same root (*pey-lamed-ḥet*) used to describe the shovel “splitting” furrow (*pole’ah*) recurs in the eighth sonnet, when Tchernikhovsky uses – in reference to mother jackals – a rare verb for giving birth, *tefalahnoh*, which usually means “to split apart.” Violence is thus located in the realms of agriculture and animal birth; but this splitting of the land or the birthing body is transformed into a source of spiritual sustenance when the speaker confronts man-made destruction.

Already in the sixth sonnet, the speaker depicts two distinct voices within him – one of a “soul wrapped in light” and the other of a “wanderer in foreign darkness.” As yet not properly consecrated, he also finds himself surrounded by “doubting-doubt, the certain doubt.”¹⁶ As Abramson’s translation conveys, Tchernikhovsky uses the term doubt, *safek*, three times (“*safek-safek, safek-vaday*”). The first and third appearances of the word *safek* are part of an idiom that suggests that the two opposing conditions, “doubt” and “certainty,” are both plausible in this situation. The poet thus intensifies the overall uncertainty enveloping the speaker. To explain further, in Tractate Yoma of the Mishna (8:7), the phrase “*safek hay safek met*” (it is doubtful whether he is alive or dead) is used in a discussion regarding the status of a man buried under collapsed stones. In this case, the rabbis declare that he should be attended to until proven dead, even on the Sabbath. The sixth sonnet, concluding with the line “as I stood between the living and one already dying,” thus alludes to this Talmudic turn of phrase. In other words, the speaker’s hesitation between “doubting-doubt” and “certain-doubt” suggests a nightmarish reality in which he (the doctor) is called upon only to

15 Ibid., 159, and 162.

16 Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*, 125. In Alter’s translation the line reads as follows: “A realm of sheer doubt, doubt of what is certain.” Idem, Saul Tchernikhovsky’s “To the Sun,” 162.

affirm uncertainty as to whether a soldier is dead or alive.¹⁷ The prolonging of the process of dying is one way in which Tchernikhovsky conveys, in both *From the Melodies of the Time* and *To the Sun*, the bewildering uncertainty of the battlefield and the doctor's position within it. He focuses on the time when life can still be discerned yet appears to be running out; for him, this in-between zone of dying becomes associated with the paradoxes of witnessing, just as it heightens the drama of the inability to save the life of an individual.

Importantly, it also remains unclear in the above-quoted Mishnaic teaching whether the person buried under the pile of stones is "a worshipper of the stars" or one of Israel. In the eighth sonnet, the speaker explicitly refers to himself as a pagan believer: "Stars are my gods, I pray to them bewitched / By their faces, light of day and pale moon."¹⁸ In other words, the resolution of uncertainty, of the wavering between life and death, is attained through a pantheism in which the sun, moon, and stars endow both animate and inanimate beings with their life force. This represents a noticeable shift from the 1916 poem, in which these same celestial objects were unsatisfactory witnesses. But before the speaker can join the cosmic choir celebrating these celestial gods, he must come to terms with the events of a war that appears to disrupt the harmonious co-existence of all life forms.

The seventh sonnet, located at the center of this corona cycle, is the most autobiographical of them all. Here the speaker wields the physician's "sharp scalpel," reminiscent of the earlier sharp instruments (thorn, shovel, scythe) that previously sustained him. But the scalpel neither elicits songs nor enables the harvest; it is, rather, an ineffectual tool and, to the speaker, his "craft" (*umanut*) is "terrible."

"Be-'omdi bein ha-ḥay u-vein ha-goses kevar
 (umanut me-nora'ah!) ve-izmel ḥad be-khapi,
 yesh bokhe mitokh gil ve-yesh mekalel be-api,
 safagti aḥaron 'or tokh ishon goses zar.

El ra'am toteḥei-'on mitgalgelim ba-kar,
 le-esh notsetsah be-eshun minharti li ve-gapi
 hitveti aḥaron-kav, maḥakti ḥay mi-dapi,
 mi-saf meshoham kakh te'aker 'even-yekar.

17 For Zvi Luz, these lines "echo" the First World War and the Russian revolution. The dream-like quality of this realm of doubt, he claims, becomes in this sonnet an unwanted condition, suggestive of the "irrationality" of war and revolution, rather than a desirable state. Idem, *Aḥdut u-ba'ayatiyut taḥat ha-shemesh* [Unity and Discord under the Sun], in: idem (ed.), *La-shemesh. Masot 'al klil sonetot le-Shaul Tchernikhovsky* [To the Sun. Essays about Shaul Tchernikhovsky's Corona of Sonnets], Ramat Gan 1996, 119.

