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THE PROPHETIC MODE IN
MODERN HEBREW POETRY

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Contents

Introduction,	1
Chayim Nachman Bialik's Poetry: An Introduction Without Footnotes,	39
The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry,	127
Introduction to the Poetry of Uri Zvi Greenberg,	191
The Beginnings of Hebrew Women's Poetry,	309
Jerusalem in Modern Hebrew Literature,	341
Modern Hebrew Literature: Zionist Perspectives and Israeli Realities,	393
The Shock of Independence: Reverberations in Early Israeli Poetry,	423
Time and Space in the Works of S. Yizhar and Yehuda Amichai: Two Generational Models in Early Israeli Literature,	491
The Epistemological Quest and the (Im)Possibility of Prophecy in the Early Poetry of Natan Zach,	527
Acknowledgments,	597
About the Author,	599

Chayim Nachman Bialik's Poetry: An Introduction Without Footnotes¹

In autumn 1891, Chayim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934), an excited and frightened youth of eighteen just-arrived in Odessa from a yeshiva in Lithuania, handed his poems to the editor Y.Ch. Ravnitsky to look over and, if some of them were thought worthy, print in his alma-

1. This attempt at a comprehensive but also concentrated and relatively short summing up of Bialik's poetic achievement is directly and indirectly based on many references to assumptions and arguments (which it either further develops or rejects) articulated by critics and scholars throughout the twentieth century. If these references were to be fleshed out in the form of an argued discourse of acceptance, qualification, or rejection, the size of the essay would have been quadrupled. It was therefore decided to leave it "unannotated." By the same token, comments on Bialik's specific poems are not anchored in references to editions, page numbers, etc. As for the quotes from Bialik's poems, they are based mostly on Atar Hadari's translations (*Songs of Bialik*, Syracuse NY 2000) and sometimes on those of Ruth Nevo (Ch.N. Bialik, *Selected Poems*, Tel Aviv 1981). However, in most if not all cases, the translations have been "tampered" with, so as to bring them closer to the original and better use them as illustrations to my arguments. Often, the translations, pedestrian as they are, are mine.

nac, *Hapardes*. To Ravnitsky's eye only one, "To the Bird," seemed publishable. It was marked by both emotional directness—expressing longings for a mythical Zion, magical and lost, mourning the agonies of Jews in the harsh diaspora—and showed fluency and skill in the use of the tonal-syllabic meter only then starting to make inroads into Hebrew poetry. When the almanac appeared in the spring of 1892, the emotional content of "To the Bird," and its melodious lilt, touched many readers. Several critics even noted the appearance of a new Hebrew poet to watch, even though sentimental poems homesick for Zion were thick enough on the ground in the poetry of the time, and the music of the poem was not entirely new. Still, "To the Bird" seemed a pleasant addition to the poetry of the time. No one guessed, nor could they guess, that the author of that lyric complaint would in a few short years change the face of Hebrew poetry and leave its forms and contents in a new, modern state of repair.

The young poet himself did not feel the possibilities within him. Though aware of emotional and spiritual forces running through him, he had as yet no faith in an ability to act on them. Lowborn and orphaned of his father in childhood, he had grown up almost without supervision in his grandfather's house, where he was intermittently "educated" (i.e., reprimanded, harassed, and even abused) by relatives and friends, and his life passed in solitude, without formal education or development under watchful, loving eyes. He immersed himself sporadically in fierce bouts of work—now in traditional study of the Talmud, now in reading the new secular literature. But he could find no spiritual foothold in either. From the Lithuanian Yeshiva of Volozhin, where he tried at first to excel as a Talmudic scholar, he fled to Odessa where he sought to become a modern Hebrew writer, but it seemed to him that both attempts had come to naught. He saw himself as a man without education, lacking the habits of disciplined study, mired in laziness and daydreams, torn apart by internal clashes ("I have sustained terrible turmoils and they tear my heart in ten pieces and batter my head to smithereens"; this from a letter to a group of friends written at the time). At a loss in both the spiritual and real world he labored under a permanent cloud of depression.

Hebrew poetry at the time of Bialik's maturation, in the 1880s,

was also cast under a pall of low-spirited haziness. In the century since the birth of the “new” Hebrew literature, while the eighteenth century waned, this poetry had tried to base itself on a universal, neoclassical poetics. Within the literatures of Europe a romantic revolution was raging, thrusting individuals to the center of spiritual life and looking to their idiosyncratic spiritual struggles and unique personal experiences for truths both metaphysical and religious, yet Hebrew poetry still dealt in retelling Bible stories with stale, didactic interpretations poised to paint “good” or “bad” behavior. It still imitated clichés of “nature” in poems about seasons, boasted heavy discursive odes on love, death or poetry; and even tried drawing concepts from the realms of philosophy to lend these themes ideational depth. Turning to public, exclamatory verse, this poetry addressed the people, *the people*, with rhetorical exhortations, urging that they change their lives, abandon the blueprint of religious tradition, and become a modern European nation—following the doctrine of the *Haskalah* (the Jewish Enlightenment movement), whose agenda this poetry was designed to enhance.

Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did Hebrew poetry find an authentic and powerful voice in Y.L. Gordon, who succeeded in telling Bible stories and Jewish history with a dramatic intensity rising from the questioning of the traditional Jewish interpretation of Jewish “sacred” history. But Gordon’s success—and he was the dominant Hebrew poet of the period—only emphasized the distance of the Hebrew poetry of the time from having the will and ability to express individual life. Gordon’s success stemmed from his identification with a collective, non-individualist poetic voice; a voice well versed in argument and wit, but not in metaphor and association—in short, a poetic voice that, tied to a universalist mindset, did not articulate the sensibilities of contemporary man, and remained stuck in a kind of poetry which European culture had ditched a hundred years earlier with the demise of the “Age of Reason.”

This poetry became passé as the nineteenth century waned. New forces bursting into the social and intellectual lives of Eastern-European Jews with the wave of pogroms in 1881–82 and the rise of Jewish nationalist sentiment (in both its Zionist and non-Zionist

forms) pulled the rug from under its feet, and Gordon, though not yet an old man, suddenly became yesterday's poet and all but stopped writing. Poetry now needed a wealth of warmth, not wit and argument; empathy for the people's suffering, not satire; a language expressive of an inner turmoil, not clever and witty discourse. Hebrew poetry was in search for a new poetic foothold, but, for a time, it failed to locate any such firm grounding. The emotional abundance that flooded it lacked the focus to lend it concreteness—a true sense of the individual, a firm hold on the self. In this respect, the sentimental Hebrew poetry of the time remained where it had stood in Gordon's day, speaking not through a unique man with an idiosyncratic, personal interiority but through a generic Jew, sentimental but lacking in psychological nuance. That mode, which had not necessarily injured Gordon's epic and satirical poetry, certainly undermined the poetry of affect and hyperbole which was now written by the poets of *Chibat tsiyon* (Love of Zion). There, the lack of authentic subjectivity through which the current overwhelming emotionalism could be processed and endowed with psychological and situational specificity had devastating results. With the cruelty and precision of the young and talented, Bialik, while still a beginner, tore apart the poetic effusions of his older and established contemporaries:

