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POETRY



Edited by
Polina Tambakaki

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Contents

Notes on Contributors VII

Introduction: Modern World Poetry and the Graeco-Roman Reception

Themes and Approaches 1

Polina Tambakaki

1 On Modern Arabic Poetry and the Graeco-Roman
Classical Tradition 47

Terri L. DeYoung

2 “Deeply Chiseled in a Calligraphic Style”
*Graeco-Roman Appropriations and Modernist Historical Sense in
Yang Mu’s Poetry* 83

Michelle Yeh

3 Black Poetry and the Classics
A Primer to the Power of Language 113

Patrice Rankine

4 “A Group of Ardent Hellenists”
The Imagists, Greek Meter, and Making It New 141

Elizabeth Vandiver

5 The Exalting Alliance
Presocratic Poetics in Twentieth-Century France 174

Alison James

6 “der Aquädukte Herkunft”
Rilke and the Uses of Antiquity 207

Charlie Louth

7 George Seferis Reads John Keats
*Defending “Greek Hellenism” and the Question of the Renaissance,
Language and Locality* 240

Polina Tambakaki

- 8 Belated Return
*The Encounter of Modern Hebrew Poetry with the Graeco-Roman
 Classics* 297
Giddon Ticotsky
- 9 Italy's Long-Standing Classical Vocation
Lyric Poetry in the Twentieth Century 332
Nicola Gardini
- 10 Reimagining Catullan Poetics in Modern(ist) Japan
Nishiwaki's Ambarvalia and "Translatory" Acts 364
Akira V. Yatsunami
- 11 Andalusia and Antiquity
Classical Culture in the Poetry of Federico García Lorca 395
Federico Bonaddio
- Afterword 426
A. E. Stallings
- Index 429

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Belated Return

The Encounter of Modern Hebrew Poetry with the Graeco-Roman Classics

Giddon Ticotsky

Hebraism and Hellenism – between these two points of influence
moves our world.

MATTHEW ARNOLD¹



The ties that bind the Graeco-Roman and Hebrew cultures together are strong and convoluted, from as early as their beginnings in ancient times. This chapter deals with the encounter of modern Hebrew poetry with the Graeco-Roman classical tradition, situating it in the polarized relations between the two cultures, as well as in their close and symbiotic interactions. Complex historical residues played a role in the relatively belated reception of Graeco-Roman elements in modern Hebrew literature. And while they contributed to the shaping of Hebrew literature as part of modern European culture, these elements were not integrated deeply into it. It was only after the Second World War that a window of opportunity for a common cross-cultural destiny opened up, when Hebrew writers saw the shared platform of the two cultures as a bulwark against fascism. At the same time, the belatedness in the reception of

1 Arnold (1993), 110 (from *Culture and Anarchy* (1869)). I began writing this chapter at Stanford University and completed it at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I would like to thank the Institutes that have supported me during that period: Taube Center for Jewish Studies at Stanford, Israel Institute in Washington DC, and the Mandel Scholion – Interdisciplinary Research Center in the Humanities and Jewish Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. I also extend my deep gratitude to Polina Tambakaki who has inspired me to venture on this research journey – she has shown exceptional kindness and patience throughout. Ami Asher translated my text with great talent. My discussions about the chapter with Haim Be'er, Aminadav Dykman and Israel J. Yuval helped me considerably in formulating it. Yaacov Shavit's *Athens in Jerusalem: Classical Antiquity and Hellenism in the Making of the Modern Secular Jew* (1997) was also extremely helpful in acquainting me with the contacts between the cultures.

elements of the Graeco-Roman classical tradition in Hebrew poetry prevented them from being “eroded,” as it were, by the Biblical corpus (the main point of reference of Hebrew literature) – by becoming, for example, objects of irony or parody.

1 Graeco-Roman and Hebrew Cultures: Residues of the Past

In the course of its bicentennial history – it is customary to mark its beginning at the middle or end of the eighteenth century – modern Hebrew literature had to catch up with political, sociocultural, and artistic developments that had taken place much more gradually in Europe. It had to “chew up and swallow,” as it were, rapidly and at times simultaneously, Classicism and Neo-Classicism, Sentimentalism, Romanticism, Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, and many other artistic movements without having the time to taste or digest them. It is as if the clock of modern Hebrew literature is as twisted and melting as in the famous painting “The Persistence of Memory” by Salvador Dalí.

The twisted clock of Hebrew literature shows that its European time is relatively young. But, at the same time, it always shows another time: Jewish and ancient Israelite time. In this parallel temporality, modern Hebrew literature is a belated scion of ancient Hebrew literature, starting with the Bible more than two thousand years ago. The relation between the two literatures is more than symbolic – it is organic. Almost any contemporary work of Hebrew literature echoes ancient texts, consciously or unconsciously: for one thing, the rate of ancient Hebrew words in contemporary texts is 80%.² Moreover, throughout generations, Jewish culture has been characterized by exceptional inter- and intra-textual sensitivities, to the point where it is almost impossible to avoid alluding to its ancient origins.

Thus, tracing the reception of Greek and Roman cultures in modern Hebrew literature requires a dual perspective – both synchronic and diachronic, both modern and archaic. In other words, against the background of contemporary representations of these cultures in Hebrew literature, one must at all times be conscious of the history of their complex relations with ancient Jewish culture. Deep in the contemporary clock of Hebrew culture ticks its ancient clock.

2 Nir (2007), 249. In 1911 the Hebrew author and intellectual Micha Josef Berdyczewski [מיכאל ברוך ברדיצ'בסקי] (1865–1921) wrote about this duality: on the one hand, the Hebrew writer “wants to unshackle the burden of generations, while on the other he ties the next knot; he himself is but another link in the chain he aims to break [...] This poetry is *the poetry of the tear in the heart*” (Berdyczewski ((1952), 174) italics in the original). All translations are by Ami Asher, unless otherwise noted.

Ancient Jewish culture was in constant and fundamental conflict with both Greek and Roman cultures.³ This was not only an intense national and territorial conflict, but also a religious-identity one that has determined, to a great degree, the self-perception of the Jewish people across generations: a life-or-death struggle between the first monotheistic religion and rival polytheistic religions. The conflict began when Alexander the Great occupied the Levant in 332 BCE (the siege and capture of Tyre, in Phoenicia, now Lebanon) and Hellenic culture began to dominate the region. It remained dominant, in fact, even during the short period of Jewish sovereignty (the last one before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948), from about 140 BCE until the Roman invasion in 63 BCE. The Islamic occupation of Palestine in the mid-seventh century CE marked the end of the period when the Jews were dominated by the Roman (and later Byzantine) civilization, which in 313 CE (the Edict of Milan) became Christian.⁴

But even when Jewish culture was no longer politically subordinate to the Graeco-Roman civilization, the latter continued to be regarded as its typological enemy. Starting from the first centuries CE, in Jewish discourse, Rome and its culture were identified with Edom, a people described as the bitter enemy of the Children of Israel, particularly in Biblical times. “As soon as Edom became synonymous with Rome,” writes Israeli historian Israel Jacob Yuval, “all prophecies of future revenge were shifted in one fell swoop from Edom to Rome, along with the expectation of its fall and ruin at the End of Days.”⁵ Greek has also remained engraved in Jewish cultural memory in negative terms. To this day, Hebrew speakers often use the term “Hellenizers” [מתייזנים] to refer not strictly to Jews who have been acculturated to Hellenic civilization (as in its original sense), but as a byword for traitors – those who have given up their Jewish identity and denied their origins out of convenience.

Next to this pessimistic narrative, one may find an optimistic one that seeks to stress the ongoing dialogue between the rival cultures. Hundreds of Greek words have been adopted in Hebrew, to the point that even native speakers fail to notice their foreign origin; well over three thousand Greek and Latin loanwords have been documented in rabbinic literature.⁶ Moreover, the autonomous leadership institutes of Jews in the Hellenistic Empire evolved

3 Another culture that had religious and territorial conflict, but only with one of the two cultures (the Roman one), is Islamic-Arab culture, if we count the Byzantine Empire as the direct continuation of Rome.

4 The Edict of Milan made Christianity legal. The Edict of Thessalonica (380 CE) made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire.

