**Poetic Memoirs: The turn to self-documentation in Israeli contemporary poetry**

Dr. Shira Stav, Department of Hebrew Literature, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev

Hebrew Poetry of the last three decades shows a clear turn towards personal documentation and auto/biographical writing, which emphasizes values of authenticity, actuality, and materiality. While life stories and memoirs have been written from the dawn of literature and have also been an important part of the growth of modern Hebrew literature, it seems that in the history of Hebrew literature the growing stream of memoiristic, biographical, and autobiographical literature in the current period – known as the ‘era of the memoir’- is indeed unmatched. Scholarly inquiry into the rise of the memoir has dealt almost solely with prose works. I aim to widen the field of discussion to poetry and identify and define the poetic memoir as a genre category with its own characteristics, which call for description, conceptualization, and interpretation. I suggest that the formation of this poetic form affects, expands, and changes both the nature of contemporary poetry and the nature of life writing.

Many prominent contemporary Israeli poets publish poetic works that meet the description of memoirs:

* The speaker in these works is openly the empirical ‘I’ of the poet
* These works document an experience, or an event, or a person, or a place, or a time, from the concrete or historic reality of the poet’s life
* Usually, these works mention concrete real details – names, sites, dates and/or events – that the readers can verify in principle
* These works do not represent a single moment or image as in a lyric poem, nor do they aim to encompass an overall lifetime, but are complete collections of poetry that focus on a certain subject, within a defined space, with a defined duration.

This definition does not relate to poems with merely an autobiographical dimension – the likes of which have been written from the inception of modern Hebrew poetry until today. It seeks to delineate entire works dedicated to the documentation of some reality in the life of the poet, and written as a memoir in poetry. Many poetry collections published by Israeli poets in the past three decades belong to this category (among them: Rachel Halfi, Meir Wieseltier, Erez Biton, Zali Gurevich, Aharon Shabtai, Mordechai Galili, Eli Hirsh, Efrat Mishori, Dana Amir, Eran Hadas, Shlomi Hatuka, Orit Gidali, Meital Nissim, and many others). These are entire collections, which consist of poems and long poetic cycles, or works that combine poetry and prose – that meet the characteristics of a memoir. In principle, poetic memoirs can cover any subject, but several common themes recur: mourning for a loved one, figure portraits, place portraits, childhood and youth, war experiences, childbirth, journeys, and more.

My focus on works printed since the 90s does not mean that this type of writing did not exist previously - although its scope was much smaller.

In an essay published in 1999, Avner Holzman recognizes that in the 20th nineties, confessional-documentary prose became a central phenomenon in Israeli literature, especially prose that focuses on the relationship between the author and his or her parents, despite its almost absolute absence from the four previous decades. Holzman mentions 16 works, by writers such as Haim Be'er, Yoram Kanyuk, S. Yizhar, Aharon Apelfeld, etc. However, he does not distinguish between the poets he mentions, among them, Dan Pagis with the work “Father” (1991) and Natan Zach with *Death of My Mother* (1997), despite their significant differences in style and structure. These are two works by senior and influential poets who for years have been described as staying away from biography and personal exposure. In these works, they nevertheless took – as if unexpectedly – a step that seems to contradict their writing career. I see their works as a clear signal of the start of the “The Memoir Boom” in poetry, and a notable turning point in the move of many poets from the 1990s onward toward personal documentation and auto/biographical writing. In the 2000s this trend grew immensely. In fact, a significant percentage of the poetic works published today are poetic memoirs.

In his book, Zach relates briefly – and somewhat apologetically – to his ‘unexpected’ entry into ‘confessional-documentary’ writing:

I never wrote about ‘fresh’ experiences. The term ‘experiential’ itself always repulsed me. Did I ever ‘experience’ a poem? Perhaps it is the poem that experienced me? This would make no less sense, perhaps even more. Maybe the correct term would be ‘from experience,’ but this, too, is imprecise. No poem was ever written completely ‘from experience.’ The poem itself is an ‘experience,’ a verbal experience, through words. And what would I call a poem, or a part of that poem, that does not stem from my own experience? In my previous poems I never wrote about current events, or about any of my family members. This is how things turned out, unplanned as they were.

