Meir Wieseltier’s book *Shivrei shir mul Yempa* (*Fractures of Poems Facing Yempa*, 2016) is dedicated to the memory of Yempa Boleslawski, an editor, translator, and close friend of the poet, who passed away in the summer of 2015. It is a thin, intimate volume that was designed and produced by Wieseltier himself and printed by his private press as a limited edition shortly after Boleslawski’s death. The poems in the book were reprinted in Wieseltier’s fourth collection of poetry entitled *Ha’adam hanidaf* (*The Brittle Human*, 2018) along with nine additional poems.

My reading seeks to emphasize the documentary and factual basis of the work that makes it a kind of poetic memoir. Poetic memoirs are works of poetry with a significant and explicit personal-historical dimension—entire collections of poetry that document incidents, persons, events, places, and periods in the life of the poet, wherein the lyrical “I” is overtly close if not identical to the empirical or historical “I” of the author. Many of the collections published by Israeli poets over the last three decades belong in this category.

*Shivrei shir* documents the period of grief experienced by the author after Yempa’s passing. The memoir-like quality of the poems stems not only from their format, which closely resembles that of a diary written in close temporal proximity to the occurrences described therein, but also—and most importantly—from the fact that they are framed as a direct address to a concrete addressee, mentioned by name in the title. This personal address reveals an intersubjective relation with a real person from the empirical world “outside” of the text and reveals a slice of the author’s non-fictional life. The dominant place given to the referential space of the real goes against the common notions about the “speaker” in a lyrical text established by twentieth-century literary criticism.

This kind of exposure, involving a real-life figure and the personal impact she had on the poet, is anything but matter-of-fact in Wieseltier’s poetry, which, from the beginning, purposefully distanced itself from autobiographical writing and reading, going so far as to level severe criticism at the latter. An early meta-poetical poem such as “*He’ara*” (“Comment,” 1973), for instance (“I lie buried under the heaping mass of my life story”), expresses outright hostility toward the autobiographical dimension and challenges the widespread tendency of inexperienced readers to try and interpret the poem by referring to the events of the poet’s life. Wieseltier makes it clear that the informative, referential facts of life in no way reflect the lyrical “I” of the poem.

In this modernist view, it is the anonymous quality of the lyrical voice—the “I” freed from the shackles of personal history or the specific circumstances of time, place, status, ethnic origin, etc.—that is the source of its power. Helen Vendler writes of the lyrical subject’s inexhaustible passion for abstraction and for the absence of social signifiers. The lyrical voice is perceived as intangible, eternal, and universal, inviting the reader to merge their subjectivity with that of the speaker in a way that does not necessitate any real signified outside the text (Vendler 1996, 2). In the words of Vered Karti Shemtov, “the I of the poem and the I of the reader can become one because it is possible to detach the poetic I from any specific time and place. The lyrical I, therefore, remains devoid of uniqueness, which, in fact, makes it ‘everyman’” (Karti Shemtov 2020, 356).

The reality of the addressee, however, changes the way the speaker’s “I” is perceived in this particular collection. This is no longer an “I” founded on abstract categories or ideological values, but a documentary-lyrical “I” that is tightly bound to a real external referent, one whose lyricism is characterized by its connection to a specific woman by the name of Yempa. The name and the woman herself carry no baggage of allegorical meaning. Yempa does not represent a general “woman,” “reader,” “friend,” or “lover,” and thus the speaker in the poem can no longer be “everyman.” The representative functions of the speaker and the addressee are subverted by the presence of her name.

Ostensibly, this work could be classified as lyrical poetry in the traditional sense, a collection of “elegies for a friend.” However, Wieseltier’s insistence on using his friend’s name, as well as other paratextual elements that have a decidedly factual dimension, tip the scales against a lyrical reading. It is a strategy that strives to break the spell of abstract eternity cast by the anonymity of the poem. The emphasis placed on reality and empirical specificity brings out the finality documented in the work, without which the loss cannot be experienced in its completeness. Nevertheless, this is not a negation of the lyrical dimension but rather a means of making it more flexible, broadening its terms in a way that stretches the creative space between two opposing forces: the centripetal force that pulls us inward toward the poetic convention of the impersonal lyrical subject unbound by the concrete limitations of time, place, and community, on the one hand, and the centrifugal force pushing us out toward the concrete, specific details of the personal, the individual, and their biographic reality, on the other hand. The work, if so, hangs in the tension between the autobiographical validity of the single, unique, and unrepeatable life experience and the extra dimension that gives the concrete details a broader, extemporal status beyond the realm of the personal.

As a memoir of grief that addresses and talks about a dead woman, the work is dominated by the trope of apostrophe: a conventional address to an anonymous addressee, which here is transformed into a specific addressee who is dead and, therefore, gone. Jonathan Culler writes that in the elegy—an inherently apostrophic poetic form that is addressed to a missing or lost object—the apostrophe breaks the irreversible linear timeline of narrative that advances from life toward death and creates a liminal temporality, a special discursive dimension of an ever-renewing “now” that is ruled not by time but by the poetic force. Through the use of the apostrophe, the real loss is pushed aside to make room for the linguistic event of a reunion in the poem. The power of the poetic speaker is thus magnified manifold. The address to the lost object affirms the presence of the speaker and allows him or her to find in this quasi-magical ability the sense of his or her own continuity.