5 Yuval (2006), 10.

6 Levine (1998), 7. See also: Rosén (1979); Shoal-Dudai (2019).

according to the Greek bureaucratic model and borrowed their names from it. A prominent example is the chief halachic council called Sanhedrin [סנהדרין], from the Greek word for council *synedrion* (συνέδριον). Today, the Knesset – Israel's parliament – owes much to these structural arrangements. And the Greek frame of mind may have had a significant impact on the very roots of Jewish religious law (Halacha [הלכה]). Israeli historian Daniel R. Schwartz writes:

The Greek tendency to refer to visible things (deeds as well as objects) as representative of invisible things that are more primary and essential forms the basis of two highly important tendencies in the history of Jewish culture, as it developed out of its contacts with Hellenism: classification and universalism. [...] The willingness to produce universal categories, which for the Jews (as for the Greeks and Romans) is fundamental to the ability to create both philosophical and legal literature [...], leads directly to universalism also with reference to human beings.⁷

Schwartz's argument leads to two fundamental conclusions. First, Judaism – as religion, ethnicity and culture – has always moved between two poles: on the one hand, withdrawal and isolation, and, on the other, openness to the world; in each period, this tension takes a different shape and transforms Judaism.⁸ The second conclusion, deriving from the same pendulum movement, is that one must question the homogeneity of Jewish thought, and rather assume that throughout its history it accumulated alien sediments – just as Christian theology is not homogeneous and has received multiple external influences throughout generations, whether consciously or unconsciously. This is a methodological note that should remain in the background of any discussion of the relations between Judaism and Hellenism, or between modern Hebrew literature and the Graeco-Roman classics: none of these corpuses is monolithic or static; in fact, they are fundamentally heterogeneous and dynamic.⁹ Moreover, our very ideas regarding ancient civilizations – Jewish, Greek-Hellenistic, Roman, and others – have been irrevocably rewritten since the rise of modernity,

7 Schwartz (2007), 194.

8 Nachman Syrkin (1868–1924), one of the leading intellectuals of socialist Zionism, argued that Jewish culture was open to external influences when it was strong, and withdrew away from them in times of weakness and crisis (Syrkin (1938)).

9 To illustrate the heterogeneity of Greek culture, we can invoke the differences between the Athenian civilization at its apex in the fifth century BCE and the civilization created in the East following Alexander the Great's conquests about a century later; or the cultural, legal, and moral differences between the Greek city-states themselves, for example, between Athens and Sparta.

secularism (with its scientific research), and nationalism in Europe. To a great extent, our conceptions of the three ancient cultures that are the subject of this chapter have been reborn since that time, the eighteenth century, in view of those historical transformations.

It is worth mentioning here the years-long preoccupation with the question of the origin of cultures – perhaps “origins” would be more appropriate. In ancient times, this discussion had a religious, mostly polemical nature, with one of the two ancient cultures, Jewish or Greek, usually vying for the coveted status of originality.¹⁰ To mention only one example: an ancient Jewish legend tells that after conquering Jerusalem, Alexander entrusted King Solomon’s library to his teacher, the philosopher Aristotle, who then proceeded to copy and translate the texts under his own name (!).¹¹ This is one of several folktales that Israeli historian Yaacov Shavit calls “the theft of wisdom.”¹² Apparently, the more explicitly separatist they present Judaism to be, the more open to, and sharing with, other cultures they silently admit it to be.

In later periods, the preoccupation with cultural origins was translated into an attempt to find out whether the Bible was influenced by Greek literature, or vice versa. In the seventeenth century, for example, the Dutch scholar Hugo Grotius argued that Greek poetry was influenced, among other things, by the Song of Solomon.¹³ About a century later, in 1777, Johann Theophilus Lessing (1732–1808) followed suit by publishing *Eclogae regis Salomonis*. Conversely, one of the first modern Jewish historians, Zvi Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), tried

-
- 10 This is reminiscent of the Christian supersessionism or replacement theology designed to explain how the Christians, or Israel of the Spirit, inherited the Jews, or Israel of the Flesh. This idea already appears in the New Testament, but it is St. Justin Martyr who imposed on this substitution the categorical distinction between flesh and spirit. He thereby laid the groundwork for that theology, which lies at the heart of Christianity’s self-definition vis-à-vis Judaism. See Pelikan (1971), vol. 1; Ruether (1974), chapter 3; Simon (1986) [1948]; Ticotsky (2018).
- 11 This legend is told by the fourteenth-century Rabbi Meir Ben Isaac Aldabi [מאיר אבן אלדבי] (c.1310–c. 1360), in his *Paths of Faith* [שבילי אמונה]. One of the greatest Jewish poets of the Hebrew Golden Age of Spain, Rabbi Judah Halevi [יהודה הלוי] (1075–1141) also argued that Greek wisdom originated in the Children of Israel. See Shavit (1997), 424 and 427–9; Shavit 2006.
- 12 Shavit (1997), 66–78. Here, Shavit borrowed an expression coined by Norman Roth, “Theft of Philosophy by the Greeks from the Jews” (ibid., 68; see Roth (1978)). A modern expression of the same motif may be found in *Socrates’ Secret* [סודו של סוקרטס] (1955), a novel by the Hebrew writer Avigdor Hame’iri [אביגדור המאירי] (1890–1970). See also Bar Kochva (2008).
- 13 That period also saw the publication of a book by the English scholar Zachary Bogan (1625–1659), who sought to map all parallels between the Homeric corpus and the Old and New Testaments. See Bogan (1658).

to refute their claims and prove the opposite: that the Biblical author of the Song of Songs borrowed ideas and phrases from the idylls of the Greek poet of the third century BCE Theocritus.¹⁴

This academic debate was telling: in a certain sense, it replaced the inter-religious polemics on the question of the “original” and therefore “correct” religion (and consequently, culture), that raged at first between Jews and Greeks, and later among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It was no coincidence that the polemic battleground was the Song of Songs, as it was precisely then, in 1778, that Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) published his translation and interpretation of the Song of Solomon, igniting a hermeneutic revolution by seeking to read the Biblical text literally, rather than allegorically, as a universal (albeit “Oriental”), secular love song rather than as a religious text.¹⁵ In the background of these developments were the academization and secularization of theological discourse as represented by the rise of scientific philology; the rise of modern nationalism, concurrently with the rise of Romanticism; and the legal and cultural emancipation of the German Jewry, which spawned – among many other remarkable achievements – the new discipline called *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Judaic Studies): analytic and objective research of Jewish history by modern Jews, which laid the groundwork for Jewish studies as we know them today.

2 The Turn-of-the-Century Drama of Renewed Cultural Encounter and Shaul Tchernichovsky’s “Before the Statue of Apollo”

The second half of the nineteenth century represents a formative and particularly vibrant period in the relations between the Jews and the European nations among which they lived. Starting with the French Revolution, the emancipation of the Jews stimulated modernization processes at the expense of a weakening traditional community, growing secularization and integration

14 See Graetz (1871), 68–9, where one may also find details about important studies that preceded Graetz’s. For more on this polemic, see Kaminka (1930), 12–20. Also worthy of mention is the French scholar Victor Bérard’s study of the *Odyssey* (1931), which argues, among other things, that the Homeric Epic is rooted in ancient Hebrew sources. Of modern approaches, that represented by Cyrus Herzl Gordon (1908–2001) must be mentioned (albeit problematic in its own right), according to which both the Bible and ancient Greek literature share a common source – the ancient civilizations of the East, including the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, among others; see Gordon (1965), 218–77.

15 Pardes (2013), 30–5.

in the general population, and the growth of an intelligentsia and liberal bourgeoisie with strong assimilationist tendencies.

For many European scholars the Jews' "return to history" and the development of a modern European self-awareness constituted fertile ground for the scientific, or rather pseudo-scientific, obsession with race theories and with the examination of the purported contribution of each of the ancient civilizations to the legacy of European culture – supposedly from an objective point of view but actually under the influence of the *Zeitgeist* that also gave birth to modern anti-Semitism. One of these scholars, the French historian and philosopher Ernest Renan (1823–1892), opens his voluminous *History of the People of Israel* [Histoire du peuple d'Israël] with these words:

For a philosophic mind, that is to say for one engrossed in the origin of things, there are not more than three histories of real interest in the past of humanity: Greek history, the history of Israel, and Roman history. These three histories combined constitute what may be called the history of civilisation, civilisation being the result of the alternate collaboration of Greece, Judea, and Rome.¹⁶

As much as it sought to remove the barrier between the competing cultures and emphasize their commonalities, this statement was motivated by Renan's tendency to blur the relation between the ancient Israelites and modern-day Jews.¹⁷

As opposed to this (purportedly) inclusive tendency, the poet Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) and the intellectual Moses Hess (1812–1875), one of the fathers of European socialism and one of the precursors of Zionism (he was called the "communist rabbi"), expressed an approach Shavit calls a "pattern of antinomy." Shavit explains about Heine, who, like Hess, was born to Jewish parents in the Rhineland:

Heine found in Hebraism and Hellenism two faces of Western civilization, two universal categories: the ascetic spiritualism of the Jews in contrast to the glorification of life and the sensuality of the Hellenes. [...] on the one hand Heine became in the following years a symbol embodying the conception of the idealistic, unequivocal dualism endorsed by so many after him, on the other he personified the inner struggle and the spiritual and cultural qualms of a broader public, its perception that

¹⁶ Renan (1888), vii.

¹⁷ Shavit (1997), 55.

Hellenism and Judaism interacted, contended, and became reconciled, creating a perpetual tension and constant dynamic even when one overpowered the other.¹⁸

One generation after Heine, Hess also contrasted the two cultures in his book *Rome and Jerusalem: The Last Nationality Question* [Rom und Jerusalem, die letzte Nationalitätenfrage] (1862). But whereas for Heine the pattern of antinomy was designed to crack the code of Western civilization and mark himself, the German Jew, as part and parcel thereof, Hess applied the same pattern to achieve a different end: charting a political horizon for the Jews beyond Europe through the renewal of their sovereignty in the Promised Land.