There is not talent and no new idea, no skill of language and no spark of God, but there is a spirit of fudging and pointless thoughts, a spirit of emptiness and wasted breath that blossoms in the air of an empty heart—aside from the lie and deceit that stands out in all their poems as they weep the destruction of their people great as the sea and long for Zion—with two hearts they speak. You do not hear the sigh of a people and its longing in their songs, but rather a commotion of things is heard: “drowning in a sea of tears, boiling tears, blood and fire and pillars of smoke,” or like this: “Zion my vision; in my dream I saw you; my love, my staff...” and all these fine words show their forgery plain as brass—my fine soul is sick of them...
(from a letter to Ravnitsky, 1894)

This crushing verdict concerning the poetry of the period was written by a ferocious young poet who detested the poetry of the day. He suggested to the philosopher Achad ha'am (Asher Gintsberg), whom he idolized and regarded as a spiritual mentor, that he refrain entirely from publishing it in his new literary journal, *Hashilo'ach* (launched in 1896), to which Bialik himself had been invited to contribute. As far as poetry was concerned, he maintained, Hebrew literature needed a period of strict abstinence. This, of course, was an indication of dissatisfaction not only with the work of his contemporaries, but also with his own early work. For his by now famous "To the Bird" as well as many other poems he had composed, were not so different from the poetry he reviled. The truth of the matter was that the young poet experienced severe difficulties in his struggle to break loose from the sentimentalist poetic framework he was born into. Among his experiments he even tried a return to a discursive poetry of wit, argument and narrative à la Gordon, about whom he wrote, upon the latter's death in 1892, an elegy full of reverence. But this return to the past was no longer feasible. Bialik swallowed Gordon's major achievements whole and learned from them, but the new sensibilities that had toppled Gordon's poetry were alive in him as much, if not more, than they were in the work of the poets he disliked; and the old suit would not stay unripped on the new bridegroom. Thus finding himself returning again and again to a poetry of emotion, of tears and hyperbole, which he did not want, he was always in crisis, sure that his writing would grind to a dead end. That was the reason for his self-effacing comments in the aforementioned letter to Achad ha'am, in which he explained why he was not in a position to accommodate the revered editor's wishes to publish his poetry. *Hashilo'ach* was simply too good for him. The editor had to be warned to steer clear even of his, Bialik's, poems. Indeed, in the mid-1890s, already master of a certain reputation, young Bialik saw himself about to be run out of a "career" in which he found neither joy nor profit.

The question arises, how did he, despite these limitations and his low self-esteem, not only leap to stand tall as the poet surpassing all his contemporaries, but also lever Hebrew poetry as a whole out

of its low ebb? As late as 1892, Achad ha'am believed that the entire project of the "new" Hebrew poetry, which had been evolving for over a century, was a failed enterprise. It was trying to do things which could not go together. On the one hand, it attempted the revival of an ancient poetic idiom, that of the "pristine" Hebrew decorum of biblical poetry, thus skipping millennia during which the Hebrew language evolved and changed. On the other hand, it reached across the breach to the European culture of the time, wished to avail itself of the genres, forms, conventions, euphony, and elegance of the European neoclassical poetic tradition. It purported to impact the "ossified" Jewish heart by means of the aesthetic; to soften and revive it with the felicities of elevated language, but it was devoid of the essential component of emotive articulation—that of connotation, of the associations and tiny, barely conscious nuances of meaning and emotional coloring only a spoken language could possess. It consisted of a web of quotations and allusions, flowery expressions and decorative, imprecise figures of speech. Its attempts to follow in the wake of European models were, therefore, gauche and clumsy. That was why only scholars and erudite youngsters read it while most readers remained indifferent. Indeed, the Zionist philosopher concluded, Hebrew poetry did not have much of a chance before the realization of the Zionist goal: the creation of an energetic, Hebrew speaking community in Palestine. As long as that ideal community remained a dream, there was no sense in investing too much energy in the maintenance of a Hebrew poetry, or, for that matter, of Hebrew *belles lettres* in general. And at least for a time, Bialik concurred with his mentor. A new kind of Hebrew poetry was needed, but could the need be satisfied? Achad ha'am kept reminding his followers of the chasm separating one's wishes from one's ability to realize them.

But within a few years Bialik was to prove his mentor wrong, and vindicate those who disagreed with him (foremost among them M.Y. Berditshevsky). His poetry would be a living proof of the latter's assertion that within the spiritual and literary spheres, a real need, if deeply and authentically experienced, amounted in and of itself to at least half of its satisfaction. Achad ha'am's analysis of the failure of nineteenth-century Hebrew poetry was wrong in that what ailed and

stunted the poets of the Enlightenment was neither their reverting to the language of the Bible, which was an integral part of their revolution and inevitable if they were to challenge the norms of current rabbinical Judaism, nor the fact that they wrote in an unspoken language, that of books and textual references. Authentic poetry flowed from concrete human conditions when genuinely and fully experienced; and since the Jewish condition was pervaded by booklore and intertextual cogitation, Hebrew poetry could not but be “bookish” and intertextually referential. What had been wrong with much of the “new” Hebrew poetry which had been written before Bialik was essentially its being formed without a firm core of subjectivity. This too was perhaps historically inevitable. Emerging from the collectivist civilization of the “*eda*” (the community as defined by ritual and subservient to the same set of halachic norms), the new poets could not immediately assume the burden of full individuality. They had rebelled against a way of life informed and ruthlessly regulated by objective, supra-personal directives; but they themselves were still numb as individual persons. Even their adherence to bookish poetic decorum was not that of individuals who lived with books and wallowed in textual allusions, for such individuals would endow intertextualism with the warmth and specificity of concrete and idiosyncratic experiences: Most of the nineteenth century poets merely followed the biblical models mechanically. The “new” Hebrew poetry rebelled (and could not but rebel) against the “old” tradition of liturgical verse developed since late antiquity and through the much prolonged Jewish middle ages. Its rebellion was inevitable, since this poetic tradition, emanating from an essentially supra-personal and anti-individualistic civilization, could not articulate modern sensibilities. However, the sheer act of rebelling did not create the poetic discourse through which these sensibilities would find a voice. The poetry written by the new poets lacked grit and traction not because of the humanist and universalist ideals it swore by, but because these ideals were not yet articulated through a poetic voice permeated by the timbre and inflexions of a unique subjectivity. Hebrew poetry would be reborn when a fully fledged Jewish individual finally emerged from the vapors of incoherent and still not fully integrated psychic interiority. It would

come into being together with a robust “self.” This did not mean that it would have to be “individualistic” in the sense of recoiling from or being indifferent to the collective Jewish experience. Indeed, it could not afford such indifference, since the pressures of the Jewish collective condition impacted every sensitive and fully aware Jewish individual. Such an approach would only undermine the individual’s sensibilities and awareness by shutting off the collective. Besides, an authentic “self” does not, as a rule, define itself by cutting off, or by detaching from others. It defines itself by acknowledging the boundaries which separate the individual from others, but such an acknowledgement does not entail either indifference or self-sequestering. On the contrary, it renders possible real dialogue between the self and what is outside its boundaries, between the I and the Thou. The new Hebrew poet would inevitably invest himself in the collective issues, but he would do it from the vantage point of an affirmed self.

