

Preface

I have titled this study a critical introduction to indicate the two goals it aims to accomplish. It is an introduction out of simple necessity. The very existence of a substantial corpus of Hebrew writing in America, not to mention poetry in particular, is a fact that is largely unknown to American Jews, to Israeli readers, and to students of American studies and American Jewish literature generally. And if the existence of the phenomenon is known to specialists in Hebrew literature in America and Israel, in its particulars, it is known only to a tiny handful. (The reasons for this cultural forgetting are considered in due course.) Hence the need for an introduction. This volume therefore attempts to set the scene for the emergence of the Hebraist movement in America, to explore the inner world of the Hebraist and the motives for the persistence of Hebraist production in an alien environment, to provide profiles of the careers of the major American Hebrew poets, and to offer individual accounts of the key poems that deal with American history and society. (The reasons why the study is limited to American Hebrew poetry rather than fiction and drama is discussed in Chapter One.)

At the same time, this is a *critical* introduction. Even if I had not intended it to be such, there is no way to prize apart description and evaluation. I have therefore undertaken the critical task with as much responsibility and self-awareness as possible. I have not hesitated to identify what I regard as the strongest works in the body of American Hebrew poetry and to offer arguments for those judgments. In presenting an essayistic account of the careers of each of the twelve poets discussed in this study, I have given an interpretation of the *shape* of

the career in artistic terms together with an assessment of its successes and failures. And although the critical discourse of the study largely hovers at the range of general interpretative description, there is also frequent use of close reading. The profile of each poet concludes with a close reading of a lyric poem to give the reader a concrete experience of the poet's work. Both within the profiles themselves and in separate thematic chapters, I offer critical readings of several important texts.

Despite the many poems presented and translated, this volume is not an anthology of American Hebrew poetry. Several projects in the works hopefully will perform that function for both English and Hebrew readers. This volume is also not a literary history. By literary history I mean an exercise in historical poetics that would trace the development from early to late of literary language, genres, and poetic strategies in relation to changing thematic engagements. I very much hope that the reader will find many insights on these subjects delivered along the way, but I have not found it feasible to attempt a full-scale literary history. The reason for this is straightforward. When I first embarked on the study of American Hebrew poetry, with the exception of the path-breaking essays of Abraham Epstein, I could not find much help in getting my bearings in what turned out to be a surprisingly vast body of material.¹ There was no easy way to survey the landscape and see the forest for the trees. My only recourse was to start with one poet, read everything he wrote and that was written about him, and then go on to the next. The plan of this book, to some degree, recapitulates this journey.

My encounter with each new poet was beset with vicissitudes. Many of the American poets wrote in a formidable Hebrew style that was elevated and difficult. In the absence of translations and any real critical literature, both signs of the long neglect of the subject, I found it challenging simply to read through the material and block out a general mapping of the poet's oeuvre. It was akin, to press the metaphor, to cutting a path through a virgin forest. At first acquaintance, if truth be told, I often found the poet's verse daunting and uninviting. With persistence, however, the veil of difficulty would lift and the poetry would become differentiated and approachable. Afforded free movement within the poetry, finally, I could locate the individual poems

that spoke to me and immerse myself in them. And thus, in stages and over time and somewhat unexpectedly, I would, almost without exception, fall in love with the poet I was working on at the time. I would stay with him long enough—the duration of this fidelity was not inconsiderable—to be able to sketch his profile and place him in context. Then it was time to move on to the next of my twelve figures. Thus, through a sustained sequence of serial monogamy, I moved toward the completion of the project. These successive episodes of acquaintance and rapture and separation afforded many insights about the larger picture of American Hebrew poetry, but the process has left me sufficiently challenged by the prospect of presenting what I have learned so far, and hence the status of this volume as a critical introduction. An integrative literary history, along with more specialist studies, hopefully will be undertaken at a future point and probably by hands other than mine.