European Jews used various terms to refer to the acculturation they experienced in those years, including the phrase “the beauty of Japheth in the Tents of Shem” [יְפִיתוֹ שֵׁם יַפֶּת בְּאוֹהֵלֵי שֵׁם].¹⁹ This phrase is common in the literature of the Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* [השכלה], which began in the late eighteenth century, that is, roughly, fifty to one hundred years after the onset of the European Enlightenment. The phrase is derived from the Biblical verse “May God enlarge Japheth and let him dwell in the tents of Shem” [יַפֶּת אֶלְהִים יִבְרַח וְיֵשֶׁב בְּאוֹהֵלֵי שֵׁם] (Gen. 9:27)²⁰ – part of Noah’s blessing upon his two sons, Japheth and Shem, who did not see his nakedness when he became drunk. Given the typological identification of Shem as the father of the Israelites and Japheth as the father of the Europeans and Westerners, the phrase “the beauty of Japheth in the tents of Shem” alluded to the borrowing of European cultural elements, then considered universal, by the Jewish world. As much as it highlighted the gap between the two cultures, the phrase also indicated their ancient kinship relation, and conveyed a positive and optimistic message. Conversely, the expression “an alien grapevine in the vineyard of Israel” [זמורה זרה בכרם ישראל] conveyed a negative message, alerting to the danger lurking in the introduction of foreign and even destructive elements into Jewish culture. Both expressions reflect the sentiments of both fascination and fear that characterized the Jews’ contact with European civilization, as yet another manifestation of the aforementioned tension between separationist and universalist trends in Jewish religion and culture.

This brings us to one of the foundational moments of modern Hebrew literature, in 1899, when Shaul Tchernichovsky [שאול טשרניחובסקי] (1875–1943)

18 Shavit (1997) 41, 44–5.

19 In the original Hebrew verse, “Beauty” [יְפִיתוֹ] may also denote enlarging one’s territory and borders expansion.

20 All Biblical translations herein are from the English Standard Version (ESV).

composed the poem “Before the Statue of Apollo” [לְנוֹכַח פֶּסֶל אַפּוֹלוֹן], which was to attain iconic status in modern Hebrew culture. Together with Hayim Nahman Bialik [חיים נחמן ביאליק] (1873–1934), who was also born in the Russian Empire in the 1870s, Tchernichovsky is considered a founding father of modern Hebrew poetry, not least thanks to this poem. Born in 1875 in the Crimea, he immigrated to Palestine in 1931 and died in Tel Aviv in 1943. In terms of his *Weltanschauung*, however, he may be considered kin to the Romantic generation of the turn of the nineteenth century, next to Byron, Goethe, Hölderlin, and Schiller.²¹ The poem “Before the Statue of Apollo” was written when Tchernichovsky was a medical student at Heidelberg, and it was soon to be regarded as a poem that heralded a new chapter in the history of the relations between modern Hebrew and Western cultures.

This programmatic poem was highly audacious in its time and was even interpreted by Tchernichovsky’s contemporaries as heretical. The speaker’s fascination with the statue is very foreign to the spirit of traditional Judaism, which to this day follows the Second Commandment that prohibits the making of graven images.²² In the Bible, a statue is the likeness of a deity designed for idolatry, categorically opposed to the worship of the single God. Accordingly, the Jewish prohibition against worshipping a statue, which is tantamount to idolatry, is interpreted as mandating martyrdom, if it is necessary to avoid its violation (as in the story of the Woman with Seven Sons).²³ Note that the Hebrew word for “statue” (pesel [פֶּסֶל]) sounds like the adjective “invalid, improper” (pasul [פָּסוּל]), but it is not clear whether the two words are etymologically related.

21 Bronovsky (2006), 101. This is in keeping with the twisted, melting mechanism of the clock of modern Hebrew literature discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

22 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them” (Ex. 20: 3–4).

23 According to this story, during the Hellenistic Greek occupation of Palestine, the men of King Antiochus IV Epiphanes captured a Jewish woman and her seven sons and demanded that they worship an idol and eat pork. One after the other the sons refused and were viciously executed in front of their mother. To her youngest, she said: “My son, go to your father Abraham and tell him: Thus said my mother. Feel not proud of yourself and say that I built an altar and placed my son, Isaac, upon it, for my mother built seven altars and put seven sons upon them in one day. For you it was a trial, for me it was reality” (Midrash Eichah Rabbah, parshata 50). She then committed suicide. This story is therefore a feminine and much more terrible version of the Binding of Isaac story. Note that the woman and her seven sons were recognized as martyrs by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

As much as Tchernichovsky appears to break a taboo by admiring the statue, he is equally careful not to cross the threshold:

בְּאֵתִי עֲדִידָה, אֵל נִשְׁכַּח מֵעוֹלָם,
 [...]

 בְּאֵתִי עֲדִידָה, – הֲאִם הִכְרַתְנִי?
 הֲנִנִי הִיְהוּדִי: רִיב לָנוּ לְעוֹלָמִים! ...
 [...]

 עֵינֶיךָ הֲרוֹאֶה בִּי! יַעַן הִרְחַקְתִּי
 לְכַת מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר הָיוּ לִפְנֵי
 וְאַחֲרַי בְּנִתִּיב יַתַּע אָדָם בְּן תְּמוֹתָהּ, –
 הֲנִנִי הֲרֵאשׁוֹן לְשָׁבִים אֵלֶיךָ,
 [...]

 זָקֵן הָעַם – אֵלֶהִיו זָקֵנוּ עִמּוֹ!
 [...]

 וְאָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ.
 בְּאֵתִי עֲדִידָה. מוֹל פְּסֻלָּךְ אֶקְדָּה.
 פְּסֻלָּךְ – סִמָּל הַמְּאֹר בְּחַיִּים;
 אֶקְדֶּה, אֶכְרַעָה לְטוֹב וּלְנַעֲלָה,
 לְאֲשֶׁר הוּא נִשְׂא בְּמִלּוֹא כָּל הָעוֹלָם,
 לְאֲשֶׁר הוּא נִהְדָּר בְּמִלּוֹא כָּל הַבְּרִיאָה,
 לְאֲשֶׁר יֵשׁ מְרוֹמָם בְּסוּד־סוּדוֹת הַיְצִירָה.
 אֶכְרַע לְחַיִּים, לְגִבּוֹרָה וְלִיִּפִי,
 אֶכְרַע לְכָל שְׂכִיזוֹת הַחֲמֻדָּה, שֶׁשֶּׁדְּדוּ
 פְּגָרֵי אֲנָשִׁים וְרִקְבֵי זָרַע אָדָם,
 מוֹרְדֵי הַחַיִּים מִיַּד צוּרֵי שְׂדֵי,
 אֵל אֱלֹהֵי מִדְּבָרוֹת הַפְּלִי,
 אֵל אֱלֹהֵי כּוֹבְשֵׁי כְּנַעַן בְּסוּפָהּ, –
 וַיֵּאסְרוּהוּ בְּרַצְעוֹת שֶׁל תְּפִלִּיז...]

[I come before thee, O long forgotten God,
 [...]

 I come before thee – Dost thou recognize me?
 Here I am – a Jew. Our quarrel is of old!
 [...]

 Thine eye sees me and is astonished.
 Yes, I have come further than all before me,
 And after me on the road wanders man so mortal.
 Behold, I am the first of those who return unto thee
 [...]

My nation is grown old and its God old with it,
 [...]

 So I come to thee.

 I come to thee and before thy statue I bow my head.

 Thy statue – it's a symbol of the light in life.

 I bow my head, I kneel to the good and sublime,

 To everything exalted in the world so full.

 To all things glorious in the universe so rich,

 To the sublimest mysteries of creation,

 I bend the knee to life, strength, and beauty.

 I bend the knee to all those treasures of delight

 Which lifeless men, the seed corrupt of man,

 The repressors of life, stole from the hand of my Rock, the Almighty,

 The Lord God of the wonderous deserts,

 The Lord God of those who conquered Canaan by storm –

 But they bound him up in the straps of Tefillin.]²⁴

The speaker does not kneel in front of the statue but only bows to it. He kneels down – not to the statue itself, but to the properties it represents. Even the obvious criticism of rabbinical Judaism for binding “The Lord God of those who conquered Canaan by storm” in *tefillin* [תפילין] straps – condemning the conceptualization of Judaism as a single continuum, from the Bible to the present – is not an attack on the essence of Judaism. In fact, the speaker presents himself as a kind of Jewish representative of his generation: precisely because of his Jewishness, he, perhaps more than his Christian European contemporaries, is “the first of those who return unto thee,” the first to remember a “long forgotten God.” This means that the fracture between Hebraism and Hellenism is to become the bridge between them: it is the Jew, whose Canaanite past has been forgotten, who will remind the world of the Hellenic past long gone (perhaps due to the rise of Christianity), and vice versa: the Hellenic past will remind the Jew of his indigenous, Canaanite past.

