A Poet in Search of His Voice: Nathan Alterman before "The Seventh Column"

by *Arie M. Dubnov*

Nathan Alterman, *Ha-Tur Ha-Shvi'i* (The Seventh Column), ed. Dwora Gilula, 6 vols. (Bene Beraḳ: ha-Ḳibuts ha-me'uḥad, 2010-2017), pp. 2646.

Nathan Alterman, *Sa'ar U-Ferets: Prozah U-Maamarim, 1931-1940* (Essays and Articles, 1931-1940), eds. Uri S. Cohen and Giddon Ticotsky (Bene Beraḳ: ha-Ḳibuts ha-me'uḥad, 2019), pp. 384.

Avraham Shlonsky, *Lo Tirzah: Yalkut Katan Shel Shirim Neged Hamilchma* (Thou Shalt Not Kill: A Small Collection of Anti-War Songs), with an introduction in Hebrew by Hagit Halperin (Jerusalem: Blima, 2022), pp. 84.

Every year, after I invite students taking my survey of Israeli cultural history to choose and analyze a Hebrew poem, I find myself grading, on average, two or three papers discussing Nathan Alterman's "The Silver Platter." Inspired by a speech by Chaim Weizmann, who stated that the Jewish state "will not be given to the Jewish people on a silver platter," Alterman's poem picked up the famous literary trope of the living dead and described a young girl and a boy rising from the dead dressed in battle gear, telling the nation in tears with a soft voice: "We/Are the silver platter/ On which the Jewish state/ Was presented today."[1] The poem was first published in the labor Zionist daily *Davar* in December 1947, a few weeks after the beginning of the hostilities known today as the 1948 War. It has been often cited ever since and turned into a staple text always recited at commemoration ceremonies during Israeli Memorial Day, regularly reproduced by Jewish Agency emissaries, and turned into a pennant.

[1] Nathan A. [Alterman], "Magash Hakesef" (The Silver Platter), *Davar*, December 19, 1947, 2 (All translations from Hebrew in this article are by the author). On the poem's reception and instant canonization, see Dan Laor, *Ha-Maavak `Al Ha-Zikaron: Masot `Al Sifrut, Hevrah Ve-Tarbut* (The Struggle for Memory: Essays on Literature, Society and Culture) (Tel Aviv: `Am `Oved, 2009), 110-141.

My students are not alone in conceiving Alterman as the poet laureate of the Israeli nation-in-arms. For almost a quarter of a century since its appearance (1943-1967), readers of Alterman's weekly poetry column, "The Seventh Column" ("hatur hashvi'ee"), encountered a unique poetic persona, writing in rhymes and combining the role of the prophet, the public moralist, and the political commentator. Later disciples and admirers like Moshe Shamir, who recruited him for the Greater Land of Israel Movement, described Alterman as a poet who was simultaneously a prophet and a political leader.[2] Alterman's uncompromising obedience to the tenets of labor Zionist ideology and his unflagging admiration of David Ben-Gurion and Israel's armed forces can explain in part why he is still recited today outside literary circles. Back in the 1980s, Dan Miron, the influential Israeli literary critic, went as far as to argue that, from the 1940s on, Alterman was "not only a full member of party-line literature, but, one might argue, its clearest symbol."[3]

Puzzling as it may appear, a factor no less significant in Alterman's canonization was his willingness to criticize Israeli politicians and the cases in which he used his column and his privileged status to stand up for what is morally right and even, as in the case of the poem "'Al Zot" (On This) of November 1948, shed light on war crimes and condemn them.[4] It was perhaps this duality that played in his favor

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[2] Moshe Shamir, *Nathan Alterman: Ha-Meshorer Ke-Manhig* (The Poet as a Leader) (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1988).