This study describes the work of twelve American Hebrew poets with substantial bodies of published verse. That number might already seem surprising to those who were formerly unaware that there existed *any* American Hebrew poets. But there are indeed many more figures than the twelve, and the inclusions and exclusions therefore require some explanation. There are a number of published poets whose work, while deserving of attention, did not have sufficiently influential careers to warrant a place in a study that is structured around key figures; these include Baruch Katznelson, Eliezer D. Freidland, and M. Sh. Ben-Meir.² I have excluded, for example, a number of poets—among them Reuven Avinoam-Grossman, Noah Stern, Reuven Ben-Yosef, and T. Carmi—who were either born or raised in the United States but who emigrated to Israel and pursued their literary careers there. By affiliation, Avinoam-Grossman (1905–1974), who was born in Chicago and moved to Palestine in 1928, was most closely associated with his colleagues in America; he was active in translating American literature, and he participated in the collective project of translating Shakespeare into Hebrew undertaken by the American Hebrew poets.³ But because his career unfolded in Palestine, he has not been included. (The subject of the reception of English and American literature into the Hebrew literary system in Palestine/Israel, in which American

Hebrew poets played an important role, is an important but separate area of inquiry.)

It will certainly not go unnoticed that there are no women among the twelve poets studied here. This reflects the general state of affairs in the public culture of American Hebrew literature, especially the editorships of journals and miscellanies and the publication of collections of verse. This is not to say that women were not involved in the Hebraist activity in America, especially in Jewish education, and there are poems by women scattered among the Hebrew journals.⁴ The pivotal role of female Hebraist educators is just beginning to receive the attention it deserves.⁵ This is a subject that undoubtedly deserves further investigation. Late in the work on this book, I was excited to learn of the existence of Claire (Haya) Levy, who published a poetry collection titled *Kissufim* [Longings] in 1941, which was, so far as I know, the first publication of its kind by a woman in America. The Chicago-based poet Chana Kleiman published a slim volume of verse in 1947 titled *Netafim* [Droplets], which is in the process of being reissued in a bilingual edition. She is joined by Chana (Annabelle) Fermelant, who published two volumes: *Iyyim bodedim* [Solitary islands] (1960) and *Pirhei zehut* [Flowers of identity] (1961).⁶ I expect that when the Hebrew periodicals of the time are combed through, we shall find a number of women who wrote poetry and published individual poems but did not bring out a book of verse. It will be intriguing to piece together the story of women's participation in American Hebrew literature.

Very late in this study I came across the unusual and impressive poetry of Avraham Zvi Halevi (1907–1966), who published gritty and splenetic poems about New York City that are unlike anything else in the corpus of American Hebrew poetry. Although I could not manage to make him a separate focus of study—the slight amount of his production would make it hard to call him major—I was able to give attention to his fascinating verse at the end of Part Three in the context of a discussion of the problematic theme of urban life.

Finally, there is the question of period. This study plots the career of Hebrew poetry as it rose and fell with the fortunes of the modern Hebraist movement in America, with its inception in the years just

before World War I, its heyday during the interwar years, and its decline—with a youthful moment of revival—in the postwar years. The death of Gabriel Preil in 1993 serves as a symbolic point of closure. But just because this coherent period comes to an end does not mean that Hebrew verse was not written in America after the early 1990s. There is the improbable but delightful case of Robert Whitehill, who was born to an assimilated Jewish family and raised in Lubbock, Texas. Whitehill, who now publishes under the name Shmuel Whitehill-Bashan, taught himself Hebrew and eventually mastered the craft of Hebrew poetry and published several volumes of verse in Israel.⁷ Then there is the case of George (Chaviv) Gorin (1909–1988), a graduate of the Hebrew Gymnasium of Bialystok, who came to America in 1939 and practiced as an ophthalmologist on the Upper West Side of Manhattan; in the four years before his death he wrote six books of Hebrew verse, which were published in Israel.⁸ The religious community may have other Hebrew writers who are not generally known in the literary community. Zvi Meir Steinmetz (1915–2005), who wrote under the name Zvi Yair, published a number of books of religious verse. His three-volume collected poems appeared in 1997.⁹ Steinmetz was born in Budapest and, after surviving the war hidden in an insane asylum, arrived in the United States in 1952. He was close to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who encouraged him to continue writing verse. Another category includes Israelis who are living in America, like Maya Arad, a professor at Stanford University who has published verse novels in Hebrew. Within this category are the established critic-poets Rina Lee and Lev Hakak. Sadly, not much of significant literary creativity in Hebrew has been written by the numerous Israelis who have immigrated to North America or who have lived here for extended periods.

In sum, there is no end to the story, and the rumored demise of Hebrew poetry in North America—the so-called disappearance of the last of the Mohicans—continues to be undermined by interesting exceptions and outliers. Although I have endeavored to introduce the major figures in the major period, by no means do I wish to present American Hebrew poetry as a closed canon. Nothing would please me more than to see this canon destabilized and reopened.