What we have here, therefore, is a new level of interpreting the concept of “the beauty of Japheth in the tents of Shem,” which expands it immeasurably:

²⁴ Translated by Bernard Braham (Tchernichovsky 1964 [1899]). Canaan is the ancient name of the Land of Israel, prior to its occupation by the Children of Israel. The *tefillin* (phylacteries) are a set of Jewish ceremonial objects made of parchment and leather straps. A devout Jew “lays the *tefillin*” (ties himself with the leather straps attached to the parchment) every morning. These two signifiers therefore allude to completely different periods in Jewish history: Canaan refers to an ancient period before the Israelites became a nation and the *tefillin* to a custom adopted much later, in the rabbinical period.

for the modern Jew, Western civilization is no longer a decoration or a seasoning but a panacea. In this sense, Tchernichovsky's thought is rooted in the ideal of the Renaissance men and of the Romantics, who viewed the revival of classical culture as a two-way street: reconstructing the past that is essential for promoting modernity and the resurgence of nationalism (Renan wrote about the "cultural renaissance" as a political lever for crystallizing a national consciousness).²⁵

The speaker is both young and old. He has "come further than all before" him and is a member of an "old" nation, but he chooses life and youth, "So I come to thee." However, although it is admired by the speaker as a model of life and vitality, the statue is static and silent. It is the speaker who is dynamic, it is he who chooses to approach and talk to the statue, and it is in his power to carry out the cultural and perhaps also the self-transformation he envisages. Apollo, the god of sun, the light, music, and beauty remains no more than a statue – one of many copies of the Apollo Belvedere, which had found its way to the University of Heidelberg.²⁶ It is the Jewish medical student (then in his first year at the University of Heidelberg) who breathed life into the statue (which also represents the god of medicine), in the spirit of the German Romantic, perhaps also Nietzschean, adoration of Hellenism. Note that this student came from Eastern Europe (the poem bears the indication "Odessa-Heidelberg, 1899"). See how many Easts we have here: Eastern Europe, where Tchernichovsky was born; one ancient East, partly imagined: Hellenic civilization, from the German point of view, as Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) described it in his *History of Art of Antiquity* [Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums] (1764), in which the Apollo Belvedere was described as representing the perfection of the Greek ideal; yet another ancient East, also partly imagined: Canaanite, Hebrew-indigenous civilization. And yet another East: the contemporary Middle East, the target of the Zionist vision which was becoming a reality in those very years (the First Zionist Congress was held in Basel two years earlier, in 1897). All those four Easts are connected through a single West: that of German Romanticism.

25 For more on the poem in its broad Jewish and Zionist contexts, see Holtzman (1999), 64–6, 127–9. Holtzman provides a detailed description of Berdyczewski's influence on Tchernichovsky (see above, p. 298 n. 2).

26 The original marble statue (itself a Roman copy of a lost bronze original from the fourth century BCE), is now presented in the Vatican Museum; see Shavit and Shavit (2009). Due to space limitations, I have not elaborated on the poem's homoerotic or autoerotic overtones. On the choice of Apollo, rather than Dionysus, for instance, as the hallmark of Hellenism, see Sha'anani (1984), 127–9).

Tchernichovsky's "Before the Statue of Apollo," together with his gigantic translation project – among other things, he translated the complete *Iliad* and *Odyssey* into Hebrew with exceptional artistry, using a counterpart of the Homeric dactylic hexameter throughout – marked him as *the* "Greek" and "heathen" poet of modern Hebrew literature.²⁷ As such, he was clearly contrasted by his contemporaries with Bialik: the latter was seen as the "national poet," the voice of Zionist revival, while Tchernichovsky was deemed the "universal poet." Tchernichovsky's "foreignness" played a dual and contradictory role in setting the boundaries of modern Hebrew literature, while, at the same time, viewing it as a "natural" outgrowth of European literature.

The poem "Before the Statue of Apollo" has a unique status in Hebrew culture also because it is probably the first *ekphrastic* poem in modern Hebrew literature "not only from the chronological aspect, but also from the substantive, conceptual aspect," as Avner Holtzman remarks.²⁸ In that, Tchernichovsky paved a path hitherto blocked by Hebrew culture's traditional aversion to plastic arts, owing to the aforementioned Biblical prohibition against the graven image, which had led to actual iconophobia (note in this regard the stereotypical dichotomy that views Judaism as an oral/aural culture as opposed to Hellenism as a visual culture).²⁹ In many respects, this poem represents the Big Bang of modern Hebrew poetry, in that it reformulated the relations of Hebrew (not necessarily Jewish) culture with Hellenic culture on an equal basis, out of profound awareness of the residues of the past, but without becoming subjugated to them and with optimistic emphasis on their shared human platform.

3 Normalization by Way of Neutralization: Jacob Fichman's "On Reading Homer"

The trail blazed by Tchernichovsky enabled his contemporary Jacob Fichman [יעקב פיכמן] (1881–1958) to write in 1907, at the age of 26 and about a decade after Tchernichovsky's "Before the Statue of Apollo," the poem "On Reading

27 As Dykman ((1994), 426) writes, translating the Homeric epics was a lifetime mission for Tchernichovsky, preoccupying him probably from 1917 until 1942, a year before his death. On the prosodic forms used by Tchernichovsky, see Dykman (2000), 23–6. For more on Tchernichovsky and the translation of classical antiquity, see Schulte (2013). On the reception of the dactylic hexameter in modern Hebrew literature more generally, see Dykman (2007). For a 1913 translation of book 9 of the *Iliad* into Yiddish by Max Weinreich, see Moss (2007), 203–4.

28 Holtzman (1999), 127, 129.

29 See, e.g., Shavit (1997), 199–201.

Homer.” Born in 1881 in Bessarabia (today Moldova), Fichman was active in the major hubs of modern Hebrew literature in Eastern Europe until he settled in Tel Aviv in 1919, where he died in 1958. In the poem the speaker presents the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as life-changing texts and as sources of inspiration for self-revival:

[...]
 עָרַב עָרַב אֲנִי קוֹרֵא – וּבִלְבָבִי
 דְּבַר־מָה חֲזָק, רַעְנָן נְעוֹר וּמְתָרוּמָם,
 דְּבַר־מָה גָּדֹל בִּי וְרַב בְּטַחוּנִי; וּכְמוֹ נִפְתַּח פְּתָאִים שְׂכָר נִעְלָם
 שִׁירַת חַיִּי חָדָד חֲרָדָה מִמְסַגְרָה,
 אֲנִי מִקְשִׁיב אֶל הַקּוֹלוֹת וּבִרְעָדָה, –
 אֲכַן יֵשׁ עוֹד מָה בְּאָרֶץ וְאֲנִכִּי לֹא יֵדְעָתִי.
 [...]

[[...]]

Night after night I read – and deep within my heart
 Something powerful, fresh, awakens and ascends,
 Something waxes confident within me; like a hidden dam has suddenly
 burst
 From captivity, the music of my life did flee,
 To the sounds I lend my ear and with a shudder –
 Forsooth there's something else out there in the world and I never knew.
 [...]].

This is less of a declarative-national and more of a personal poem: while the speaker in Tchernichovsky's poem presents himself as the representative of the Hebrew nation standing in front of the emissary of Hellenism (and this standing is physical, in space, facing the statue), with Fichman the situation is far more intimate – it is the encounter of a reader with a literary work, by himself, perhaps in a private space. For Fichman's poem there is no need either to state the polarization between the two cultures or to declare their symbiosis that is apparently the order of the day, as in Tchernichovsky's poem. In the very act of reading, the poem enacts that symbiosis. For the speaker of the poem, that is, a Hebrew reader of Homer, the alienness of Hellenic texts no longer carries any national-cultural significance; it is the product of the temporal gap which separates by necessity a modern reader from an ancient text. For the modern Hebrew reader, the ancient Greek work spells, as he puts it in the poem, the “vision of alien, wild life,” the experiences of a life that as much as it differs from his, still there is something in it that can be recognized as familiar, as

rising from the depths of his soul. In that, the Hebrew reader was no different from any European reader of his time, or perhaps of an earlier time, especially if he was of a Romantic bent. Suffice it only to mention the sonnet “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” by John Keats (1795–1821) about the discovery by the English speaker of a new world through reading the translation of the Homeric epics by the Elizabethan poet George Chapman (1559–1634).³⁰

At first glance, Fichman’s poem may look pale in comparison with Tchernichovsky’s. On the face of it, it makes no public case; and certainly, it did not gain central status in the modern Hebrew poetic canon. But therein precisely lies its importance, namely in being low-key and emphasizing the quotidian, personal, and all-human experience, as opposed to the national, cultural, and historical drama foregrounded in “Before the Statue of Apollo.” In that way Fichman’s poem charted a path that was perhaps no less important: “normalization” of the Graeco-Roman cultures in Hebrew culture by neutralizing the intercultural clashes. Now it became possible to interweave motifs and characters from these cultures organically and non-apologetically, without placing ideology at the foreground of the poem. (Note, however, that this move necessarily had implicit ideological meanings, in presenting, for example, modern Hebrew literature as part and parcel of European literature, by pointing to the similarities between the Jewish and classical legacies and the contribution made by both to the formation of Western civilization). Fichman’s marginality – he was considered from the very start an “impressionist” poet enclosed in his world, who avoided representing contemporary reality – was victorious here, since it facilitated a more natural assimilation of the Graeco-Roman classical elements in modern Hebrew poetry, and in a certain sense foreshadowed its future path, emphasizing the existential and hence universal elements in motifs borrowed from the Graeco-Roman tradition.