[3] Dan Miron, *Im Lo Tihyeh Yerushalayim: masot 'al ha-sifrut ha-'Ivrit be-heḳsher tarbuti-poliṭi* (If There Is No Jerusalem: Essays on Hebrew Writing in a Cultural-Political Context) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987), 54. Miron's provocative statements yielded a controversy. For alternative readings, see Dan Laor, *Hashofar Ve-Hakherve: Masot 'Al Natan Alterman* (The Shofar and the Sword: Essays on Nathan Alterman) (Tel Aviv: hakibbutz hameuhad, 1983); Zivah Shamir, *'al 'et Ṿe-'al Atar: Po'eṭiḳah U-Poliṭiḳah Bi-Yetsirat Alterman* (Sites and Situations: Poetics & Politics in Alterman's Work) (Tel Aviv: hakibbutz hame'uhad, 1999).

[4] Nathan A. [Alterman], "Al Zot (On This)," *Davar*, November 19, 1948, 2. Notably, the poet did not disclose what specific battle or massacre his poem was referring to. Due to the date of its publication and the reference to a "[military] jeep crossing [the streets of] a conquered city" in the opening stanza, most critics assumed the poem was referring to the brutal conquest of Lydia. However, it is not unlikely that it was written in response to the al-Dawayima massacre, which took place a couple of weeks earlier (October 29, 1948), especially given the hint in the third stanza of "fiercer battles." The use of such imprecise coordinates should be taken into consideration. Nonetheless, the poem condemned the usage of euphemistic language, using the word "murder" instead of "delicate situation," and concluded with an explicit demand not to whitewash but to prosecute the soldiers involved. Following its publication and an exchange of letters between

posthumously. Alterman has had such a long-lasting impact on Israeli culture that even the late retired Colonel and military historian Meir Pa'il and, more recently, the retired Major General Menachem Finkelstein, the former Chief Military Advocate, included lengthy analyses of Alterman's poems in their writings. The latter went as far as authoring an extensive essay recommending reading Alterman's poetry, perhaps as a substitute to a long line of philosophers who developed *jus ad bellum* theories, to guide Israeli officers and jurists about just war and the "purity of arms" (*tohar haneshek*).[5]

Shortly after the poet's death in 1970, the literary editor Menachem Dorman established the Alterman Institute, which oversees his estate, and began publishing the poet's writings, including the *Seventh Column*. During the 2010s, Dwora Gilula, a classicist by training, took upon herself the daunting task of preparing a revised, annotated edition, correcting errors and omissions, and rearranging the columns in their chronological order (rather than by themes, as Dorman's edition did). Notably, on top of the 700 columns, Gilula's new edition also includes "Rega'im" (Moments), a series of nearly 300 similarly rhyming

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Alterman and Ben-Gurion, the poem was reportedly reproduced and distributed among IDF soldiers. For discussion, see Yitzchak Laor, *Anu Kotvim Otakh Moledet: Masot `Al Sifrut Yisreelit* (Narratives with No Natives: Essays on Israeli Literature) (Tel Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-meuhad, 1995), 122-124; Haggai Rogani, *Mul Ha-Kefar She-Harav: Ha-Shirah Ha-`Ivrit Veha-Sikhsukh Ha-Yehudi-`Arvi 1929-1967* (Facing the Ruined Village: Hebrew Poetry and Jewish Arab Conflict 1929-1967) (Haifa: Pardes, 2006), 105-145; Hannan Hever's introduction to the anthology *Al Tagidu Be-Gat: Ha-Nakba Ha-Falastinit Ba-Shirah Ha-Ivrit, 1948-1958* (Tell It Not in Gath: The Palestinian Nakba in Hebrew Poetry), ed. Hannan Hever (Haifa: Pardes, 2009), 9-55.