18 Alter, Saul Tchernikhovsky's "To the Sun," 163.

Ve-'ulam be-'oto zik ba-'ayin ha-'omemet,
 ba-'or ha-sofeg 'or u-veterem kam la'ad;
 ve-'ulam be-'oto barak esh kodḥah ve-tsoremot,

ba-esh ha-kor'ah le-esh, ha-metsavah 'cid u-shemad, –
 hayita atah vam; ze hodkah hamamani; –
 ha'im kidamti bo 'o eḥar tsur bera'ani?"

“As I stood between the living and the one already dying
 (What a terrible craft), a sharp scalpel in my hand,
 Some would weep for joy, some would curse me roundly,
 I soaked up the last light in a dying stranger’s pupil.

By the thunder of potent cannons rolling through the meadow,
 By the fire flashing in the pitch-black of my bunker to me only,
 I traced the last line, erased the living from my page,
 From a bejeweled threshold thus a precious stone is torn.

And yet in that spark in the guttering eye,
 In the light soaking up light before blanking out forever;
 And yet in that fire-flash burning and shrieking,

In the fire calling to fire that bids disaster and destruction –
 It was you who were in them, this your glory that stunned me; –
 Did I come too soon or was the Rock late who created me?”¹⁹

The seventh sonnet depicts a man who is dying and cannot be saved, not unlike the poet’s own brother to whom the entire corona is dedicated. The doctor wielding the scalpel appears tortured by his inability to help this “stranger,” and he describes himself as alternately crying out for joy and cursing, reactions one cannot help but associate with the turmoil of feelings experienced by soldiers on the front lines. Whereas the speaker of *From the Melodies of the Time* foresees his own death and bemoans the absence of a witness, the speaker in the corona becomes a helpless witness to another man’s life fading away, but he focuses on the effects of this demise on himself: “I soaked up the last light in a dying stranger’s pupil.” Just as the speaker previously soaked up (*sefagtim bi*) the smells of “rich crumbly soil,” the heat of the “chaff,” and the song of the scythe in the grain, now he internalizes (*safagti*) this “last light.” Recalling, nonetheless, that the previous things he had soaked up “stood by [him] in straits, in the battle,” we need to ask, how can a dying stranger’s last sparks of life affect the speaker as doctor and witness?

19 Ibid. In Abramson’s translation of this sonnet, the third line of the first stanza reads as follows: “Weeping with joy and cursing in fury.” See idem, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*, 126.

In the second stanza of the octave, the doctor is already alone in a “pitch-black” tunnel or trench, where he hears the thunder of cannons. There, in the last light of the stranger’s pupil, he performs the task of noting down the man’s death; he erases the living from his page. The act of tracing a “last line” (*aharon-kav*) links the writer’s pen and the doctor’s scalpel, since both trace (bloody) lines – the former on the page and the latter on the body. This connection appears even more evident when we consider the intricate concatenation of first and last lines in *To the Sun*, with each sonnet taking up the line where the previous sonnet left off. The cycle as a whole transforms the finite act of tracing the line to erase the living into a chain of varying repetitions, so that no line is ever a “last” line. Similarly, after the erasure has already taken place in the octave, the sestet of the seventh sonnet returns to the image of a “spark in the guttering eyes.” Thus, even while the stranger appears to have died, the poet prolongs his death for the remainder of the sonnet, with the result that the speaker continues to stand between the living and the dying.

The prolongation of dying through song is in itself an act of violence, one that not only suggests “rebirth [...] into a possible future,”²⁰ but also the infliction of further suffering. This excess of dying underscores the doctor’s position as “a passive witness,” one who has been, in Eyal Peretz’s words, “overwhelmed” by an excessive event that does not depend on the will of the witness and that therefore cannot be controlled. Alongside this inherent passivity of the witness vis-à-vis the “unmasterable excess” of the event witnessed, there also exists an imperative to communicate the event to others, to become an active transmitter of this overwhelming experience, thereby transforming the second-degree witnesses – the readers – who participate indirectly in the event.²¹ Tchernikhovsky’s speaker is doubly overwhelmed, by the unpreventable death of the soldier and by the revelation of the divine on the battlefield, and he bears testimony as well to the moment of being summoned as a witness on the battlefield. But the speaker can only do partial justice to this summons, because he is blinded by the revelation of war. Beginning with a “spark” and progressing to “light,” and the burning “fire-flash” of war, the speaker (within the narrative frame of the poem, the physician) draws a clear connection between the more metaphorical “light” of the dying and the fires of wartime destruction. He locates “you” and “your glory” – identified in the eighth sonnet as the warming “sun,” a divine force – both in the spark that is about to be extinguished and in the cannon fire responsible for this death. This is the central revelation of the seventh son-