Bialik would be exactly this kind of new poet. He would revolutionize and liberate Hebrew poetry by seeking and finding the core of his innermost self, and with great effort and tremendous investment of mental energy, delineate its boundaries and dimensions. In this he would prefigure the quintessential modern Jew emerging from the bondage of a collectivist civilization not in order to turn his back on his community of origin, but in order to conduct an I-Thou dialogue with it; a dialogue informed by tension, anger, and scathing criticism, but, in the final analysis, a dialogue which was meaningful and constructive both for the self and for the community, even in the many cases where the poet declared himself hurt, incinerated and devastated by it.

But how did this happen? How did Bialik, discovering his true self, invent a new kind of Hebrew poetry through which he engaged the community as a whole in a poetic dialogue that was meaningful as much as it was painful? The answers to these questions can be found in Bialik’s poems. Bialik wrote just over one hundred “canonical” poems, in addition to some often deeply original adaptations of folk songs. All these were written in a relatively short span. Fifteen years after the publication of “To the Bird,” Bialik’s well of poetry began to dry, and within a few years he came, as a poet, to almost a com-

plete standstill. But in those few poems and within this short span of hardly two decades he broke spiritual rocks, and his labor changed all the dimensions of Hebrew poetry and Hebrew culture in general.

2

Bialik's first and most decisive step on this road was uncovering a personal "I" and placing it at the center of his poetry. When a Hebrew poet of the time used the first person, he expressed a socially inclusive, vaguely rhetorical entity. In his early poetry, Bialik did the same; however, in his case, this flight to vagueness resulted not from sentimental imprecision but, rather, from very real difficulties with his ego. He was suspicious of his "I," feared it, and wished to push it away or at least restrain it. That "I" threatened him on the one hand with a teeming wealth of visions and imaginings: "In my heart there blossomed a luscious forest of dreams. I was lost in my smallness in the darkness of that forest..." he made the protagonist of his symbolist prose-poem "The Scroll of Fire" (1905), confess, pointing to his youth as a time of stormy inner clashes, which resulted in consternation, vagueness, and depression. All the powers of the mind and the body were then experienced as overwhelming and endangering the solidity and integrity of the poet's personality—the intellect, the imagination, the instincts, the sexual urges. The latter, repressed and crushed, were seen as particularly threatening. "In me there nest snakes" ("In Me There Nest Snakes and Adders," 1901), the poet would assert time and again, obsessively coming back to the phallic symbol of the snake, representing a part or an aspect of the psyche which was severely damaged and therefore malevolent, seething with rage. On the one hand, to give his inner world free and full expression involved the unleashing of powers over which the poet had no control. On the other hand, any expression that did not embody the individual poetical personality was an exercise in futility, meaninglessness, and deception. Consequently, Bialik was plagued with a fierce, ongoing depression, which often asserted itself in an agony of "a living death" or "death in life" ("I cannot live and cannot die," ["Night Thoughts,"

18921–895]). The repressed emotional eruption on the one hand and heavy, continuous depression on the other, were two sides of the same coin. Emotions—feelings of joy and sensual harmony—were tied in Bialik’s consciousness to some primal state of freedom and felicity, in which he basked throughout his early childhood before his father died, when he grew up almost without supervision in a small Ukrainian village (his father dealt in the timber industry, and failing in that he turned to inn keeping). This imaginary dream world of happy solitude in the lap of nature was perceived as a lost paradise, “a land full of wonders,” which was forever replaced by “life of ruins, empty and tasteless” (“Night Mysteries,” 1899).

His depression probably welled from the crushing of a young child’s instinctual freedom by harsh socialization under particularly unpropitious circumstances: the uprooting of Bialik’s family from the country to the town, the family’s financial ruin, the death of his father, the terribly hurtful abandonment by his mother, who in her dire poverty, felt she was not in a position to raise her child, and the subsequent collision with the social reality, in which a Jewish boy of the time had to live without the protection and love of his parents. Through harsh experience, Bialik learned to fear his unpredictable instinctual—or “natural”—being. Hence his depression often expressed itself as a phobic reaction to “nature.” The poet felt he needed to be protected from what he perceived as the forces of the world or nature, which were, in fact, emotional and creative forces acting within himself. He feared these forces would cut him off from reality, drown him in visions, take from him all powers of decision, and eventually drag him into the abyss. He defended himself against the riddles of nature, dreams of joy, and visions of sexual gratification, of which he was mistrustful, by denouncing himself as a person who did not “deserve” joy. And so, through constant effort to abstain from visions, to cut himself off from his internal world, and to cleave to “reality,” he sought to concentrate his attention on what was outside himself. There, outside, awaited the harried and oppressed Jewish people, who had reached a crossroads. He started as a poet by mingling his personal “I” with the collective “I” of the people, allegorizing himself as the suffering Jew, *per se*. There was

almost no other way for him at this stage to say something meaningful about himself. To reach the self he had to dissolve it into an allegorical national formula, morphing the self into a speaker for the harassed collective. When opportunities for a more direct contact with his emotions and libidinal cravings offered themselves, he recoiled from them with genuine panic.

He gave much thought to the history of Jewish suffering and searched for its meaning. This was painful, but much easier than searching for the meaning of his personal malaise. To his mind the historical continuum of Jewish religious belief had ended. The sense of sacredness which had lent meaning to Jewish suffering and endowed the people's wandering with a sense of purpose had disappeared, evaporated, leaving behind it an existence that was worse than death. As long as this sense had informed Jewish existence it had elevated sheer misery to the status of voluntary self-sacrifice; once it was gone, misery was rendered mundane, and therefore insufferable: "There is not purpose to my wandering, no sanctification of the name of God, the shadow of the Lord is gone, the spirit of holiness departed," ("A Short Letter," 1894). National life was thus denuded of content and values. Whatever spiritual props once supported its dead weight had by now been removed. Without a new support system it would collapse into itself, and the only new support system the young poet could point to was Zionism.

There was something fierce and frighteningly intense about young Bialik's Zionism. Unlike Leon Pinsker's and Theodore Herzl's Zionism, it was not triggered by anti-Semitism and fear of gentile murderous resentment, nor by the humiliation of the acculturated Jew at not being "accepted" by non-Jewish society, as was the Zionism of Max Nordau and Theodore Herzl. By the same token, despite Bialik's adoration for Achad ha'am, his Zionism did not altogether dovetail with that of the philosopher's, which was informed by an elevated concept of the national "essence" (which Achad ha'am identified with the moral legacy of the biblical prophets), and sought to remedy through a "spiritual center" in Palestine the cultural fragmentation of modern Jews due to their acculturation within different host-societies. Bialik's Zionism, by far more primary and desperate, emanated from

what the poet experienced as the sheer vacuity of Jewish national existence after the demise of faith; a vacuity to which extinction was preferable. In a poem which clearly articulated the poet's desperation, the speaker, presenting himself as the child of "the house of poverty" and the "elder of wandering," stated that death, the end of national existence, did not frighten him. Life "without hope and light" was sevenfold more cruel. Whereas Zionism was a "distant star," a mere dream that might disappear at any moment, it was the only star in a totally dark firmament, and the poet was ready to invest in it the last "spark" of the nation's vitality ("One Distant Star," 1899).