[5] Menachem Finkelstein, "'The Seventh Column' and the 'Purity of Arms': Nathan Alterman on Security, Morality and Law", *IDF Law Review* 20, no. 1 (2009), 1-229 [in Hebrew]. Finkelstein's extended essay was republished as a book in 2011. In applying such a term, Finkelstein continues a long labor Zionist discursive tradition, extending all the way back to the debates surrounding the doctrine of "restraint" (*havlaga*) during the events of 1936-39, which was examined ad nauseam in Israeli historiography and shall not be repeated here. For a succinct summary, see Meir Pa'il. "Moral System in the Act of Fighting," in *Tohar Haneshek: Siach Mefakdim, Mishpatanim U'mechanchim* (Purity of Arms: A Dialogue between Commanders, Jurists and Educators), eds. Meir Pai'l and Yehuda Wallach (Ramat Efal: Yad Tabenkin and the Israeli Society for Military History, 1991), 9-15. As the literary scholar Yael Dekel has persuasively shown, the categorical rejection of this euphemistic language helped authors affiliated with the so-called Canaanite movement, writing in the magazine *Aleph* (1948-1953), to crystalize their own idiosyncratic artistic language. See Yael Dekel, "A Report on Culture's Losses and Victories: The Canaanite Literary Criticism of Hebrew War Fiction," *Mikan, Journal for Hebrew and Israeli Literature and Culture Studies* 20 (2020): 333-354 [in Hebrew].

sketches and columns Alterman published infrequently from late 1934 to January 1943 in the newspaper *Haaretz*, which were missing from previous editions. The result—a monumental six-volume book—is a remarkable scholarly achievement that provides yet another indication of Alterman's eminence in contemporary Israeli culture.

A happy consequence of digging deep into the poet's literary *Nachlass* is that it provides readers with an opportunity to revisit the poet-in-the-making while he is still searching for his own poetic voice and persona. If the "mature" Alterman of the *Seventh Column* was "double voicing"—expressing the hegemonic discourse while criticizing it at the same time—Alterman's writings from the late 1920s and 1930s disclose a set of two seemingly different contradictory trends: on the one hand, as a poet, he was drawn to symbolist, universal, and autonomous poetics, purposely bereft of direct references to concrete or contemporaneous events, while on the other hand, his newspaper articles and essays are imbued with profound historical and political awareness, a strong tendency to social engagement, and a decisive commitment to interwar pacifist ideas.

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What did Alterman's youthful commitment to pacifism emerge from? Though it would be difficult to pinpoint a single source of influence, there is no doubt that Avraham Shlonsky's work in general, and his 1932 anti-war treatise *Lo Tirzah* (Thou Shalt Not Kill) in particular, played a major role in shaping the young poet. A decade older than Alterman, Shlonsky positioned himself since the mid-1920s as a proponent of modernist and symbolist poetry. He did not hesitate to launch a campaign against the cliché and the didactic, haughty, and biblically infused rhetoric of his predecessors. His poems portrayed the poet as a prophet or as a lunatic and a stranger misunderstood by his audience, living outside society and against it, in a manner akin to the French *poète maudit* (accursed poet) tradition. His artistic stance led him not only to a dispute with Berl Katznelson—the labor Zionist ideologue and editor of *Davar* scorned outdated bourgeois notions of "professional writers" distinguished from ordinary dilettante comrades—but also enraged H. N. Bialik, leading the Hebrew Writers' Association to withdraw its

sponsorship of *Ketuvim*, the influential literary magazine Shlonsky co-edited.[6] In 1933, when Shlonsky resigned from *Ketuvim* (due to yet another dispute) to found the magazine *Turim* (Columns), the young Alterman, alongside Leah Goldberg, accompanied him.

Lo Tirzah, which has recently been republished after being almost entirely forgotten, belongs to that period. A hybrid text, fusing the political pamphlet with an artistic manifesto, the treatise reflects Shlonsky's uncompromising commitment to pacifism and, by the same token, his admiration of European antiwar poetry. For him, like so many poets of his generation, World War I represented a kind of madness and, no less significantly, the treason of Europe's men of letters. The colossal conflict revealed the culpability of the romantic-poetic mind and how easily it collapsed and turned to pro-Patria hymns producing machines feeding the fodder. He explicitly referenced Julien Benda's *La trahison des clercs* (1927), the famous French critique of intellectual corruption and surrender to authority, and stated that the war created a stark division between "the murdered poet and the murderous poet" (p. 32). The list of culprits he compiled included poets such as Richard Dehmel, Edmund Rostand, and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who were contrasted with writers such as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Max Brod, Stefan Zweig, Georges Duhamel, and Franz Werfel. Critically, unlike advocates of art for art's sake, Shlonsky expected authors to engage in politics and use their craft to prevent future bloodshed and warn of future wars and onslaughts. Shlonsky concluded his treatise with a condemnation of the "lead soldiers of extremist nationalism" in Hebrew poetry, Uri Zvi Greenberg and Yaakov Cohen, "who sanctify the symbols of heroism and trill the outward forms of hollow militarism" (p. 47), alongside an unflinching critique of the corrupting power that militarized language had on labor Zionism:

> For we perceive military terminology not only among the *Sitra Deyamina* (right-wing camp) but even in a camp that follows the light of the religion of labor and dreams of beauty in an honest and serious communal life. Note: Battalion, Conquest, Front, etc.—these words, borrowed from the

[6] Hagit Halperin, *Ha-Ma'esṭro: Ḥayay Ṿi-Yetsirato Shel Avraham Shlonsḳi* (Maestro: The Life and Works of Avraham Shlonsky) (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat po'alim, 2011), 332-356; Anita Shapira, *Berl: Biyografyah* (Berl Katznelson: Biography) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1980), 259-260.

> military lexica, supplement newspaper articles, conversations, and poems whose entire essence, all their content, is utter enmity to this military barracks spirit (p. 48).[7]

Following his own advice, Shlonsky concluded his treatise with a warning

> After all, many thought that among us, more than any other nation, such madness and perversion would be impossible—not only because we are, so to speak, the "chosen people" (which nation is not chosen and just in its own eyes?), but mainly because we are a people learned in torment. Many thought so—and were deceived. All indications are that according to the law of reaction, once he arrives in his homeland, the Jew can miss all this deceptive shine [...]. We are now a "parvenu," a beggar who has turned rich, adorned with precious stones that the "masters" rejected from generation to generation (p. 53).[8]

As Hagit Halperin explains in her introduction to the reissued treatise, Shlonsky published the text four times between 1929 and 1933, each time slightly differently (the first publication, on 1 August 1929, was merely three weeks before the outbreak of the 1929 riots in Palestine). Its republication—as an elegant pocket-sized booklet—nearly a century after its original publication tells us much about the deep frustration felt by the Israeli intelligentsia today. Yet, in the context of our present discussion, it also reminds us of the prevailing cultural atmosphere to which Alterman was exposed. Like his mentor Shlonsky, who spent a short but influential year in Paris (1924), Alterman also traveled to study in France (1929-1931; he spent the first year at the Sorbonne followed by two years at an agricultural college near Nancy); like Shlonsky, he was enamored of the anti-war poetry; and

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[7] The term "Sitra Deyamina" is one of Shlonsky's linguistic renewals. Derived from the Aramaic expression "Sitra Achra" (lit. "the other side") used in Kabbalistic writing as a general name for all the forces of impurity and satanic evil, the phrase "religion of labor" is a direct reference to the writings of A. D. Gordon, one of the sages of socialist Zionism. The passage criticizes terms such as "battalion of labor" (*gdud ha'avoda*), "conquest of labor" (*kibush ha'avoda*), and "work front" (*hazit ha'avoda*) popularized by the members of the Second and Third Aliya.

[8] The term "parvenu" appears in the Hebrew original. The final sentence paraphrases Psalms 118:22: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone."

both suffered from a similar bipolarity that was most probably an inevitable consequence of the attempt to forge a subversive bohemian-modernist poetic persona while simultaneously remaining within the labor Zionist camp, loyal to the party.