In his pioneering book on the mutual images of Jews and Christians, Yuval wrote that we [that is, modern, secular people] are currently in a post-polemical and post-apologetic age, that enables us to examine intercultural conflicts in a more objective light, to heighten ourselves, so to speak, above “the shoulders of the previous generation,” as we “can see the *other* side [...] better than

30 The Homeric epics were only fully translated into Hebrew some thirty years later, by Tchernichovsky (see above). By the time Fichman published his poem, there were only a few, and very partial, Hebrew translations of the Homeric works (Dykman (1994), 469; Cohen (2018)). Fichman probably became acquainted with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in Russian or German translations. About a decade after publishing this poem, he helped Tchernichovsky edit his translation of Anacreon’s poems. For this translation, see Rosenmeyer (2014). On Keats’s sonnet, see also Tambakaki, this volume, and Yeh, this volume.

they could.”³¹ Accordingly, we can say that Fichman’s poem heralded a new age in the relations of Hebrew culture with Graeco-Roman civilization – a post-polemical and post-apologetic one. This age is inseparably related to the “return of the Jews to history” – the crystallization of secular and modern Hebrew-Jewish consciousness, and subsequently, with the advent of Zionism, of national self-determination as well.

Fichman’s poem is included in his first book, *Stalks* [גִּבְעוּלִים], published in Warsaw in 1911. At that time, the Polish city was one of the major hubs of modern Hebrew literature, second only to Odessa, while Tel Aviv – where Fichman would later settle – was only two years old and, like the rest of Palestine, was still under Ottoman rule. After the First World War, the centers of Hebrew literature moved from Eastern Europe to Vienna, Berlin, New York, and mainly the Land of Israel, which would supersede them all with the growth and prosperity of the Jewish settler community under the British Mandate. Curiously, hardly any Hebrew poems dealing directly with Graeco-Roman mythology were written in the interwar period (an exception that proves the rule is *Anacreon on the Pole of Sorrow* [אֲנַקְרֵאוֹן עַל קוֹטֵב הָעֵצָבוֹן] by Uri Zvi Greenberg [אורי צבי גרינברג] (1894–1981), published in Tel Aviv in 1928).³² Perhaps Tchernichovsky’s translations and some of his poems provided the Hebrew literary system with the classicist element it had lacked; perhaps the tumultuous historical events of later years prevented the proverbial Hebrew dam from being opened to foreign texts.

4 Odysseus and the Second World War – A Moment of Shared Destiny: Lea Goldberg’s “The Lament of Odysseus”

In late May 1945, some three weeks after Germany’s surrender in the Second World War, Lea Goldberg [לֵאָה גוֹלֶדְבֵּרְג] (1911–1970), the leading Hebrew female poet of her time, published the poem “The Lament of Odysseus” [קִינַת אוֹדִיסֵאוֹס]. Goldberg was born in Königsberg, East Prussia, and before immigrating to Mandatory Palestine in 1935, she lived in Russia and studied at the universities of Kovno, Bonn, and Berlin. She died in Jerusalem in 1970. In a certain sense, she inherited Tchernichovsky’s place in modern Hebrew literature as a representative of *Weltliteratur*, a master of sonnets and a prolific translator, and like him she travelled from Eastern Europe through German universities

31 Yuval (2006), 21; emphasis added.

32 See Rosenmeyer (2014), 228.

to Palestine. In “The Lament of Odysseus” she combined the Bible and the *Odyssey* in an unprecedented way.

“The Lament of Odysseus” is probably the first modern Hebrew poem by a female poet that borrows elements from the Graeco-Roman classical tradition.³³ In it, Goldberg rewrites the Homeric epics. For, unlike in the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus travels to the Underworld to seek advice from the Prophet Tiresias, in Goldberg’s poem Odysseus is “old” and comes to “pay respects.” “The Lament of Odysseus” opens as follows:

שָׁבַע נְדוּדִים יָרַד אוֹדִיסֵאוּס הַשָּׁב שְׂאוּלָה
 לְדָרֵשׁ בְּשָׁלוֹם יְדִידִים הָרוּגִים לְפִי חֶרֶב.
 צִלְלֵי רַעִים חֲלָלִים בְּרִכּוּהוּ בְּשַׁעַר,
 זַעֲקַת מוֹתָם וּבְכִים אֲזִנּוּ זוֹכֶרֶת –
 אֵיךְ נָפְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים!

[Sated with wandering, old Odysseus descended to the Underworld to pay his respects to friends killed by the sword. The shadows of slain comrades greeted him at the gate, their weeping and death cries resounding in his ears – How the mighty have fallen!]³⁴

The last line is repeated in the following stanzas of the poem, a refrain conveyed partly by the speaker, partly by Odysseus himself. “How the mighty have fallen!” is half of a phrase from one of the best-known laments in the Hebrew Bible: David’s elegy about King Saul and his son Jonathan, who died in the battle with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa.³⁵ The battle scene described in the poem is also replete with Homeric and Biblical allusions. For example, we read the following lines:

אִישׁ וְסוֹסוֹ נָפְלוּ בַשָּׂדֶה הַקָּטָן.
 דָּם בְּהֵמָה וְאָדָם – פִּלְגֵי שְׁחוֹר נִשְׁפְּכוּ.
 [...] אִוִי לְעֵינַיִם קְמוֹת לְקִרְאֵת הַמְּקוֹת,
 אִוִי לְשִׁפְתַיִם אֶלְמוֹת – “הַשְּׁקוּנֵי מֵיִם!”

33 Shacham (2001), 30.

34 Translated by Rachel Tzvia Back (with a minor change; Goldberg (2005) [1945], 73).

35 Goldberg omitted the first part of the opening verse of the lament, which grounds it in a national context: “Your glory, O Israel, is slain on your high places! How the mighty have fallen!” [הַצְּבִי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל בְּמוֹתֶיךָ חָלָל אֵיךְ נָפְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים] (2 Samuel 1:9).

[Men and their steed fell in the killing fields
 The blood of beast and man – black rivers flowing.
 [...] Woe to eyes blind in the face of death,
 woe to mute lips – “Give me water!”]

One can bring to mind “the horse and his rider” [סוס וְרִכְבוֹ] from the Song of Moses;³⁶ the Homeric phrase “the black death fell on men’s eyes” (e.g., τὸν δὲ κατ’ ὀφθαλμῶν ἐρεβεννῆ νύξ ἐκάλυψε); and Sisera’s request to Jael: “give me a little water to drink” [הַשְּׁקִינִי נָא מְעַט מַיִם].³⁷ At the same time, the scene is also reminiscent of the recent battles of the Second World War (one has only to recall the Polish horsemen charging the German tanks on the very first day of the war, September 1, 1939). Goldberg thus created an exceptional amalgamation of ancient Hebraic and Hellenic elements, in which the *Odyssey* and David’s elegy are combined with the horrors of the recent war.³⁸

אֶת סְלִיחַתְכֶם בְּקֶשׁ בְּאֵתֵי שְׂאוּלָה,
 [...]
 אוֹת הַקְּלוֹן עַל מִצְחֵי מוֹתוֹ שֶׁל רַע,
 אוֹת הַקְּלוֹן עַל מִצְחֵי חַיֵּי מַנְגֵד,
 קוֹל זַעֲקַת מוֹתְכֶם אֲנִי זוֹכֵרֶת.
 אֵיךְ נָפְלוּ גִבּוֹרִים!

[I have come to this hell to ask for your pardon
 [...]
 The death of a comrade is Cain’s mark on my forehead.
 My far-away life is Cain’s mark on my forehead.
 Your death cries resound in my ears.
 How the mighty have fallen!]

In the poem, the amalgamation of ancient Hebraic and Hellenic elements is also formal: the poem is written in the dactylic rhythm, derived from the ancient Greek epic meter, at the same time recalling the Biblical prosody,

36 Exodus 15: 1, 19. See also Jeremiah 51: 21; and Zechariah 12: 4.

37 Judges 4: 19. Note that those very words are used by Abraham’s servant when addressing Rebekah (Genesis 24: 43). For Homer, see, e.g., *Il.* 5,659.