20 Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*, 129.

21 Eyal Peretz, *Literature, Disaster, and the Enigma of Power. A Reading of Moby-Dick*, Stanford, Calif., 2003, 11.

net; it leads, in the following sonnet, to a celebration of these cosmic forces through song.

The phrase “fire calling to fire” (*esh ha-kor’ah le-esh*) rewrites Ps. 42:2, where “deep [*tehom*] unto deep calls out at the sound of Your channels.”²² Rather than identifying the divine with the forces of water, Tchernikhovsky finds a “you” in light and fire. And in contradistinction to the speaker of Ps. 42, who remains distant from God and unable to see God’s presence, the poem’s speaker can sense the presence of a divine element and bear witness to “his” appearance even in the most intense moments of battle and on the most modern battlefield. He further locates this awesome “you” precisely in the calling fire that “bids disaster and destruction”; it is there that the divine appears in all its stunning “glory.” This revelation is nonetheless problematic given the conditions under which it appears: following on the heels of death and taking place in the face of a destructive fire. “The poet appears to be impressed by death and to push aside its cruelty and terror,” Boaz Arpali contends, “and this fact renders him, in the best case (if we do not take into account all the ethical pitfalls) a strange man, an anachronistic creature.”²³

The revelation of a divine “you” on the battlefield appears in the penultimate line of the seventh sonnet, which is followed by the speaker’s question that stresses the temporal problem entailed in his revelation. Either he has come “too soon” and therefore expounds a truth or revelation that we are not yet ready to receive, or else the “Rock [...] who created [him]” has come too late and is the relic of an innocent generation. As a closure to the seventh sonnet, the question “did I come too soon or was the Rock late” also refers to the doctor’s inability to save the dying man; he could not prevent death *when it occurred* and therefore finds himself disconnected from the present moment. This last line of the seventh sonnet and first line of the eighth perform, furthermore, the recuperation in Hebrew song that links the archaic past with a future linguistic trajectory. The modern Hebrew language itself, not merely the speaker, is both a relic of the past and a new arrival, perhaps too early, on the scene of modernity. It is not quite up to the task of depicting the modern battlefield or the current moment of dying, but it does possess a vast echo chamber where the bleakness as well as the magnitude of World War I can resound.

The aesthetic and ethical problems that arise with the attempt to transform the battlefield and mass death into a revelatory experience prevail already in

22 The Book of Psalms. A Translation with Commentary by Robert Alter, New York 2007, 149f.

23 Boaz Arpali, Tom ve-yedi’ah be-klil ha-sonetot “La-shemesh” [Innocence and Knowledge in the Corona of Sonnets “To the Sun”], in: Luz (ed.), *La-shemesh*, 217–278, here 246.

the octave of this seventh sonnet. From Klausner's rave review of 1919 to the work of Zvi Luz, Hillel Barzel, and Glenda Abramson, interpretations of *To the Sun* have glossed over the speaker's inability to save the dying and, and to an even greater degree, the speaker's implication in the violence described. The witness, as Peretz has explained, is not a spectator, observing events purely from the outside; s/he participates in them and is therefore implicated by them and changed thereby.²⁴ Klausner, for example, does not read the erasure of the living in the octave literally, but rather suggests that the speaker erases the "old" that is "still full of life."²⁵ For Barzel, the speaker experiences a personal "sadness" at the sight of death, comparing the dead to a "precious stone" torn from a "bejeweled bowl." Barzel further emphasizes that the physician attains creator status, since he appears to determine the fates of people (sentenced to life or death), though he does so unwillingly.²⁶ Similarly, Abramson contends that the speaker is "endowed with an almost god-like function" when he absorbs the dying man's spark of light and erases him from the page. At that moment, "the ordinary actions of a ministering doctor assume cosmic proportions within the world's upheaval" and the doctor becomes a "mystical entity," a "representative of the sun."²⁷