Young Alterman's commitment to anti-war rhetoric lapsed over the years, and it was pushed to the margins of the scholarship dedicated to him. Regrettably, Alterman's translation of R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End*, a highly popular 1928 anti-war play, is nowhere to be found in the archives and is thus considered lost.[9] A significant relic that survived is his 1934 poem "Do not give them arms," written after he learned from reading a newspaper about the death of a veteran French soldier who was injured during a German gas attack during World War I. The composer Stefan Wolpe, who fled Germany following Hitler's rise to power, helped turn the poem into a popular anti-war anthem by adding a tune, sung many times in later years in kibbutzim choirs and performed by Israeli singers such as Yehoram Gaon and David Broza. In an ironic twist of Israeli history, during the 1990s, the settler movement opposing the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestinian Authority appropriated the poem's title and turned it into a catchy slogan that was printed on posters and bumper stickers opposing the Yitzhak Rabin government's decision to allow the establishment of a Palestinian police force. What an odd comeback into the public agora.

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Sa'ar U-Ferets (*Sturm und Drang*), a superb assemblage of Alterman's short newspaper articles and sketches from the 1930s, provides yet another significant sequel to the Alterman of the *Seventh Column*. We meet an Alterman who is not yet the sermonic court lyricist but a novice poet who fumbles and probes for his distinctive aesthetic stance and voice, still under the strong influence of Shlonsky;

[9] The English play premiered in London in December 1928, starring the young Laurence Olivier. The Hebrew play, based on Alterman's translation, was first staged in October 1934 by the New Theatre, cast with recently arrived German-Jewish actors. For discussion, see Tom Lewy, *Ha-Yekim Veha-Teatron Ha-`Ivri: Be-Maavak Ben Ma`Arav Le-Mizrah Eropah* (The German Jews and the Hebrew Theatre: A Clash between Western and Eastern Europe) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2016), 228-236; Dan Laor, *Alterman: Biyografyah* (Alterman: A Biography) (Tel Aviv: `Am `oved, 2013), 154-155.

a *feuilletonesque* Alterman, who relied on caustic humor and irony when writing about theater, cinema, his impressions from a visit to a museum, or his strolls in the streets of Tel Aviv or Haifa. We encounter an Alterman who writes very little about "world events" and newspaper headlines. An Alterman passionate about art and deeply suspicious of grand political elocutions, scouring to find an intimate, fresh way of looking at the world, not crushed by the weight of the big words and the noise of lofty rhetoric. Take, for instance, his proclamation of October 1938, originally published in *Turim* (Columns), Shlonsky's literary journal:

> There are words with which it is uncomfortable to be alone, in solitude, even for a short while. When you stand face to face with them, with no background noise, with no witness, the silence begins to weigh on you like a foreign garment. You know such words. They are prosperous, their strides are broad, and their voice is abundant and very generous. They scatter gold in mass assemblies. They bravely risk their souls in speeches and debates. They are the spirit of anthems. They were, and certainly will forever remain, the great patrons of the wars and the barricades. There is no limit to their inheritance in wealth and youth. But when they suddenly come to you, fatigued from generosity and heroism, battered by the many hugs and handshakes, standing solitary in the doorway—it seems to you that they have been diminished to a loaf of bread (p. 273).

Echoes of Alterman's short but formative French period can still be heard in many of the early articles in this collection. Equally estranged from the Jews of France and the boastful display of France's overseas possessions at the International Colonial Exhibition in Paris, he ponders the connection between displacement (*'akira*) and infertility (*'akrut*) and the special position of the Jewish student in relation to his environment and toward his own kin. Alterman returns to Palestine, a consciously parochial Eretz-Israelian *flâneur*, forging a new persona: a stroller walking leisurely through the streets of Tel Aviv, the city he adores. Anthropomorphism is a recurrent, favorable technique he employs. When looking at the city map, he sees

> Nahalat Binyamin Street went out on his way, reckless and dandy. The Rothschilds' blood is flowing in his arteries. [...] The municipal police tower took a large watch out of his waistcoat pocket and forgot to put it back in out of boredom [...]. Allenby Street was getting ready to swim and put his head in the water, but his legs got tangled up in the net of the commercial center, and he could not move (p. 57).