The plan of this study is comprised of three parts. Part One begins with a historical introduction in Chapter One to the larger Hebraist movement as a context for the study of the poetry. This introduction discusses the relationship between fiction and poetry, the phases in the development of Hebrew belles lettres, the negative assessment of American Hebrew literature on the part of the critical establishment in Palestine/Israel, and the stylistic identity of American Hebrew poetry and its major themes and genres. The introduction is followed by a chapter, titled “The Apotheosis of Hebrew,” which focuses on the great anthem to the Hebrew language published by Abraham Regelson in 1945. That formidable poem is used as a touchstone to speculate about the inner experience of American Hebraists and the intimate and religious nature of their bond with the language. Regelson’s anthem serves as a gateway to the inner world of Hebraism and illuminates the motives behind and beneath the poetic production that is the subject of this study.

The core of the book, Part Two, contains twelve chapters—one for each of the twelve poets. It is in these essays that the volume attempts to discharge its introductory responsibility. Each essay places its subject within the larger context of Hebrew literature and the American Hebraist scene, with some gesture in the direction of biography, and foregrounds the unique features of the poet’s work. In most cases, I try to outline the shape of the poet’s career as a whole; in the cases of the several poets who moved to Israel, I have emphasized the American phases of their lives. I spend considerable time discussing individual works that represent the poet’s best efforts and much less time on works that do not seem now to have enduring value. The essays vary in length; some essays about important poets such as Silkiner, Efros, and Lisitzky are shorter than the essays about Silberschlag and Halkin because I discuss some of their major book-length poems elsewhere in Part Three. As mentioned above, each essay concludes with—standing as a separate unit—a textual analysis of a single lyric poem. (The reason for the emphasis on the lyric is discussed in the Introduction.) It is my hope that these brief, close readings provide the reader with the kind of tactile experience of the poetry that cannot be provided

by the necessarily generalizing discourse of the essays as a whole. All translations in this volume, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

Part Three (“American Vistas”) reflects closer attention to a limited number of poems, most of them of book length, that address American history and the American landscape. These include three epics about Native Americans (by Silkiner, Efros, and Lisitzky), long poems about rural New England and upstate New York in the nineteenth century (Bavli and Preil), a narrative saga about the California Gold Rush (Efros), a collection of poems based on African American folksongs and sermons (Lisitzky), and poetic sequences on New York City (Halevi). In these important works, American Hebrew poets were responding, in their own way and on their own terms and certainly at their own speed, to the demand voiced by the Hebrew literary center in Palestine early in the twentieth century that the Americans deliver *amerika’iyyut*, American local color. The response to this demand, if they were responses at all, came decades later in sophisticated and varied ways. The works discussed in this part constitute much of the American canon of American Hebrew poetry.

The present volume, as I have described above, is a hybrid enterprise: a critical introduction to American Hebrew poetry. It undertakes both to supply the basic information of an overview, as well as to offer critical interpretations of individual poems and whole literary careers. Given these mixed purposes, I expect that there will be several different kinds of readers who will find the book useful and therefore different ways in which the book will be used. Although I will be gratified if students of Hebrew literature read the book cover to cover, I fully realize that others might find a modular itinerary more useful. After absorbing the introductory materials of Part One, such a reader might dip selectively into the individual portraits in Part Two before examining the colorful Americana of Part Three.

There are, to be sure, other equally fascinating thematic preoccupations in American Hebrew poetry that deserve exploration. There are major responses to the Holocaust, for example, in the work of several of the poets. At a time when the ideological background of the Yishuv (the organized Zionist settlement in Palestine) introduces conflict and

ambivalence into the literary responses to the murder of European Jewry, American Hebrew writers were able to address the subject more directly. The relationship to Zion and to Palestine/Israel on the part of the Americans is another absorbing topic. Although they staked their lives on being Hebrew writers, their location in America did not make it easy for them to be acknowledged and play a role in the life of Hebrew at its center; moreover, the establishment of the state of Israel accelerated their marginalization. Also, the preservation of the dignity of the Hebrew language as spoken by Israelis did not always fulfill hopes. This was a complex and fraught relationship. Both subjects, the Holocaust and Israel, which I have not dealt with in this volume, will well repay attention in the future.