However, this transformation of the witness into a near divinity is limited; he is capable only of erasing the living from the page, not of saving the man's life. He transforms death into a source of poetic and mystical redemption, but this is an act that is suspect from the start, for it elides the personal, even intimate nature of dying and undermines the task of the witness. The survivor-poet of this cycle lives to tell the horrors of the battlefield, but he must use the dying man's last spark of life to do so. He wields his scalpel not to heal but to repeat for posterity the futility of modern medicine in the face of the mass destruction wrought by technological warfare. The instrument of healing thus becomes a "sharp," even murderous weapon, one that betrays the horrific nature of the "crafts" of medicine and poetic writing.

Most tellingly, if in the seventh sonnet the poet focuses on the instrument of the doctor that then becomes a writing implement used to trace the final line of death, in the eighth stanza he shifts his attention to the sounds and voices of prayer rather than the roar of cannons. The drama of death and erasure is thereby recuperated through the seeming immediacy of song. In this manner, Tchernikhovsky's corona brings to the fore a type of literary meta-witnessing, for it bears testimony to the birth of language out of the death

24 Peretz, *Literature, Disaster, and the Enigma of Power*, 10.

25 Klausner, *Shaul Tchernikhovsky*, 163.

26 Hillel Barzel, *Shirat ha-tehiyah: Shaul Tchernikhovsky [The Poetry of Revival: Shaul Tchernikhovsky]*, Tel Aviv 1992, 188.

27 Abramson, *Hebrew Writing of the First World War*, 128.

and violence of war, to the transformation of modern artillery explosions into biblical battle-trumpeting, now rendered as the “voice of [Hebrew] prayer.”

The fullness of the universe surrounding the speaker in the eighth sonnet (“‘Gods’ are around me and fill all existence”) stands in utter contrast to the emptiness of the tunnel or trench in the previous sonnet as well as to the solitariness of the dying man. Instead of the “last light in the dying stranger’s pupil,” the speaker is now surrounded by stars, sun, and moon. All of Earth’s animate and inanimate beings become “sun-children,” “avatars of light and heat.” In the sestet of this sonnet, the universe of light is portrayed as being the “voice of prayer, the prayer of all”; here Tchernikhovsky uses two words that are homonyms (in the Ashkenazi pronunciation) *kol* (voice) and *kol* (all), to convey the unity of voice and existence. The repetition of *tefilah* (prayer) creates a chiasmus within the first line of the sestet, further emphasizing the unity and circularity of the cosmos. Nonetheless, by evoking the sounds of she-jackals birthing and of battle trumpets, the prayer portrayed here is not harmonious or pastoral but instead replete with the violence of procreation and war.²⁸

This evocation of violence-infused song is grounded, in the eighth sonnet, through multiple allusions to the Book of Job. Tchernikhovsky draws the verb *tefalahnoh* from Job 39:3, where gazelles “push out their young in the throes of labor [*yaldehen tefalahnoh*].” These are the words God utters from the whirlwind as a response to Job’s suffering, and the emphasis of these passages is on the natural world rather than on human beings. Furthermore, in the penultimate line – “In the chorus of the infinite I’ll sing out and not be still” – Tchernikhovsky uses the singular form of the verb to sing out, *erannah*, which he previously used to describe the call of the battle-trumpet (*yaron shofar kerav*). Alluding here to the song of the “morning stars” in Job 38:7, when “all the sons of God shouted for joy” (*be-ron yahad kokhvei boker*),²⁹ he writes not of “sons of God” but of the “sons of the Sun,” envisioning the celestial forces, “suns in the spheres,” engaged in harmonizing prayer. If God’s speech in Job surveys the creation of the inanimate world and the natural order of life within it, Tchernikhovsky’s sonnet opens and closes with its human speaker ready to join the “chorus of the infinite” – that is, the chorus of God – rather than remain still.