Interestingly, this Zionist statement was the end result of a protracted attempt on the part of the poet to write an autobiographical poem in which he tried to touch upon the most painful and humiliating of the formative experiences of his childhood: the sight of his father as a reluctant and miserable publican, who sold alcoholic beverages to Ukrainian peasants, turning the family's abode into a dirty tavern, "full of vomit and vulgarity." This sight, he believed, was the source of everything in him that was pained, impotent, and devastated. However, Bialik could not bring the autobiographical poem to a satisfactory conclusion. Leaving five unfinished versions, he had to morph it into a public statement by a speaker who was not the son of his actual father and mother, but rather the son of exile and poverty ("My father—bitter exile; my mother—black penury"). The allegorized self still supplied the vital insulation without which the personal self could not be even indirectly approached.

Thus Bialik's Zionism flowed from the deepest personal wound, an innermost bleeding gash, and was seen as the only, albeit desperate, remedy. It incorporated "the longing of all [his] soul, hope of [his] hopes, my moon and sun that give me light" ("A Short Letter" 1894). Its promise of contact with land and fertility raised fantasies of a reunion with a mother's bountiful breast; a contact which the poems' speaker had been robbed of as an infant: "I shall bury my face in the ground, fall to the wet sods,/ I shall ask earth, and shed copious tears in its lap:/ Tell me, mother earth, wide, full, big—/ Why wouldn't you bare your breast to me too, a miserable, thirsty being?" ("In the Field," 1894). It was the only chance the Jewish

people stood of finding their niche in the cosmos, of achieving an all but sexual reunion with nature. Young Bialik had, therefore, to become a poet of national suffering and Zionist hope, allegorizing his self as the nation. His personal self-image, low and ugly as it was, was identified with the diasporic figure of the Jew as a hunted dog. Zionist national salvation could be interpreted as also leading toward some personal salvation that would free the poet from his depression and bring him joy and mental equilibrium. Through this emotional parallel Bialik could “smuggle” into his nationalist songs some authentic personal charge, and develop for his national-allegorical persona something of a personal voice, the voice of his pain. At the same time, crucially, this parallel allowed for an escape from real grappling with personal pressures that did not bear examination, yet would not cease. The personal tone in the speaker of the poems was an escape valve through which Bialik could release a little of the steam that shook his being and threatened to blow him apart. For a few years it gave the poet stability and opened a creative avenue that brought him recognition and explained his rapid acceptance as “the national poet.” His national generalization of his own trials met the expectations of readers used to a poetry of inclusive poetic voice, and a national-collective message. At the same time, the personal tone in the poems lent them an emotional warmth that the poetry of the time saw as necessary to poetic function. Bialik met, in this fashion, all expectations. Both conservative and radical critics found that his poetry formed a complete identification between the personal “I” and the national “I,” and ascribed to this identity the lion’s share of his accomplishment.

But Bialik himself was not at all satisfied. He sensed that the persona the critics praised was far from complete and in fact cost him, as a poet, a whole world still moving within him and demanding expression. This world could not be expressed in his allegorical national poetry, which was soon accepted as the all-but-official expression of the Zionist movement. Yet these visions were the main part of his life as a person and as a poet, and a poetry that could not express them was redundant and expendable. Thus he sank deeper and deeper into depression (“How great, how great the desolation”

["Ah, How Great the Desolation" 1896]), eruptions of anger ("Why are you frowning and sad—/ there is God's vast expanse—and yet for you it's tight" ["At Close of Day" 1895]), and an ache with no relief because its cause remained obscure ("for what is pain and what's the dream / that come slowly at close of day / and draw with them the innocent heart / to the ends of space, to beyond the flood?" Ibid). Release from this dead end demanded a clear separation of his own "I" from all areas surrounding it, the creation of borders for it, the pursuit of its integrity. Only such separation could give the poet a clear sense of his own identity and, by corollary, make possible new, fertile, and creative contact with the world surrounding him, including the nation, as an entity other than and separate from the self.

3

First Bialik would have to draw a line between his self and the surrounding world of objects and sensations, to which he referred as "nature," or the cosmos. As noted, he instinctively feared that world and its power because he sensed a connection between it and the emotional and instinctual forces in his own personality. For this reason, he repeatedly described, in notable poems of the 1890s, a situation in which nature appeared as a force of temptation and seduction, trying to sweep the "I" after it to a realm in which that "I" would have no control over itself, nor even certainty that its life will not be taken from it. Folklore and romantic balladry gave these natural forces, which represented intrinsic uncontrollable psychic urges, form as forest demons, water nymphs, *Erlkoenig* and Rusalkas. In Bialik's poetry, however, this representation went far beyond folkloristic demonology. It constituted a report on psychological occurrences full of danger. In "Night Thoughts", the lyric speaker reacts to the clearing and quieting of the night after a summer storm. The storm did not frighten him at all; it was expected and routine. It is the quiet, beauty, and sensuality of the calm summer night that follows which send him hurrying to the shelter of the low and ugly self-image ("sleep of peace and quiet, sleep of healing and cure—/ are not for me, not for me, son

of garbage, worm.”), because they make real for him seductive sexual forces liable to sweep him into uncontrolled sensuality.

In “At Close of Day” the speaker explains the overpowering sight of the sunset “between clouds of fire and clouds of blood” as witness to cosmic violence. The sight imposes upon him a deep depression, a sense of the eternal separation from childhood and its innocence, and an imprisonment within a “dirty” world of discarded rinds and ugliness. His reaction to it is not unlike that of a child to a primal scene. At this moment, the wind also appears and tries to tempt the speaker to join it and fly to “a world of good all festival” in which there is no darkness and no slavery, but the speaker turns away and refuses the offer, meditating on temptation as the dream that lures you to “beyond the flood.”

This recurring situation makes clear that although Bialik clung to a natural world that he saw as permanently estranged from him as a Jew, the distance was not only a result of external forces imposed upon him. Rather, it was the main mechanism of his self-protection against pressures with which he was still not able to grapple. Hope lay in the realization of Zionist plans that would form a new link with nature, but this hope was bound up in a flight from the personal concrete “I” to a national one, which was not a real answer to the problems the poet faced.