Is it because I fear the exposure, hesitant to bare my sorrow – and not only mine – to the public domain? If so, does it result from my education, or from my… fear of the public […]. “In the meantime, she returns to me whenever I sleep, in my dreams”; but this is not explicitly true. She only returned in the poem […]. What are these fabricated ‘signs’ that find their way into every verbal attempt, with the intention of intensifying its emotional content, and how else can they be stopped without harming the very ability to write poetry?

“A tear is an intellectual thing.” Once, I quoted Thomas Hardy who quoted this line from one of William Blake’s famous poems […]. This statement is perverse, and stems from the same attempt, in poetry, to escape the ‘real thing,’ that is never a poem. Yet, even so, what a wonderful ‘poetist’ aphorism. But here, in these pages, only things as they are. Not poetry” (Zach 1997, 75).

Zach’s meta-poetic vignette appears at the center of his memoir, among other personal documentary sections. It appears to be a kind of apology, or a moment in which Zach ‘gets a hold of himself’ and asks: Why am I writing about these experiences? Is this even poetry? What is the point of writing about personal experiences? And what would make them an intellectual matter? Perhaps writing the vignette itself is what makes it so.

Zach notes that it is the fiction that makes a poem a poem. As the famous saying (attributed to both Jean Cocteau and Picasso) goes, Art is a lie that tells the truth. The “real thing” is never a poem; therefore, in this text, which seems to relate true and realistic things, there is no poetry. When he quotes a line from a poem he wrote about his mother – “In the meantime, she returns to me whenever I sleep, in my dreams” – he attests that he never dreamt of his mother, but rather, he lied in the poem. But did he lie? Is the poem itself not a dream? A dream dreamed by the poet.

Zach writes: “Here, in these pages, only things as they are. Not poetry” – and immediately after, quotes a poem (of Paul Celan’s).

With these words, Zach formulates the conscious aesthetic norms in the spirit of Pound, Eliot, and the school of “New Criticism,” those who called for a “continued extinction of the personality” (Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*). He sharply distinguishes between his poetry, especially as set in literary discourse – anti-experiential and distant from personal, familial, or social experience – and between “these pages” (written as diary-like fragments in prose, in the poet’s hand, including poetic sections as well) that express his “sorrow” in public, and are, therefore, “not poems.”

Zach is clearly torn between opposing demands. On the one hand is his need to be a poet, which means refining emotion into something else, turning sorrow into an intellectual and objective matter. On the other hand – some things just happen, unpremeditated. His words reflect an ambivalent fluctuation between spontaneity, manifest in the immediate expression of experience and emotion, and strict poetic requirements.

“A tear is an intellectual thing.” Zach quotes Thomas Hardy, who quotes William Blake, and adds that while this is a perverse statement, it is also a wonderfully poetic one. This ambivalence, between the “perverse” and the “poetic” here becomes the identifying mark of poetry, indirectly also classifying his book *Mot Imi* (“My Mother’s Death”) as a poetic work, despite Zach’s disclaimer which immediately follows. Zach attaches himself to the chain of quoters (Blake-Hardy-Zach-and Zach quoting an earlier Zach), presenting himself as a poet who determines that here will appear only “things as they are” and not some poetic perversion. However, those “things as they are” in his fragmented memoir themselves appear to be a perverse poetic act: Being a poet is perverse, as it means, in this book, to tear your mother’s dead body to shreds. Zach’s very assertion that these are “things as they are” invites doubt and skepticism.

Michael Gluzman reads Zach’s avoidance of biography as the poetics of obliteration, which serve the great need of repressing a traumatic past (Gluzman 2018). This view has the conflict to which Zach attests – between the poetic values he set for himself in his early poetry and the real need for documenting experience in writing – acting as an inner psychologist. But perceiving this from a genre viewpoint, relating to the characteristics of the poetic memoir, identifies a conflict whose main component is poetic, which is caught up in the fundamental tension between aesthetics and the representation of reality. This is a tension that Zach seems to ‘solve’ – but doesn’t really – when he defines the text as “not poetry.” In fact, in this vignette Zach raises the most relevant ars poetica questions, ones that stand at the heart of the act of writing.