Hence, Tchernikhovsky borrows from the Bible a “vision of a harmonious order to which violence is nonetheless intrinsic and where destruction is part of creation,” to quote Alter. Excluding the Jewish God from the cosmic picture, the poet still retains the logic of a universe suffused with violence

28 Ibid., 163, and 173.

29 Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, New York 1985, 95, and 103.

already on the level of animal birth. Still, if God's response challenges Job to think beyond his human misery and fathom the contradictions of the world surrounding him, the "immense world of power and beauty and awesome warring forces," Tchernikhovsky goes so far as to subsume human death on the battlefield within a higher cosmic order, thereby making sense of it.³⁰ What is more, he implicitly depicts the "rebirth" of Hebrew from such modern wars and revolutions, drawing on the archaic lexicon of Job as well as rabbinical language in order to modernize Hebrew and bring it to bear on the events of World War I. Violence becomes in this manner an intrinsic part both of the cosmic order and of Hebrew writing of the period. Nonetheless, Tchernikhovsky's literary achievement with the corona of sonnets can be understood as rare and esoteric, especially upon recalling that, in Arnold Band's words, "by 1919 the closing of horizons for a Hebrew writer in the Soviet Union had become painfully obvious. [...] [T]he political currents [...] left him no alternative but exile."³¹ And indeed, *To the Sun* was not published in Odessa, the city where it was written, but in Jerusalem. The poem not only bears witness to and prolongs the dying of an anonymous stranger on the Russian front, but it also celebrates the last brilliant light of Hebrew-language culture in the nascent Soviet Union.

Epilogue: Generations of Dying

In his famous poem *Le-nokhah pesel apolo* (Facing the Statue of Apollo), written twenty years prior to *To the Sun*, Tchernikhovsky attributes the process of "dying" to the generations of Jews spanning the period of the conquest of Canaan to his own day. The speaker who wanders away from "everything that came before him" describes how he "has had enough of this dying for generation after generation [*gesisa le-dorot*]." His living soul seeks to break out of the diasporic Jewish mold and enable his "bound emotions [to come] to life." Such revival, at once both personal and national, is to be achieved by returning to an ancient Jewish God, a divine being closer to the Hellenistic tradition; he emphatically rejects the "dying" Judaism that has held sway in the interim. In *To the Sun*, Tchernikhovsky strove to translate these ideas and this ideology to the modern battlefield; it is to this end that he renews the Renaissance form of the Hebrew sonnet. His doctor, standing between "the living and one already dying," recalls the Jew who turns to face

30 Ibid., 106, and 110.

31 Arnold J. Band, *To the Sun*, in: Alan Mintz (ed.), *Reading Hebrew Literature. Critical Discussions of Six Modern Texts*, Hanover, N. H./London 2003, 81–91, here 90.

the statue of Apollo in order to discard the current traditions of his people and rediscover more ancient and, for him, energetic forms of worship.

Still, the speaker pays a high price to establish this new order in *To the Sun*. Absorbing the last light of the dying, he transforms it into the life force of the sun while erasing the dying man from his page. This double action is intimately linked to poetic creation, not only through the image of line and page, but also through the theme of light itself, which Tchernikhovsky equates with life and revival already in his poem from 1899. Following the violent act of erasure from the page and the unresolved witnessing at the heart of this poem, Tchernikhovsky discovers the divine precisely within the forces of destruction. Even if the man's death is not overtly desired, it is nonetheless a necessary precondition for revelation. Similarly, in order to bow down before the statue of Apollo and accept all that it symbolizes, the speaker must pronounce his predecessors and contemporaries a dying people and declare himself "the first to return [to Apollo]." Death is the logical precondition for renewal on a religious, cultural, and linguistic level, and to witness dying becomes almost a prerequisite for the modern Hebrew poet.

Tchernikhovsky nevertheless conveys the moral dilemmas of such an attempt to transform death into cosmic song and a totalizing pantheistic vision. He prolongs the period of dying and reveals the witness' sense of guilt, and at the same time asks his readers to continue along the chain of lines and sonnets rather than hesitating to contemplate the last stroke, the last line of death. Whereas the biographical Tchernikhovsky saved many men's lives and was honored and thanked for his valiant wartime service, his speaker as both doctor and artist must lose a life and witness an inevitable death for the sake of crafting a monument for Hebrew poetry. In *To the Sun* as a whole, the poet overcomes the crisis of witnessing and ultimately weaves an intricate linguistic wreath that negates the singular lines of death. Tchernikhovsky recognizes the physician's feckless, even murderous inclinations, only to transform them into a (formal) poetic triumph that reaffirms human endeavor and reframes death and violence through the life of the Hebrew language.