38 Tchernichovsky and previous Hebrew translators of the Homeric epics had also used the amalgamation technique, combining Biblical with Greek elements, but it was he who refined it into a veritable art form (see, for example, Rosenmeier (2014)).

among other things in its multiple parallelisms (between the stanzas, between the lines and even within them, between the hemistichs).³⁹

A parallel movement on two levels is evident in the poem: between the third person and ancient past, on the one hand, and the first person and the present, on the other. This is a movement between a distant description of the combat and a state of intense emotion, perhaps felt by Odysseus and perhaps by the speaker, which is absent from both epics, the Hebraic and the Hellenic alike – the survivor's pangs of conscience for having survived while his loved ones have died. Goldberg said in a 1961 interview:

I wrote the poem ["The Lament of Odysseus"] during the war and I wanted to express the encounter with the dead, the encounter of a person who bears the burden of guilt for having stayed alive [...] It is no coincidence that in this poem, I used an expression that has nothing to do with Greek poetry, that of the lament "How the mighty have fallen!" – one of the most dreadful lyrical exclamations in the Bible.⁴⁰

It may be argued that by travelling so far back to the past, Goldberg sought to rebuke the immorality of her own time from a safe distance.⁴¹ This move is also designed to disguise her own deep pain for her loved ones left behind in Europe to die in the Holocaust, while she lived in Mandatory Palestine, protected from the horrors of war. "For the snare is broken, blasted open, and we have escaped" [כִּי נִשְׁבַּר, נִפְּץ הַפֶּחַ וְאַנְחָנוּ נִמְלָטָנוּ] we read in the poem. That statement, which sounds like a contemporary confession by the speaker, actually paraphrases Psalm 124: 7: "We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped" [נִפְּשָׁנוּ כַּצִּפּוֹר נִמְלָטָה מִפֶּחַ יוֹקְשִׁים, הַפֶּחַ נִשְׁבַּר וְאַנְחָנוּ נִמְלָטָנוּ]. Goldberg also used that same verse in an article published in late April 1945, about a month before publishing the poem, in which she

39 Yeglin (2002), 69–72.

40 Yardeni (1961), 130–1. Curiously, at the beginning of the war, Goldberg (2016 [1939], 399) considered that very same lament to be "the first or one of the first pacifist poems in the world." The possible discrepancy between these two perspectives suggests a difference between the way Goldberg perceived the war when it began (as a kind of replay of the First World War, hence her pacifist attitude) and her later perception, having found out about the full scale of the Holocaust.

41 Hebrew literature scholar Ofra Yeglin ((2002), 63) elaborates: "When [Goldberg] turns her narrative gaze away to the historical-literary case of Odysseus [...] she achieves [...] that same gap between the time of the plot and the time of its narration [...] also reminding the reader that unlike the place and time she describes, the *Odyssey* is governed by the moral law. And though it is a mythical world of deities, demigods and heroes, it is also a deeply humane world."

undertook poignant soul-searching vis-à-vis Europe and European civilization. The article was entitled “Your Europe” [אֵירוּפָּה שְׁלָכֶם] and expounded the Jews’ fascination with European civilization and its humanistic heritage, their profound disappointments due to their recurring persecution, and at the same time, their inescapable love of Europe, out of their deep sense of belonging to it:

But I have seen you today, anguished Europe, your wounds, your blood, your terribly ugly visage. You stood before me, as you have never stood before. As the precious-most, as a beaten and injured child wallowing in his blood. And I wanted to kiss all your wounds. Again you seemed in my Jewish eyes as Jesus on the cross, a martyr – not a savior. No, not a savior: a gullible fool walking down the Way of Suffering. [...] *The snare is broken, and we have escaped.* Do we have the right to judge? Do we have the right to forget? [...] And we shall not forget you, the wounds of the lover and the wounds of the hater we will not forget. Until the day we die we will carry it within us, this immense hurt whose name is Europe, “your Europe,” “their Europe,” but apparently [...] not “our Europe,” even though we were hers, very much hers.⁴²

I have elaborated on this seminal article by Goldberg not only because it adds an important layer to the previous discussion on the relations of Jews and Western civilization, but also because it illustrates the unique significance of her poem “The Lament of Odysseus.” If the article stresses the gap between Jews and European civilization that goes back as far as the advent of Christianity, the poem offers a perfect synthesis of the two civilizations in their pre-Christian period; apparently it envisages taking them back to it, as a remedy for the terrible calamity of the war and the Holocaust – which is, according to this logic, the most extreme manifestation of Christian anti-Semitism.

In this sense, in “The Lament of Odysseus” Goldberg has articulated a *Weltanschauung* expressed around that same period by the German-Jewish philologist Erich Auerbach (1892–1957), in his famous 1946 book *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* [Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur] (it is reasonable to assume that the two were not aware of each other’s texts at that time). The chapter that opens *Mimesis*, entitled “Odysseus’ scar,” compares the representation of reality in the *Odyssey* to that in the Bible by juxtaposing the Binding of Isaac (Akedah [עֲקִידַת יִצְחָק], Genesis 22) with the passage in Book 19 of the *Odyssey*, where

⁴² Goldberg (1945), emphasis added.

Eurycleia, the old servant who used to be Odysseus' wet-nurse, recognizes him by the scar on his thigh.⁴³ Auerbach argues that these are the two prototypes that gave birth to realism in European culture, as part of a broader move, at the background of the book, of an apologetics on the Judeo-Christian heritage of Western civilization. In that, Auerbach went against the Aryan philologists who sought to eliminate the Old Testament from German culture and Western civilization in general.⁴⁴

The Second World War and the Holocaust thus provided a deeper and at the same time tragic aspect of a shared destiny between the previously rival cultures, the Hebraic and the Hellenic. It appears that for Goldberg, much like many of her contemporaries, the atrocities of the recent war had lowered the walls separating the competing cultures. In the face of Fascism and Nazism, they must have been seen as belonging to the same threatened civilization. They both faced the barbarians – no longer in the ancient sense of savages of unintelligible speech, and by way of derivation, those alien to Greek and later also Roman culture – but in their modern sense: Fascism and totalitarianism. In this light, even a conservative Israeli critic such as Baruch Kurzweil read the canonical core of Hebrew prose – the writings of S. Y. Agnon [שמואל יוסף אגנון] (1888–1970) (who received the Nobel Prize in 1966), grounded, as most of them were, in Jewish community life in antebellum Eastern Europe viewed from a post-Holocaust perspective – as a modern rendering of the Homeric motif of “belated return.”⁴⁵ And Hebrew theater was finally ready to stage Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* for the first time in the Habima National Theater in Tel Aviv in February 1947 under the direction of the English director Tyrone Guthrie. The translation used was that made by Tchernichovsky in 1929, with adaptations by the poet Avraham Shlonsky [אברהם שלונסקי] (1900–1973).⁴⁶

5 Israeli Poetry, Odysseus, and Orpheus: The Historical-Epic vs. the Personal-Metapoetic

Just as scholars disagree on when modern Hebrew literature began, they also debate whether *Israeli* literature, that created after the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, should be distinguished from Hebrew literature

43 Auerbach (2003) [1946], 3–23.

44 Zakai (2017), 94–5, 98–9; Dubnov (2018), 157.

45 Kurzweil (1966), 50–1; G. Shaked (1989), 70–2. Note that already in one of the first reviews of his work, Max Brod wrote about the twenty-one-year-old Agnon: “This is a new Homer” (Brod (1918), 1366). See also Bossak (1971); Geiger (2012).

46 For more on this production, see Yaari (2007) and Yaari (2018), 45–59.

or be considered its natural continuation. In either case, it is obvious that the renewal of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel contributed to neutralizing the conflictual relation between Hebrew and Graeco-Roman cultures, just as it placed the relations between Judaism and Christianity on a different footing. This opened the path for putting emphasis on the existential and universal aspects of classical mythologies and downplaying their foreign elements – that is, “normalization by neutralization.” Indeed, Israeli literature produced several dozens of poems referring to Graeco-Roman culture,⁴⁷ a richness which stands in sharp contrast to the small number of poems from the pre-statehood period, as reviewed above. Most of these poems, representative of the new trend, were written from the mid-1950s onwards.

This new development is also connected with a transformation in Hebrew poetry during those years, with the rise of a poetic style promoted mainly by Nathan Zach [נחמן זך] (1930–2020), which prevailed in the Hebrew poetic scene. Zach was born in Berlin and immigrated to Palestine at the age of six. In one of his most famous poems, he wrote: “I am a cosmopolite” [אָנִי אֶזְרַח הָעוֹלָם], and his style involved abandoning traditional forms in favor of free verse and emphasis on individual and daily experiences at the expense of the collective and celebratory, and adopting Anglo-American and German cultural models instead of the Russian ones that had hitherto dominated the scene. The turn of Israeli writers to Greece and Rome was thus further motivated by the importance of myth in the so-called “high Modernism.” Suffice it only to mention T. S. Eliot’s 1923 review “Ulysses, Order and Myth” about James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) containing the famous phrase: “Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method.”⁴⁸ In Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the main character (or modern Odysseus), Leopold Bloom, is a Dublin half-Jew. The “neutralization” of the conflictual charges in classical elements has thus been given an extra push, outside Hebrew culture.

Since not all Hebrew poems incorporating classical elements from the mid-1950s on can be reviewed here, I would like to suggest two main trends that characterize this corpus, noting that, as in every methodological classification, this too is organic and artificial at one and the same time.

The first trend characterizes a set of poems that put emphasis on the time gap between modern times, during which modern Hebrew poetry is written, and ancient times, as embodied in mythical figures. The poems of this category

47 For lists of such poems, see, e.g., Ben-Porat (1979); Spiegel (1989), 548–64; Tseḏaḳa (1993); Shacham (2001), 28–101. See also Silberschlag (1977) and a special issue of the Hebrew periodical *Orot* on contemporary Israeli works inspired by Homer (Nitzan (2008)).