The answer was slowly discovered when the poet isolated himself from nature deliberately. Thus he pointed out in “The Sea of Silence” (1901), one of his most beautiful short lyrics, the gap between the amorphous reality hanging over him (the night like a “sea of silence” blurts secrets, hides all the world beneath it, confuses all shapes, puts “shadow upon shadow’s back, multiplying”) and the inner life within him, which night did not influence at all. The poet concludes:

I have no world but one
the world that is within my heart.

In “Night Mysteries” (1899) initial attempts to overcome instinctive fears triggered by darkness through strained visual observation and

distanced, ironical intellectualism end in failure. Darkness swaddles the speaker's eyes, engulfs his thoughts and emotions, and leaves him only hearing and looking *inward*. Only then is it possible for him to progress towards understanding his emotional state. The poet begins to listen to the dull voices heard in the stillness of night and explains them as human voices, emitting as if from the heart of a sleeping humanity, which dreams and groans a lust for life that never meets with satisfaction. This explanation allows him to understand his own reality as that of a man whose desires and fantasies were crushed and buried under "the ruins of a life empty and pointless." For a moment "an old and wondrous dream awakes silent and melting" in his heart—a dream of joy in childhood "in some land of many wonders," and then he finally understands why he is so depressed; his human, natural desire for happiness, for a life of fulfillment, has been cruelly put down. At this point "the Lord of Night" from whom, at the beginning of the poem, he fearfully recoiled and then ironically dismissed as a figment of an idle imagination, reappears neither as a threatening, demonic power nor a conventional poetic figure representing decorative myth, but, rather, as a real and merciful God. The same awesome energy flowing in God and connecting all his parts is found also in the poet, in the form of the spirit of life and lust for life. The poet, if he does not resist the power and desire that is in himself, can be the prophet of this God, bringing his message to man. He can become the means of expression to power and desire, the explainer of the "secrets" of nature as symbols, the explainer of the secrets of the soul as well as those of "nature." This is where Bialik's "prophetism" really started: in nature, not in history; in an elemental life force, not in a transcendental Godhead.

This gauging of the "secrets" of nature and of the self did not lead directly to a separation of the two. Rather, the separation was gradually achieved, with much patient effort. Around 1900, Bialik's "nature" poetry entered a transitional phase in which scenes of orgiastic happiness resulted from the free mingling of childish, unrestrained sensualism (cf. poems such as "Splendor" [1901] and "Zephyrs" [1901]). The ecstasy, in and of itself, was still far from offering the separation or sense of selfhood vis à vis the world that the poet was in search

of—it was merely the manic flipside of his depression, for it was connected with an irretrievable childish innocence, and was felt to be lethal. Thus the ecstasy of “mingling” with the bright and caressing zephyrs (in both “Splendor” and “Zephyrs,” which sometimes—particularly in “Zephyrs”—seemed to have involved infantile masturbation, might have ended in death by mental breakdown. That was why Bialik, even as he was evoking those childish orgiastic moments in the lap of nature, was also referring to it as deadly and vacuous. He still experienced both nature and self as repressed or empty: “The stars wink and go out and people in darkness moulder” (“Stars Wink and Go Out” 1900); death is better than life, as the swaying linden trees of a nearby graveyard silently speak to the weary soul: “Come hide in our shade, rot beneath us, man alive! [—] Instead of your dying thousand times each day—/ die just the once, go out suddenly,” (“Graveyard” 1901). Not surprisingly, this phase in Bialik’s poetic development is characterized by sharp contradictions: sudden transitions from euphoria to the darkest despair, from manic to depressive moods, from breathless loquacity to the terseness of poems comprising eight or twelve short verses.

This transition phase was more or less over once Bialik published his first collection (1902), which included the poems he had written throughout the first decade of his career (1892–1901). Now started the four or five years in which his artistic power and productivity peaked. At this point he was in full control of his separate “I” vis à vis the world in which it found itself, and he was able to fully explore the relationships between the self and the external reality into which this self constantly projected itself. Bialik was finally in a position to use these projections of the self as a means of revealing the hidden layers of his soul, in metaphors drawn from the world beyond, and at the same time was able to protect the self’s autonomy. As his soul’s contents and sources became familiar to him, the projection onto nature also became more assured and intentional. The “I” of the poems was able to describe an external nature onto which clear psychological meanings were projected, but at the same time, clearly distinguish between his own emotions and forces simply in nature.

Thus, in “Songs of Winter” (written in two cycles, 1901–03),

the poems are clearly divided into sections dealing with projection onto nature, and others turning back to the source, the “I.” Here both language and structure illustrate how the poet gradually reaches a full separation between the two entities. In the first cycle he presents a crisp, icebound wintery landscape onto which a human sense of welling inner strength, about to break loose from its shackles, is projected—paralleling the heart of man, flooded by energy and a spirit of rebellion. Both parts of the poem express one continuous emotional state (that of a being chained and oppressed but already enjoying an impending freedom), but the difference between them—one a landscape description and the other a direct psychological statement—underlies the consciousness of separation between nature and man. “The heart of man” is recognized and celebrated as the only source of feeling and experience. Nature is a mere mirror. This separation becomes even clearer in the second cycle of “Songs of Winter,” where the autonomous “I” is not just compared with the landscape but is actually portrayed as superior to it through his capacity for self-reflection and even self-irony. If the wintery landscape is still identified with physical strength, freshness, and vivacity, the “I” evinces intellectual alacrity and emotional self-possession. To the emotional situation described in the first cycle, the poet now adds elements of humor and playful wit. The “I” becomes a kind of mock-epic Samson, whose heroism is intentionally bombastic and whose daring is finally no more than a stroll on a sunny winter day. Meanwhile, the winter day is depicted in images of mock-epic battle or playful parodies of the most holy biblical models: the spark of icy light takes on the role of the ram who replaces Yitschak in the story of the binding by Abraham and gets caught in the forest of frost on the window pane to wriggle, flap, and, finally, “sacrifice” himself to resolve into a drop of water. Here the poet’s self is so entrenched within its borders and so conscious of forces struggling within him (rather than between him and nature outside him) that he is capable of joking at his own and nature’s expense. In Bialik’s poetry humor always indicates that an inner conflict has been successfully negotiated and solved. It incorporates the energy taken up by the conflict that now, once the conflict has been eliminated, can be freely and playfully

released. Thus nature can be projected both as a temple from which one draws feelings of purity and refurbishes one's spiritual powers, and, at the same time, as a mere conglomeration of sun, snow and fast movement. The poetic speaker is fully aware of the fact that the significance he ascribes to nature does not really inhere in her. It is only "the world that is within my heart" which contemplates its own reflection in a bright mirror. Also, he is fully aware of the subjectivity (and hence relativity) of the inner, psychic world. What seems from within big and powerful can look from outside as small and ridiculously pompous. With subjectivity firmly ensconced and a self clearly demarcated and defined, the poet can afford to also view himself objectively and realistically.