What is troubling Zach?

The emphasis placed on the concrete biographical details in the poetic memoir counterbalance the basic norms of lyrical poetry. The traditional term ‘lyrical I’ refers to a subjective soul that is not dependent upon time and space. Helen Vendler writes of the ‘lyrical I’’s endless desire for abstraction and the absence of social markers: This is a “voice to which one can perhaps attach a specific detail– that it belongs to a black man, or an old man, or a woman, or a monk. However, one will usually not discover whether he is a black man who was born in Boston or in Atlanta, or if he is old, his exact age. And if it is a woman, whether she is married, and if a monk, at what point did he take his vows.” The lyrical voice is perceived to be abstract, eternal, and universal. This enables the readers’ immediate identification, despite their disparate eras and locations, and suggests they integrate their subjectivity with that of the poetic speaker without necessarily involving a tangible signified beyond the text (Vendler 1996, 3). By contrast, the ‘I’ of the poetic memoir is well-connected with tangible external references, making the reading embody both the empirical existence *and* the lyrical existence – even in places where they seem to pull in opposite directions.

The memoir is singular in that it places the principle of reality at the heart of the reading process. Just as observing a photograph is saturated with the awareness that what we see ‘was really there’ (Barth 1988, 85), so, too, the knowledge that matters transmitted within a text actually occurred critically influences the process of reading. This does not mean that readers will necessarily assume each statement to be factual, nor would they be concerned with verifying the information they are given. However, the intimacy created between the readers and the speaker is based on categories different than those found in ‘regular’ lyrical poetry.

During the 1960s, Zach’s critical poetry and works set forth a new ideal for Hebrew poetry, that of the ‘personal’ I, who speaks in the first person and is differentiated from the collective; this poetry matches “the poet’s biographical reality or his vision of his environment” (Zach 1966). As Hamutal Tzamir demonstrated, this called for both an individual and universal ‘I,’ simultaneously. Tzamir notes the internal contradiction that lies at the foundation of Zach’s poetry – and at the State’s foundational generation as well – between the specific/concrete, and the abstract/general, a contradiction that is based upon an imagined opposition between the personal and the national (Tzamir 2006). Her claim shows that Zach’s poetry made the biographical dimension redundant by creating a national ‘I’ whose attachment to the State was taken for granted. Poetry in the 50s and 60s attempted to shake off the collectivist norms of the Palmach literature; and yet, the ‘I’ it created remained, for the most part, a-biographical and non-specific. Even Zach’s famous critique of Alterman (1966), followed by Wiseltier’s critique of Zach (1981), regarding the lack of any personal or concrete dimension in their poetry, did not call for autobiographies. Wieseltier, for example, condemns the autobiographical ‘I’ in Amichai’s early works as emotional, immature, and “gluttonous,” and posits that the “biological-biographical I, on its own, cannot serve as a sufficient foundation for new poetics” (Ibid., 411).

It seems that every poetic generation ‘blames’ its predecessors for not being sufficiently concrete, specific, and ‘real.’ Such is Zach’s critique of Alterman, and Wieseltier’s critique of Zach; and such is Aharon Shabtai’s critique of both Zach and Wieseltier together, in the manifesto lists he published during the 1980s. Shabtai called for a ‘change in format’ and presented a piercing critique of the ‘I’ ubiquitous in Hebrew poetry, an ‘I’ that lacks specificity, and is held captive, he claims, in the mechanisms of idealization, personas, and fixed images (Shabtai 1985, 58). Twenty years later, Haviva Pedaya also attacked the shifty and disconnected ‘universal I’ norms in Zach’s version, and called for poetry that would express specific memories, images, and events, firmly situated within their cultural, historical, and linguistic norms, a “realistic, concrete, precise, and profound poetry” (Pedaya 2006).