48 Eliot (1975), 178.

stress the gap between worldviews. The mythic figures and scenes that feature in these poems are disrupted and distorted, suggesting the flawed nature of the present reality and the “decline of generations” [ירידת הדורות], a Jewish concept assuming the newer the more distant from, and more inferior to, the sources. These poems usually have an epic and historical tone, which transcends the writer’s individual experience. A primary example is the poem “Odysseus” [אודיסס] (1959) by Haim Gouri [חיים גורי] (Tel Aviv 1923–Jerusalem 2018):

וּבְשׁוּבוֹ אֶל עִיר מוֹלְדָתוֹ מְצָא יָם
וְדָגִים שׁוֹנִים וְעֵשֶׂב צָף עַל הַגְּלִים הָאֲטִיִּים
וְשִׁמְשׁ נַחֲלָשֶׁת בְּשׁוּלֵי שָׁמַיִם.

טָעוֹת לְעוֹלָם חוֹזְרֵת, אָמַר אוֹדִיסֵס בְּלִבּוֹ הָעֵיף
וְחָזַר עַד פְּרֵשֶׁת הַדְּרָכִים הַסְּמוּכָה לְעִיר הַשְּׂכִנָּה,
לְמִצָּא אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ אֶל עִיר מוֹלְדָתוֹ שְׁלֵא הִיְתָה מֵיָם.

הַלֵּךְ עֵיף כְּחוֹלֶם וּמִתְגַּעְגַּע מְאֹד
בֵּין אָנָשִׁים שֶׁדָּבְרוּ יוֹנִית אַחֲרָת.
הַמְּלִים שֶׁנִּטְלָו עִמּוֹ כְּצִידָה לְדֶרֶךְ הַמְּסָעוֹת, גּוֹעוּ בִּינְתֵימִים.

[...]

קָמוּ הַמְּבַגְרִים וְנִטְלוּ אֶת הַיְלָדִים שֶׁעָמְדוּ סְבִיבוֹ בְּמַעְגָּל
וּמְשִׁכּוֹ אוֹתָם.
וְאוֹר אַחַר אוֹר הִצְהִיב בְּבֵית אַחַר בֵּית.

בָּא טַל וְיָרַד עַל רֵאשׁוֹ.
בָּאָה רוּחַ וְנִשְׁקָה לְשִׁפְתָיו.
בָּאוּ מֵיָם וְשִׁטְפוּ רְגְלָיו כְּאֶבְרִיקָלִיָּה הַזְּקֵנָה
וְלֹא רָאוּ אֶת הַצְּלָקָת.
וְהַמְּשִׁיכוֹ בְּמוֹרֵד כְּדֶרֶךְ הַמֵּיִם.

[And when he returned to his birthplace he found sea
And various fishes and grass floating on slow waves
And sun weakened in the rims of the sky.

An error forever recurs, said Odysseus in his tired heart,
And returned to the cross-roads close to the neighboring city
To find the road to his birthplace that was not water.

A wayfarer weary as a dreamer yearning much
 Between people who spoke another Greek.
 The words he had taken as provision for his travels had meanwhile
 perished.

[...]

The adults arose and took the children standing about him in a circle
 And drew them away.
 And light after light yellowed in house after house.

The dew came and fell upon his head.
 The wind came and kissed his lips.
 Water came and washed his feet like old Eurycleia.
 And it did not see the scar and continued down the slope like water.]⁴⁹

The phrase “people who spoke another Greek” is telling. Not only is it “realistic” or historically accurate (while in their written form most ancient Greek words can easily be recognized by a modern Greek as familiar, it is almost impossible for modern Greeks to communicate in ancient Greek), but it is also a wonderful metaphor for the difficulties of understanding between any two persons, let alone after one of them has just returned after twenty (read two thousand) years. In this alternative narrative of Odysseus’ return, the climax of the plot does not happen and the hero’s communication with the people of his homeland fails – he is only successful with elements of nature. The water is stronger than the scar, as the former embodies eternal nature while the latter is fleeting, and this is perhaps the only comfort available to the Greek hero.

Gouri was not the first to weave such an alternative plot. Already in 1795 – a century before his fellow Romantic Tchernichovsky – in another poem entitled “Odysseus,” Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) demonstrated the disappointment awaiting the mythological hero in his renewed encounter with Ithaca, and by extension, the painful gap between the ideal and reality. What is new in Gouri’s poem is that he amalgamated Odysseus with Honi the Circle-Drawer [חוני המעגל] – a Talmudic mythical figure who is said to have fallen asleep and awakened after seventy years; the fact that nobody recognized him made him pray for death.⁵⁰ It may be that Gouri, known as the “Poet of the Palmach”

49 Translated by Ruth Finer Mintz (Gouri (1982) [1959]).

50 Honi the Circle-Drawer is better known for standing in a circle he drew in the dust around himself and refusing to move until the Lord sent rain. For more on the dialogue between

(a Jewish fighting force, later integrated into the Israel Defense Forces, which played a key role in Israel's War of Independence, 1947–1949), reacted in this poem to the reality of returning to the routine of everyday life after a heroic war. Perhaps the poem also encodes something of the poet's return from his 1953 studies at the Sorbonne. And he most probably was preoccupied with the Homeric hero's scar also thanks to Auerbach's book (see above), which was first published in Hebrew in late 1957 and was very influential in Israel.

While Goldberg's "The Lament of Odysseus" is a link in the transition away from the relatively highbrow speech of her contemporaries, and certainly of the previous literary generation (Bialik, Tchernichovsky, Fichman), Gouri's poetic style is clearly closer to actual speech. It has no fixed meter (although the last words in each stanza rhyme), and its overall organization is relatively flexible. In that Gouri followed the norms established by the young Hebrew poets of those years, despite being slightly older than most. The poem can therefore also be read as metapoetic: the Israeli war poet returns, but in his homeland poets have been writing differently, and therefore he and the heroic tone of his poems, and his image as a warrior, are no longer noticed.⁵¹

The second trend typical of that group of Hebrew poems inspired by classical mythology moves in the opposite direction: these poems bring the classical figures closer to the present, hence the myth is less distorted. They tend to focus on the personal and existential sphere and are usually interested in *ars poetica*. They therefore stretch a direct line between their time and the heroes of the past – usually Orpheus, who is regarded as the Father of Poets, given the tragic nature of poetic and musical creation his figure epitomizes. I will concentrate here only on the poem "David and Orpheus" [דוד ואורפיאוס] by Shin Shalom (Shalom Yosef Shapira) [ש. שלום]. Shalom was born in Poland in 1904,

the poem and Honi's story, see Pagis ((2003) [1965], 160–2) and Shoham ((2006), 120–3). Another poem written by Gouri during that time, "You Are Not a King" [אינך מלך], also connotes Odysseus.

- 51 Odysseus is also the poetic protagonist of Gouri's contemporary and brother in arms, Natan Yonatan [נתן יונתן] (born in Kiev in 1923, immigrated with his parents at the age of two and died in Israel in 2004). In his poem "If Only We Could Live within the Sad Music" [לִי נְחִיָּה בְּשִׁירָה הַנְּגוּהָ] the *Odyssey* is used to reflect on the poet's own personal experiences of battle and grief: Yonatan's Odysseus would rather continue traveling after his return to Ithaca. See Koplowitz-Breier (2012) for more on Yonatan's dialogue with Homeric works. Another aspect Yonatan extracts from mythology is Mediterranean locality whereby the distant past helped him crystallize Israeli-Jewish indigeneity. Tchernichovsky's own attraction to Greek civilization was largely due to the same reason: ancient Greek culture allowed him and his readers to imagine ancient Mediterranean Canaanite culture, supposedly emblematic of a glorious Israelite past, and by the same token the promise of a harmonious future with the neighbors in the region.

immigrated to Mandatory Palestine in 1922 and died in Israel in 1990.⁵² In the poem equal weight is given to the two ancient heroes from the Bible and Greek mythology as the writer's sources of inspiration: both David and Orpheus had the power to heal and save other people through the power of music: David, the King of Israel, Saul, and Orpheus his beloved Eurydice:

דָּוִד וְאוֹרְפֵיאוֹס,
אוֹרְפֵיאוֹס וְדָוִד
בְּמִיתְרֵי הַדְּרוֹכִים
מִהַדְּהָדִים תָּמִיד.
[...]

[David and Orpheus,
Orpheus and David
Reverberate always
In my outstretched strings.
[...]]

The speaker of “David and Orpheus” considers himself the scion of both David and Orpheus; but he also stresses the difference he has from them in successes and failures. While David was saved twice from Saul’s spear (1 Samuel 18: 10–1; 19: 9–10), the speaker is hit by it. And while Orpheus managed to flee, the speaker failed to save his lover from the underworld and left his heart behind:

אוֹלָם חָנִיתוֹ שֶׁל שָׁאוּל הַמוֹטָלָת
לֹא הִכְתָּה בְּקִיר כִּי אִם בִּי,
וּבְהַקִּימִי מִעֶפֶר הַיִּפְעָה הַנוֹפֶלֶת
הַשְּׂאֲרָתִי בְּשָׁאוּל אֶת לְבִי.
[...]

[Alas, the spear flung fast by Saul
Hit me instead, and not the wall
And as I raised from the dust the fallen splendor
I left my heart in the netherworld.
[...]]