When Bialik came in 1904 to write "The Pool," one of his longest and most complex poems, he was already in the ripest and most conclusive stage of his progressive separation of the self from the beyond. "The Pool" centers on contemplating the poet's transformation into maturity, his coming of age. It relates this transformation to a memory of divine revelation experienced by the child who penetrated to the hiding place of the wood and sat alone near a small hidden pool he found within it. This revelation induced a contemplative mood, which was the opposite of the ecstasy of nature in the poet's previous nature poems written during the transitional period, such as "Splendor." That ecstasy was orgiastic, while the revelation in "The Pool" is bound up with religious solitude and awe. The ecstasy was all sensual; the revelation is intellectual, welling from a prolonged focusing on the cognitive "riddle" (the boy sits on the lip of the pool and ponders the "question of the two worlds," the sight that is above the water and the reflection within it); the poem is laden with sacred references (the story of the Garden of Eden and stories of the revelation of the Divine Presence as the revelation to the prophet Elijah). While the ecstasy was all movement, play, companionship, the revelation was informed by total seriousness and immobility. In the earlier poems the aim of nature's revelation to the child was to seduce and contaminate, to draw him from his human surroundings and return him to his source in raw matter, that is, to dissolve him; in "The Pool" nature reveals itself to him to teach, open his eyes, to

awaken in him his consciousness and prepare him for his role as a poet. Whereas the ecstatic poems interpreted bliss in the lap of nature as tragically ephemeral, representing the innocence of childhood which can never be recaptured, "The Pool" interprets the boy's revelation as preparation for true maturity; as something he can take with him into the adult life of an artist. In order to fulfill his cultural purpose the boy-poet needs not only to bond with nature but also to part critically from it. The boy must learn to regard the physical as more than an exciting store of colorful and pleasurable images or a realm of wonders and visions, but, rather, a language, an agreed system of signs (between himself and God). Thus God instructs the boy to look and see around him not just sky, plants, trees, or sunsets, but a vast expanse of sky versus a narrow strip of blue, the wind swaying a huge cedar as well as a tiny willow, a whole horizon glowing with the burning hue of sunset and the fiery glint in an eye. In other words, the boy learns to interpret nature as a communication system which signifies through binary oppositions with common denominators. He grasps the difference between the broadness and narrowness as well as their common denominator (a strip of blue sky). He learns then to "read" the signs of nature by conceptualizing and intellectualizing it. Thus, intuitively, in "The Pool" Bialik arrived at an understanding of language and its functioning as would be formulated by the founding father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure.

The boy faces here, actually, the same riddle that Alice stood before when she entered the looking glass. Apparently, there is complete identity between the world that exists within the pool (objects reflected in it) and the world that exists outside it: the same wood, same trees, same sun, same canopy of blue of the sky. But this identity is only seeming. What exists are not two suns, two woods, two canopies of sky, two identical worlds—but a world of objects and "sights," and one of mind, signs and language, sounds and grammar; one world of experience and one of consciousness, reality and poetry, nature and the soul. Contact between the two is intense, but the difference between them is absolute. The childish soul does not recognize the difference and tends to confuse the two. This tendency is described at length in the first part of "The Pool" by means of a description of

the delusions of the Pool (which can store within it delusions, since it is nothing but a soul, the “I”). The pool in this part of the poem represents the childish consciousness.

It seems to the Pool that the world outside her is a continuation of herself or a poor substitute for what is found within her. The Pool even aspires to create or recreate the world that is outside her. In other words, the Pool represents at this stage the self that still does not know its own boundaries, or the differences between the inner world of affect and fantasy and the outer world of objects and impressions. Bialik is not interested in evoking this primitive cognitive state within himself for its own sake (as he did in other poems). Rather, he sets it, in “The Pool,” outside himself, by means of a detailed and sophisticated metaphor as well as a mild but pervasive irony. This part of the poem can be read as a psychological-philosophical comedy in four acts, arranged by hours of the day and seasons of the year. In each of them the child-like heroine, the Pool, appears in a different narcissistic mood: now she clings to the figure who stands before her (the wood) in childish coddling; now she is sure of her superiority to it; now she is frightened in a stormy night and seeks the shelter of its shade; now she returns to its side—while all around restful silence falls again—and dreams that there is no point to seek in the ends of the earth what is in any event hidden in herself.

When the Pool realizes that she is only the embodiment of an intellectual function (“all she sees, and all in her seen, and with everything changing”) she becomes a mature figure, Orphic, prophetic. It is not poetry or art, as such, that are mocked by the first part of the poem (as suggested by some interpreters) but the immature soul that thinks it “contains” all the world within it. Maturity leads to the recognition of the separate quality of the soul, its difference and uniqueness—thence comes the possibility of poetry and art; for the soul described at the start of the poem is capable of delusions, dreams, and wishful thinking, but not of understanding, observation, and creative cogitation, that is, not of poetry. It is important to notice how germane is this insight to the understanding of Bialik’s “prophecy.” The prophetic element is revealed here as much, if not more, than it is in the poet’s public utterances that are actually written in

the form of biblical prophecies and addressed at the plural “you” or “them,” i.e., at the national collective. Whereas these prophetic poems presumably brings to that collective the rumbling word of God, it is in poems such as “The Pool” that the poet tells how he learned to decipher God’s “silent language,” his “secrets” and “hints,” through a Saussureian analysis of nature as language.

By the same token, it is here that we see how the poet, at the zenith of his career, transcends romanticism and informs his poetry with the moods and intellectual insights of contemporary symbolism; for in “The Pool,” as well as in other poems written in this phase, nature is not understood any more as a welter of vital forces with which the poet, through the faculty of the imagination, can connect, and which, once he divined the unity and totality of the vital forces as the single principle that motivates and energizes the world, he can pantheistically deify. Now, the Godhead does not inhere in nature. It speaks to the poet through nature and asserts Itself in the intellectual links that make the natural objects and sensations “mean,” rather than in the objects and sensations themselves. It talks through comparisons and correspondences rather than through the incidental items that are being compared or corresponded with. As a matter of fact, “The Pool” is a major symbolist statement, and as such should be studied not only within the context of Hebrew poetry but also within that of European literary symbolism in general and its Russian extension in particular. That context would enhance the understanding of the issues of structure and continuity Bialik faced in “The Pool,” and his final separation in it from the linear-causal continuity of his earlier narrative poems. Already in these poems one could detect many instances of the poet’s growing impatience with causal linearity and its formal consequences. Now he completely disregards the chronological sequentialism demanded by causal narrative continuity. The two parts of the poem do not take place before or after each other. They represent two different phases in the evolution of the mind; but they do not occupy actual time units that relate chronologically to each other. What necessitates the appearance of the second part after the first is the logic of the argument rather than the continuity of a “story.” As much as nature itself is understood now as a system of signs,

a grammar of sorts, so does the concept of the “story” undergoes an equivalent transformation. The plot of the poem is divided into segments that relate to each other grammatically or syntactically rather than narratively. Since this was not understood, critics and interpreters were puzzled by the structure of “The Pool” and often found fault with its non-sequential progression. They questioned the unity of the poem, which is, in fact, one of Bialik’s most unified and best structured texts—only unity and structure should to be judged here by the norms of symbolist rather than romantic poetics.