In *Shivrei shir mul Yempa*, the apostrophe is unconventional in that it addresses a concrete, empirical woman, one who cannot be substituted with an abstraction. This factual concreteness underlines the unequivocal fatality of death which, in this work, becomes a powerful counterforce that undermines the “life-giving” power of the apostrophe. Not only does the speaker fail to achieve any amplification of power or “sense of continuity,” he is continuously confounded by irreversible facts and the impossibility of actually speaking to the dead woman. The autobiographical-documentary-factual aspect of the poems denies the speaker the ability to breathe life into the addressee; instead it is she who insistently pulls him to her, to the void of death. This is the point where the apostrophe, in fact, reveals itself to be a prosopopoeia—a device by which the poet imbues an imagined, absent, or dead person with the ability to speak, a kind of dubbing of a “voice-from-beyond-the-grave.” However, as Paul de Man writes, the prosopopoeia always carries a veiled threat: it is an “actual entry into the frozen world of the dead” (de Man 1984, 78). Shai Ginsburg expands on this point:

The effect of the voice is double. On the one hand, it points to the continued link between the worlds of the living and the dead, thus offering consolation. On the other hand, however, the voice contains a threat: it makes it no longer possible to simply identify speech with the living and silence with the dead…. The voice of the dead not only reminds us of our mortality but leads us in a very real way—whether we are willing or not—into the world of the dead. (Ginsburg 2016, 262)

The prosopopoetic moment is especially prominent in a poem such as “*BeChalomo*” (“In His Dream”), in which the deceased Yempa addresses the poet. This poem situates the event in a very precisely identified place and time: King George Street in Tel Aviv, during a dream experienced approximately six months after Yempa’s death by Guy Bocati—a well-known musician closely associated with Wieseltier’s circle of friends. The characters, place, and time are all mentioned by name, and yet all this grounding in reality pulls one toward the dream experience, the eternity of the poem. Like the dream, the entire poem is based on the principle of displacement: Bocati’s dream is displaced into Wieseltier’s voice so that the poet is able to “dream” the dream in the poem and make it his own dream. The garden is Meir Garden—no longer just a well-known public park in Tel Aviv, but the scene of an Orphic encounter between the living and the dead, the secret garden of Meir Wieseltier himself, at the entrance to which Yempa stands like one of the cherubs who hold up the blade of the turning sword, preventing access to the Tree of Life.

**In His Dream**

In his dream we two were walking down King George Street

He and I along the low fence of Meir Garden

And here she is,

Suddenly right at the garden gate –

He was engulfed in joy, weirdly so, for he knew she was quite dead

he could not hold back and exclaimed: Here is Yempa!

And I just said: Be quiet for a moment.

And then she addressed us:

**Too bad you are not truly alive**

And he threw at her: Says you!

And I told him:

You don’t really think you can be right more than a dead person, do you?

The poem is based on the dream of my friend Guy Bocati, who was also a loving and admiring friend of Yampa. He told me that he had had a dream lately: in his dream he and I are walking down King George Street, on the sidewalk next to Meir Garden, and there, at the garden gate, Yempa suddenly appears. He is startled, because he knows she is dead, but is very happy that she is there, and says to me: Here is Yempa! And I say to him: Be quiet for a moment. Then Yampa turns to us and says: Too bad you are not truly alive. And Guy retorts: Says you! Then I tell him: You don’t really think you can be more right than a dead person, do you.

[December 6, 2015, six months after her death]

The poem works on the same principle of reversal that dominates the entire collection. The encounter in the dream reveals the fierce vitality of the dead woman as opposed to the lack thereof among the living characters: a reversal of life and death. The poet and his friend are the ones who are not “truly alive”; they seem like pale ghosts in comparison to the Orphic manifestation of the deceased, who is alive in the “true world.” The mirror- or ghost-like existence of the two men is emphasized through the extensive note of clarification Wieseltier— unusually for him—appends to the poem. This additional text immediately raises the question of what need there is for such detailed commentary, which does not add any information to that already given in the poem. Its only function is to give the paratextual, documentary validation typical of a poetic memoir, attesting to the fact that the recounted events are not figments of the writer’s imagination but the stuff of “real life.” Here the documentary evidence provided is the identity of the dreamer, the friend Guy Bocati, and the precise date of the poem’s composition. However, there is no denying that this kind of validation does not require a note of clarification as long as the poem itself or one that repeats, almost word for word, the same details already cited in the poem itself with slight modification (“very happy” in place of “engulfed with joy,” etc.). This retelling creates the impression of unnecessary repetition and a kind of hollowness. The two men are doubled; they become “shadows of themselves,” akin to mechanical automatons who are doomed to keep repeating the same motions over and over again, for they are not “truly alive.”

Yet, at the same time, the clarification note works on more than this single plane of doubling the poem and reflecting it order to create a shadow or mirror-image space. In fact, the mirror image is in no sense identical to the poem it replicates. Not only that, there is no way of determining which came first and which is the reflection of the other—the poem comes before the note that reflects its content, but it is also the product of the dream story that preceded its composition, and is therefore also a reflection. The note turns this encounter between life and death into an encounter also between poetry and prose, between the grammatical past tense of the poem and the present tense of the note, and between the dream of the dreamer and the “dream” of the poet, which is the poem itself. At the same time it is a juxtaposition between a lyrical foundation and elements characteristic of a memoir, since the poem moves between the final, no-turning-back experience of death, of the sealed past, of the set calendar date, and of the fixation and freezing of reality in print for the purpose of producing a “souvenir, on the one hand, and the possibility of “continuous existence” in the liminal space opened up between the two parts of the text, that same shadow netherworld at the edge of the garden. This is the double function of the poetic grief memoir: its anchoring in reality pulls one toward the singular, ephemeral and unrepeatable experience of life; yet, the conversation with the deceased pulls one toward the opposite pole, that of figures suspended in a kind of placeless eternity that confers upon them the status of the abstract. At the heart of this stretching of the boundaries of lyricism is the prosopopoeia signaling the downward trajectory of things, their propensity to move in one single, irreversible direction.