52 Orpheus is also the theme of three poems by the poet Nathan Zach (see above): “Orpheus,” “Orpheus Yells” and “Orpheus Turns His Head” [אורפיאוס מִפְּנֵה; אורפיאוס צועק; אורפיאוס מִפְּנֵה]. Zach exploited the connection between the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and the scene in the Sodom and Gomorrah episode: “But Lot’s wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt” (Genesis 19:26). For this connection, see Bremmer (2008), Chapter 7 (“Don’t Look Back: From the Wife of Lot to Orpheus and Eurydice”).

The ancient stories from the two different cultures meet here through the Hebrew paronomasia between the name Saul (Shaul [שָׂאוּל]) and the Biblical word for Hades, the god of the netherworld (She'ol [שְׂאוּל]), both written in the same way in Hebrew. Moreover, the Orphic moment in the poem is formulated with a clear Biblical allusion: "And as I raised from the dust." Here the speaker-Orpheus is akin to the Hebrew Lord: "He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap" [מְקִימוֹ מֵעֶפְרָא דָל, מֵאַשְׁפֹּת יְרִים אֶבְיֹן] (Psalm 113: 7).

6 Conclusion

Israeli literary scholar Aminadav Dykman characterized European literature after the heyday of Romanticism as inspired by three sources: the Bible, the Graeco-Roman classics, and popular traditions. "As opposed to these systems, double or triple," he writes, "our [Hebrew] poetry actually had a single system. The only development it underwent, in this regard, was the transition from the Bible and its multiple subjects and language onwards, to the post-Biblical Jewish literature, and to subjects borrowed carefully and in measured doses from non-Jewish sources."⁵³ These subjects, that is, the elements borrowed from Greek and Roman cultures, thus played a key role in the modernization of Hebrew culture, in its development and opening to the world. In a dual move, the Graeco-Roman elements helped both establish the universal (read European) identity of Hebrew culture and emphasize its Hebrew character and distinctiveness. Later on, as Hebrew literature took root in the Land of Israel, they might also have contributed to stressing its Mediterranean identity.

Even after their assimilation, however, Graeco-Roman elements remained alien to modern Hebrew poetry. True, today they no longer carry the threatening ideological charge attributed to them in the past and their use is no longer considered a subversive move on the part of Hebrew writers. They have undergone a neutralization process, related to the modernization of Hebrew literature, and are often used to represent an existential, universal, and supra-temporal experience. In this regard, Hebrew literature has aligned its clock with those of Western literatures, to return to the opening metaphor. But owing to the fact that they penetrated Hebrew literature at such a relatively late stage, Graeco-Roman elements did not occupy a central place in it, apart from their appearance in several canonical poems (most of which are mentioned above). Moreover, major Hebrew poets, including Bialik, Shlonsky, Nathan Alterman

53 Dykman (2004), 194.

[נתן אלתרמן] (1910–1970), and others, had no particular need for that resource in their poetry.

Another explanation for the non-centrality of Graeco-Roman elements in Hebrew poetry has to do with “software,” rather than “hardware,” so to speak. By this I mean that historically, Jewish sources, starting with the Bible, have been typically laconic, shedding little light and keeping much more in the dark, thus allowing considerable leeway for interpretations and gap-fillings, in ways that often undermine the source with astonishing creativity. Conversely, in the Homeric text, for example, the painstaking specification of realistic details leaves much less room for interpretive or creative imagination. Auerbach put it in these words: “the Homeric poems conceal nothing, they contain no teaching and no secret second meaning. Homer can be analyzed [...] but he cannot be interpreted. [...] It is all very different in the Biblical stories. [...] they require subtle investigation and interpretation, they demand them.”⁵⁴

In any examination of the reception of Graeco-Roman elements in modern Hebrew poetry more broadly, a comparison with the reception of the Old Testament and of Christian elements proves useful. About the former, Israeli literary scholar Malka Shaked concludes:

In the poetry written in the Revival period, in the Yishuv period, and on the eve of statehood,⁵⁵ the dominant tendency is to consecrate the Biblical myths and view the Biblical characters as role models, whereas in the poetry written after statehood, particularly in the last three decades, the dominant tendency is to critique the Bible, de-mythicize and parodize it, and particularly use it in order to shed a critical light on present life, and do so through parodic uses.⁵⁶

One might say that the same description can be applied to the use of Graeco-Roman elements in modern Hebrew poetry. However, owing to their relative marginality and basic foreignness to both writers and readers, and in particular owing to their belated entry into the literary system, those processes of wear and tear have operated on Graeco-Roman elements with significantly less intensity; they have hardly been parodied, for instance.

⁵⁴ Auerbach (2003), 8–11.

⁵⁵ In Hebrew literature, the Revival period stretches between the end of the *Haskalah* (see above, p. 304) and the beginning of the modernization of Hebrew and the establishment of the State of Israel (1881–1948). The Yishuv is the Jewish settler community in pre-statehood Palestine.

⁵⁶ M. Shaked (2005), 621.

As for the presence of Christian elements in modern Hebrew literature, Israeli literary scholar Ruth Kartun-Blum writes:

A reading of fifty years of Israeli poetry shows that the Christian narrative becomes a cultural sounding box wherein the politics of identity (and identities) unfolds. Borrowing from the New Testament redefines cultural boundaries: both exclusion and inclusion processes. Turning to Western culture as a kind of subversion of local culture pushes the former into an enclosed territory, leaving other cultural assets to languish outside. [...] Another distinction that should be made is between two approaches that may be called the *collective* and the *individual* approach. The first sees the relation to the New Testament from the perspective of the confrontation between Judaism and Christianity [...] while in the second approach the interest in Jesus and other central figures in the New Testament is individual, corresponding to the writer's emotional and psychological needs. [...] For an Israeli writer, therefore, Jesus is the archetype of the lonely person seeking the salvation of his soul, of one inhabiting the edges of the norm, the cursed [...] – in all of this, the Israeli artist, in a state of individual separateness, finds the answer in the search for the self as a nucleus of identity. *The New Testament thus offers a solution for the distress of secularism in Israeli culture, and the longing for the transcendent, an option of spirituality that enables greater integration of the mysterious and the secular.* (emphasis in original)⁵⁷

In modern Hebrew literature Graeco-Roman elements do not play the same productive and exciting role as the New Testament – perhaps because they do not represent an absolute Other as Christianity, and because they are at some distance from Christianity both in time and in relation to Christianity's physical presence in Israel. Nevertheless, one may say that references to Graeco-Roman elements in modern Hebrew poetry show a transition from a collective approach (as in Tchernichovsky's "Before the Statue of Apollo") to a personal / individual one (from Fichman's "On Reading Homer" onwards), and that for present-day Israeli writers the attachment to mythology remains a priori "a kind of subversion of local culture," in Kartun-Blum's words (above). Just as the figure of Jesus is interpreted according to the needs of Hebrew writers, so are figures from Greek and Roman mythologies. Thus Orpheus provides the example of the artist who sacrifices what is most precious to him for the sake of his art; and Odysseus is usually presented as a refugee and exile, uprooted

57 Kartun-Blum (2007), 3–4, 7–8, 11.

and displaced. As is evident in most of the examples discussed here, including poems written in an era considered free of national claims, writers tend to read Graeco-Roman narratives through Hebrew glasses and even “Judaize” them to a certain extent, like Gouri’s Odysseus who becomes a kind of Honi.⁵⁸

This chapter lacked the space to capture the variety of ways in which Graeco-Roman elements are present in Hebrew poetry. Among other things, with the exception of Lea Goldberg, it did not refer specifically to the important role played by women poets, who have provided an extensive creative corpus in this area as well, often giving the classical myth a subversive interpretation, challenging its essence as a masculine, patriarchal narrative. Also undeservedly excluded were significant contemporary poets such as Meir Wieseltier [מאיר ויזלטיר] (b. 1941) and Aharon Shabtai [אהרון שבתאי] (b. 1939) (who is not only an original poet but considered the greatest Greek-Hebrew translator in our time), as well as younger ones. Nevertheless, I trust that the intimate strangeness and strange intimacy between the Graeco-Roman classics and modern Hebrew literature have been made clear – a phenomenon reminiscent of the one described by Freud, namely the *heimlich* (canny) that is in fact *unheimlich* (uncanny). In the continuing story of the relations between Hebrew and Graeco-Roman cultures, Odysseus and his wet-nurse Eurycleia provide an apt analogy, through their infinite game of hide and seek: The “Hebrew” Eurycleia is young and at the same time old, or perhaps old and at the same time young (as in the popular drawing “My Wife and My Mother-in-Law” attributed to William Ely Hill). Sometimes she recognizes Odysseus’ scar and delights in his return; sometimes she mistakes him for someone else or seeks his help to recall who she is or prove that she belongs to his family. Odysseus, on the other hand, often continues to hide himself even after returning home, and sometimes stands embarrassed on the shore of his home island of Ithaca, recognizing it well.

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58 Ben-Porat (1979) seeks to chart a clear chronological progression in Hebrew literature – from the “Judaization” of foreign allusions to more objective and “secular” use of them. To support her argument, she relies on several Hebrew poems about Odysseus. It is my understanding, however, that the Hebrew platform always paints the foreign elements with a Hebrew shade, and only the degree of shading changes with time (and not necessarily in a linear progression, as argued by Ben-Porat).

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