4

The demarcation of the boundaries separating the poet’s self from whatever was extrinsic to it was absolutely essential if Bialik’s insights into the collective experience of the Jewish people were to transcend sentimental self pity. It was every bit as necessary for the poet to separate himself from the people as it was for him to differentiate between himself and the world of objects and sensuous phenomena. Here too, a clear cut division had to be achieved, as the condition upon which maturity depended. The upward movement of Bialik’s spiritual and artistic voyage and his ability to free both his own creativity and that of Hebrew poetry in general from the old, outdated ways, demanded the destruction of the allegorical-national “I” that had dominated the early poems. The allegorical model, which reduced the poet’s personal life to an emblem of national history, and thus paralyzed much of its inherent dynamism (rather like the mobility of the insect, lost when it is caught in a piece of amber), quickly outlived its purpose and usefulness. It slowed Bialik down and even deprived him not only of the full expression of his personal experiences but, also, of the fulfillment of his mission as a national poet. In order to fulfill that mission he had to give up the rhetoric of the “I” who contained within himself his constituency, the people, to develop a genuine rhetoric of dialogue between the individual who addressed the nation and the people addressed. It is to be understood that such separation did not estrange the individual, robbing him of

his status as a faithful member of the community. Rather it allowed him to view both himself and the community critically. The “separate” individual still knows “the soul” of the group from within and can judge it by its own standards, the blueprints of its culture. But, for better or worse, this individual also must come from the outside, as an autonomous, somewhat distanced entity. Only by doing this is he able to bring to the group an innovative message, attempt to change its culture, or at least enlarge and energize it. As much as he is imbued with the group’s ethos, he must also be informed by another perspective, an “alien” one.

But first, the poet had to find for himself some place which was far enough from that of the group; a place where he could explore his apparently diminished self; diminished because relieved of the national component, which had inflated the allegorical “I.” This separation, the true birth of the individuated self, involved, it seems, severe hardships and necessitated a prolonged “labor.” It took Bialik no less than a full decade (out of the two decades of his poetic productivity) before he ensconced himself within a “room of his own.” The decisive moment came around 1900, when he started writing his autobiographical-confessional poems. We have already seen what difficulties this new development created, and how the first attempt, the 1899 poem about witnessing as a child his father’s humiliation in his cheap tavern, had to be despaired of and given up, at least for the time being. But eventually, about a year after this failure, Bialik managed to overcome his paralysis, and in 1900–01 he wrote a sequence of autobiographical poems whose importance for the further development of his work was critical. In these poems, primarily in “My Song” and “Splendor” (the two originally formed one continuous sequence), Bialik introduced to modern Hebrew poetry the quintessential romantic genre of the “autobiographical-philosophical” poem, i.e., the poem that investigates the growth of the poet’s mind and the psychic process that culminated in his “birth” as an artist (e.g., Wordsworth’s *Prelude*). As much as romanticism posited the individual’s formative life experiences, rather than the poetic tradition (“The Muse”), the collective tribal memory, or religion, as the source of art, the artist’s life, particularly his childhood, assumed a significance it

had never had before. S.T. Coleridge opined that the poet's spiritual biography replaced the habitual topics of the great epic, with the poet's childhood assuming the role once played by the mythologies of heroic battles, the birth of a hero, or the founding of a city-state. Bialik was the Hebrew poet who endowed childhood with the aura of myth, and generations of Hebrew poets followed in his wake, celebrating ad nauseam the charms of childish innocence, the fresh and colorful image of the world in the child's eye, and particularly those formative experiences, both positive and negative, that purportedly kindled the poetic spark and stayed with the adult poet as the source of his inspiration. The quintessential Hebrew model of this kind of poem was and still is Bialik's "My Song." The long narrative poem he eventually separated into two independent poems, separating "Splendor" from "My Song." As much as "Splendor" recorded the child's ecstatic "mingling" with nature as the source of the poet's "dearest visions," the somber "My Song" recorded the child's encounters with pain, loss, poverty, hunger, humiliation, and orphanhood, and pointed to it as an equally significant source. Both poems presented a difficult process of growth through an ongoing negotiation of a middle ground between belonging and estrangement, separation and rapprochement, a space where the artist could be prepared for his mission.

First and foremost, the poems declared the poet's total independence as an individual whose very being was determined by a specific and unique biographical history as well as by a specific and idiosyncratic response on his part to that history. Bialik's "song" was his and his only, because it originated in his life and individuality and whoever wanted to "know" or understand it had to search for its autobiographical roots. This, a characteristic romantic notion, was completely new to modern Hebrew poetry, where individuality had been so often blurred into representativity and symbolic collectivity, and the matrix of biography, to the extent that it was employed, had been used for the formation of "types" (national, professional, or psychological, according to a certain universalist division of humanity into stereotypes). Not many years had elapsed since the poet Y.L. Gordon had insisted on total separation of a poet's work from his life, attesting that he had never "bothered" the readers with his pri-

vate affairs but rather had always dedicated his pen to national issues (see his poem “You Are My Witnesses”). Now Bialik, Gordon’s heir, insisted that the opposite was true: poetry, even when addressing such issues, was always personal and, in a sense, autobiographical.

Secondly, the poems also suggested that although poetry was firmly grounded in the poet’s personal life, it also involved the assembling of a delicate mental apparatus that allowed for the transformation of the raw autobiographical matter through subtle mental distancing and conceptualization. Although Bialik was not invoking a state of “tranquility” (according to the famous Wordsworthian “emotion recollected in tranquility”), he did point to a process of separation, on the part of the poet, from the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” while keeping his ties with it through impassioned recollection. We already saw how in “Splendor” the delicate balance between experience and conceptualization was not truly achieved. The poet started working on it much too late, in the very last segment of the poem. In contradistinction, “My Song,” the poem that dwelt not on childish self-sufficiency in the lap of nature, but rather on the first stages of a painful socialization under the harrowing conditions of poverty and the loss of a parent, came much closer to achieving such a balance—which perhaps explains and justifies the poet’s decision to cut the umbilical cord that tied this poem to “Splendor.” The balance here sought was of a complex nature. On the one hand, the poem’s emotional temperature was very high. The speaker’s identification with his depressed and helpless parents, as well as with his own misery as a child, is felt in every line. On the other hand, the conceptualization and distance here needed were of a higher, more philosophical order compared to those of “Splendor.”