One cannot ignore Alterman's male gaze; the personifications repeatedly compared the urban setting to an exotic, seductive woman. "The Jaffa-Tel Aviv Road is foreign and different from all its sibling streets. Solemn and heavy, she rises and passes next to them without a chuckle or a nod. Originating from Jaffa, she is a beautiful and brave *giyoret* [convert to Judaism] who is afraid to encounter hidden disdain under the guise of courtesy, passing as a Ruth, silent and gathered within herself" (p. 71). The rural landscape is eroticized as well. Similes compare Haifa Bay to a maternal sea pulling out from its sand-yellow shirt a blue-veined nipple to breastfeed Haifa-baby who would not let go (p. 121), in close proximity to Mt Carmel, "An old sultan, shrouded in hookah fumes" (pp. 107-108). Haifa eventually turns out to be also a woman-child, "who was constantly hiding behind her Carmel-dad's back, like a shy and dopey child, but suddenly leaped up and began limping in a hurry toward the car on all fours, with her crooked arms and legs," who transformed into a no less seductive Zuleikha, Potiphar's wife (pp. 106-107). *Ōdī et amō*: Like in his love poetry, Alterman's love-hate relationship with Palestine's Jewish cities, and Tel Aviv in particular, is equally saturated with hints of violent jealousy and aggressive reactions toward the object of his desire:

> Tel Aviv is beautiful at twilight. She adds charm every evening, day by day. She beautifies herself as a city lady who opens her purse, directs a tiny mirror in front of her, while tilting her head slightly, coloring her lips, puffing clouds of powder on her cheeks, touching her hair flutteringly [...] I so love her and hate her as much, and I always want her to be, to grow up to be precisely as she is: frivolous and sincere; secular in her life and sacred in her mystery; bold-faced and deep-eyed (pp. 96-97).

These urban sketches, "postcards" and snapshots from wandering in the country, do not seek to describe as much as to invite readers to a kind of aesthetic re-enactment, to re-experience. Poetry, Alterman declared in 1933, "does not describe life [...] but lives it once more, in a primal, virgin, and inner form, full of wonder and surprise" (p. 186). True writing is a campaign against descriptive art and the overused symbol. Can one's commitment to labor Zionist ideology coexist with these categorical demands? In an article titled "Postcards from the Jordan Valley" (December 1933), laden with endearing descriptions of the Sea of Galilee and the northern valleys, Alterman ends up apologizing: "I forgive myself for those few lines that pretended to 'describe' the evening in the Jordan Valley. The surroundings of the Kinneret have been a kind of symbol of earthly beauty to us, and I am now like a man who disgorges from his heart a compliment for a woman who has a thousand lovers" (p. 191). Such snippets read as practice drawings preparing him towards immortal lines such as "Even an ancient vision has its moment of birth" (״גַּם לְמַרְאֶה נוֹשָׁן יֵשׁ רֶגַע שֶׁל הֻלֶּדֶת״) that would appear five years later in *Stars Outside* (*Kokhavim ba-hutz*, 1938), Alterman's debut and most influential book of poetry.

Correspondingly, Alterman does not hide his distaste for modern technologies of "capturing images," whether cinema or photography. Devoid of that mysterious primacy, they make landscapes banal and spectators passive. The cinema is "a dream factory that supplies its products wholesale, prevails over its viewers, showing everyone one dream, close and unattainable" (p. 195), and the cinema house is "a rambunctious bully, multicolored and noisy" (p. 263), while the theater is an intimate art that pays attention to details, movement, the gentle interplay of light and shadow and is, in short, "soul food" (p. 43). These remarks are not surprising, given that Alterman wrote for the theater during the same years. His marriage to the actress Rachel Marcus in 1935 further solidified his connection to this art form. Most of his original work for the theater, apart from translations of European plays such as *Journey's End*, consisted of light musicals and cabaret-style satire sketches (many of which ridiculed, fondly more than scornfully, the accents and eccentric behavior of the *Yekkes*).