“My Song” can be read as a poetic-sociological document that studied with great sensitivity a particular kind of poverty, that of the *déclassé*, the member of the middle class who sank to pauperism and who suffered not only from want and hunger but also from “shame” and a sense of unworthiness. The poem was also interpreted allegorically (once again!) as a self-characterization of the poet who declares himself the representative of the accumulated misery of the Jewish collective, i.e., as the poet of “galut” (exile) rather than “dalut”

(poverty). Both readings hardly furnish the necessary framework for the understanding of the poem's full import and significance. This should be seen within a theological—or rather anti-theological—frame of reference. The speaker measures the dimensions and gauges the sources of his individuality against the backdrop of the presumably steady divine order which had permeated the entire corpus of Jewish sacrosanct texts, from biblical prophecy and psalmody through texts connected with the ritual of the temple to latter-day liturgy and “*piyut*” (synagogal poetry based on and supplementing codified prayer). The entire continuum of these texts proclaimed the existence and relevance of this order. The various parts of this vast literary tradition are explored in “*My Song*” (through allusion and subtle quotation) in the context of some particularly painful scenes from the speaker's childhood. However, even as the texts are being evoked, they are exposed as vacuous and devious. God's order did not protect the speaker's father from humiliation and untimely death; it did not protect the child's temple, i.e., his home, from desecration; it did not save his widowed, penniless mother from dehumanization as a street vendor. Therefore, psalms and liturgy had to be replaced by the hollow chirping of the cricket, which hid in the crevices of the dilapidated cabin that the boy called home, and that cricket rather than the psalmist should be paid homage as the poet's poetic mentor. biblical prophecy had to be discarded and a new “prophecy,” found; the one that the boy “received” from his mother, who was the only “*Shechinah*” (divine presence) he knew. Just as Ezekiel's prophecy was transmitted to him in the form of a written scroll that he actually ate and digested, so Bialik's prophecy or “song” was transmitted through the dough that he eventually ate as his meager portion of daily bread; for as his poor mother kneaded it her tears dropped into it and the child swallowed them, experiencing some kind of communion with her. Indeed, throughout the poem we encounter various communions achieved through eating and fasting. It is through these communions that the poet manages not only to indicate his closeness, his physical oneness, with his parents and himself as a child, but also to suggest the far-reaching metamorphosis that has occurred through the symbolic actions of cooking, swallowing, eating, and digesting.

In the final scene of "My Song" the speaker suffuses himself with a substance that had originated in his mother's body; the dough he ate, which contained the mother's tears, was not only digested but also transubstantiated. It was not just the residue of tears that gave rise to the poet's "song." Rather it was the poet's capacity to transmogrify it into a metaphysical essence that allowed for the crushing experience of the boy, wide awake before dawn and listening to the rickety bench groaning under his mother's kneading hands, to be incorporated into a poem as a remembered and intellectualized moment of authentic being.

At the same time, however, in both poems, and particularly in "My Song," the poet was hard at work on issues that were not at all related to poetic traditions, theological explorations or the shift from classicism to romanticism. As we closely examine the portraits of the parents they present, we realize how desperately hard Bialik labored as he searched for some middle ground between terrible childhood traumas and deeply seated grudges, and an acceptable presentation of his parents from the vantage point of an understanding and forgiving adult. His mother, he as much as openly said, was the source of the pain which had stayed with him throughout his life. Her food poisoned him (in an earlier poem he said: "My mother, bereaved and mourning, bared to me a shriveled breast, from which I sucked the cup of poison" ["Night Thoughts"]); her groans seeped into his very bones and filled them with aches. If she was a muse of sorts, she was the muse of depression and loss, breakdown and bereavement. His father made the benediction over the scanty and tasteless fare he could put on the Sabbath table aware of his "guilt." His very posture conveyed to his son a message of impotence and worthlessness. Even the knife he used for cutting the piece of herring, which constituted the main dish and was supposed to satiate the hunger of a large family, was nicked and "flawed," a knife which if used by a ritual slaughterer would render the meat of an animal "unclean" and inedible. The parents were the source of the child's misery and humiliation. Of course, the adult poet knew how miserable they themselves had been, and successfully strove to commiserate with them. However, he also managed to articulate some of the rage the

child had developed as his life had been devastated by their helplessness and abject surrender. These were the emotions that until now had undermined his attempts at coming to terms with his real self. These humiliations and ancient rage had stood between him and total poetic frankness, and thus had stunted his poetic growth. Now that he was able to articulate them, never mind how indirectly, he could face the self which he had earlier camouflaged because acknowledging it had been unbearably painful. This self could now rear its head and afford a nakedness and straightforwardness which liberated the poet and released the overflow of his formidable talent.

Thus the autobiographical poems, particularly "My Song," paved the way to the writing of Bialik's best lyrical poetry. They were followed by a cycle of short lyrical poems—each of them a small masterpiece complete in itself—that Bialik composed in the years 1901–02: "I Shed to the Wind My Sigh," "Stars Wink and Go Out," "The Tear Drop Dropped," "The Sea of Silence" and "I Did Not Win Light in a Windfall." These superb elegiac lyrics convey an atmosphere of darkness that in some of them is actual night, and in others a night of the soul. Despite this darkness, there is also a sense of transcendence in the poems, the fruit of difficult spiritual growth. This growth subsisted in something like an internal operation, a surgical feat that hurt but saved life. The poet was able to physically split his erstwhile personal-national "I" into its two components. He now drew a clear distinction between self and his constituency. Though the self he described remained wounded, it also was free and at peace with itself. The poet could now say that his personal world was his alone, and that out of it his poetry was born. He could now relate to the poetry in terms of property, which enabled him to indicate how private and "his" it was. No, he did not win light out of sheer chance, or inherit it from his father, or the paternal tradition (religion); nor did he borrow it from others. It was his own; achieved through the hardest of physical-mental labor, that of the hewer who wields his sledgehammer in the quarry of his heart, breaking the hard rocks of his frozen interiority

One spark in the rock of my heart is hidden,

a small spark—but all mine,
I didn't borrow it or steal it from anyone,
it's of me and my own.

(“I Did Not Win Light in a Windfall”)

One should pay attention to the legal-monetary terms the poet uses, “winning,” “inheriting,” “stealing,” “borrowing,” “owning.” This metaphorical “monetarization” of the soul is necessary for the purposes of declaring ownership and fair division of an otherwise undivided and indivisible metaphysical entity. Thus, the poet's spark can also fulfill a public mission. From his heart it is struck through his eyes to his verse, and by means of the verse it is passed on to the constituency, who read, and thus it might kindle a fire in the hearts of others. But that new fire, while being kindled by that of the poet, was also different from it, a separate fire for which the poet refused to assume responsibility. It was fed by his lifeblood (“and I with my fat and blood / will pay the burning”), and it also, in a certain sense, had “swallowed” the poet's original spark and obliterated it. Bialik felt that poetry burnt and consumed him, or dried the wellsprings of his soul (“I Shed to the Wind My Sigh,” “The Tear Drop Dropped”), but he also knew now that his “I,” wounded and reduced though it was, achieved independence. If he succeeded in wringing from it another tear, he said, he would have to split it into two parts and thus keep half a tear for himself while sharing the other half with his readers: “one half yours / one half my heart's own”; for the heart of the poet and the heart of his readers (the people) were not one; and just as “there is one sun above and one song in a heart / and no second coming,” so there was no replacement for the unique personal “I,” and it was forbidden to blur that identity and let it sink and get lost in the greater good. He who did that would only find one day that he “sought your penny / and lost my dinar” (“Dusk,” 1907).

5

We come to identify another element, perhaps the most pressing,