His comments about photography, shorthanded as "Kodak," are fascinating: in a brief yet poignant sketch titled "We were photographed (inferiority complex)" from November 1933, he describes the influx of new immigrants from Germany

sweeping the streets of Tel Aviv, focusing on two *Yekke* girls whom he saw taking a photograph of him, and declares mockingly: "The photo machine swallowed us alive while we were still provincials. While we were 'Natives,' before we fulfilled the European Development Plan" (p. 179). Such observations should not interest literary scholars alone, for they provide a window into the fascinating cultural tensions of the period: as the historian Rebekka Grossmann showed, a new visual vocabulary was introduced to Mandate Palestine predominantly by German-Jewish photographers, photojournalists, and filmmakers (such as Helmar Lerski, Tim Gidal, Yaakov Rosner, Lu Landauer, and Shmuel Josef Schweig), who immigrated to Palestine from Weimar Germany. Their conscious attempt to forge their own understandings of belonging to the new country was at once also part of a larger story of "Weimar abroad."[10] Associating the camera with the German emigres, he turns both into symbols of an imported, alien, central-European over-sophistication and urban refinement. The "German gaze," accompanied by a discourse of modernization and development, runs counter to the poet's desire to experience the sublime, to surrender to a landscape in its wonderful primacy. Moreover, in an endless chain of Orientalization, including self-Orientalization, it demotes Alterman to the role of "the Native:"

> I returned home full of resentment and wrote a song in honor of the foreign photographer:
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> Please, Frau, listen –
> The matter is quite simple
> You photographed me this morning
> In a Kodak machine.
>
> What is the reason? Is this indeed the case?
> Am I really exotic?...
> Quite you, hush...
> No, I'm not *Asiat*! (p. 179)

[10] Rebekka Grossmann, "Image Transfer and Visual Friction: Staging Palestine in the National Socialist Spectacle," *The Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 64, no. 1 (2019): 19-45; Id., "Negotiating Presences: Palestine and the Weimar German Gaze," *Jewish Social Studies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 137-172.

Dark clouds of war cast a shadow over the last articles in the collection, especially from October 1938 on. Reviewing the minutes of the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, UNESCO's precursor, he somberly concludes that "the world of the educated and the knowledgeable is void of reality and real force," and as an inevitable consequence, naked power rises to dominance (p. 282). They mark an end of an era: not too long ago, "it was hard to believe that it would be possible to control the masses, not for a week or a month, but for years upon years, with slogans of incitement and intoxication" (p. 297), but in the present age the poet loses his ability to stimulate empathy, to mobilize:

> The words will tell in pain, in anger, about the torture of a refugee, about the torture of tens of thousands of refugees, about a synagogue on fire, about seventy synagogues on fire, about masses who have become blind and transformed into a predatory machine [...] But everything remains mute. These days, their powers, their motives, their souls do not speak in our language (p. 296).

This pessimism provides the backdrop against which his famous debate with Leah Goldberg erupted after the latter rejected Alterman's categorical demand that, with the outbreak of yet another war in Europe, all poets should mobilize for the struggle and stop writing love songs.[11] The metamorphosis was complete: it was no longer the Alterman of "Do not give them arms" (1934), a chant for pacifism hurled at warmongers, no longer the Alterman distancing himself with disgust from grandiose political elocutions. Alterman sheds the attire of the cosmopolitan poet and shrinks himself, in the language of the book's editor, Giddon Ticotsky, to Jewish and Palestine-centric dimensions in his writing. The editing is as meticulous and conducted with as loving a hand as anything done by Ticotsky, who in recent years has curated an impressive series of collections of forgotten personal letters and popular writings in newspapers by Hebrew writers and poets. The book is supplemented with a scholarly and accessible afterword by Uri S.

[11] A debate examined in detail in Hannan Hever, *Suddenly, the Sight of War: Violence and Nationalism in Hebrew Poetry in the 1940s*, trans. Lisa Katz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

Cohen, which provides the dramatic literary context for the articles collected in the book. This is a literary delight as well as a remarkable contribution to Israel's intellectual history, which still awaits the historian to write it.

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