However, Pedaya’s reading of Zach is based on his early poetry and on the manifestos he wrote during the 50s and 60s. Since then, Zach’s writing underwent significant changes. Sigal Naor Perlman points out that from the 80s onward, his writing incorporates explicit autobiographical elements that peak in his collection *Kevan She-ani ba-Sviva* (“Because I am around,” 1996). She claims that this trend is related to political changes and to the death of Zach’s mother (Naor Feldman 2014), but can also be related to a general shift in contemporary Israeli literature – and of Zach himself in his book *Mot Imi* (the ‘Death of my Mother,’ 1997) – toward autobiographical and memoir-style writing. Indeed, even the development of the critique of biographical reading into Zach’s poetry – as found in the works of Perlman and Gluzman – is an integral part of contemporary poetry’s shift toward the era of the memoir.

The poetic processes of poets such as Aharon Shabtai, Harold Schimmel, and Mordechai Galili in the 1980s essentially heralded and promoted the shift toward personal documentation and the poetic memoir, a trend that gained popularity over the following decades. Even in places where their poetry is not characteristically a memoir or narrative, poets clearly prefer an increase in concrete reality details as taken from their empirical surroundings and from their own personal biographies. This, without transitioning to generalizations, symbolism, or elevations, is a type of poetry in which the details of reality appear as *‘peshat’* and not as *‘derash,’* in their simple meaning and not in their homiletical meaning, without being interpreted as ‘ideal.’ In contrast with the anti-biographical trend, which tends to evaluate poetry as more ‘artistic’ when it omits the specificity of life materials, or when it elevates them to an ideational abstraction through sublimation, the contemporary poetic memoir usually takes the opposite strategy: It exposes and underscores the personal experience and the specific and concrete reality materials in and of themselves, and does not seek to distance itself from them or to ‘elevate’ itself above them.

Pursuit of non-symbolic concreteness, as well as the creation of splintered and fragmentary sequences and the presentation of a fluid and/or fragmented ‘I,’ a penetrable ‘I’ that takes shape from the web of associations and environment in which it is found – these characteristics differentiate the contemporary poetic memoir from most of the autobiographical poetry that preceded it.[[1]](#footnote-1) In Bialik’s poetic memoirs, as well as in those of U.Z. Greenberg, Goldberg, Amichai, Horovitz, and others, personal experience is used to demonstrate broad and abstract meanings, and fortifies the lyrical ‘I’ as a coherent structure that validates itself. Conversely, today’s poetic memoir refrains from posing personal experience as a symbol, myth, or paradigm. Rather it presents a fragile and fragmented ‘I,’ where the veracity of its position is questionable.

The poetic memoir often does not create a coherent, autonomic, and distinct ‘I,’ but rather the opposite. It breaks apart this coherence and exposes it as false. Several memoirs – Zach’s *Mot Imi* (the “Death of My Mother”) is a good example of this – present a fragmented narrative that crumbles the subjectivity and undermines the borders between the inner and the outer, between falsehood and truth, between the ‘I’and the other or the environment, and expose the shaky foundations of the ‘I’’s pretension of a subjective, autonomous existence. These texts present the ‘I’ within a web of associations, thus avoiding solipsism: That which is ‘personal’ is usually not only personal but social or political as well, framed within a concrete world and saturated with a strong awareness of the surrounding world and realistic life conditions, while reflecting upon them and upon itself and upon the act of writing. In *Mot Imi*, for example, the autobiographical aspect is focused neither on the ‘I’ nor exclusively on the mother’s image, but rather presents, through the family narrative, the cultural environment of an entire community, the German-Haifa elite with its self-identity as refugees and their complete detachment, a community in whose common traits death holds a very prominent place.

Poetic memoirs are, therefore, the product of coping with two opposing stressors. On the one hand, a centralizing force pulls inward toward the poetic norm of both the ‘I’ and the lyrical, an anonymous and impersonal ‘I’ that aspires to not surrender to the concrete constraints of time, place, and community. On the other hand, there are decentralizing forces –personal sequences, identities, concrete details, as well as historical, geographical, and social realities. Every poetic memoir is situated within a scale that ranges from anonymity to the personal, from the general to the specific, and is constructed within a constellation unique to its placement within this spectrum.

Twenty-five years have passed since Zach published his book, a period which also witnessed changes in the sub-genre of the poetic memoir. Poet contemporaries of Zach and Pagis, especially those of the 60s and 70s generation, turn to the poetic memoir at an advanced stage of their poetic career, having first written collections in other styles. This is true for Gurevich, Rachel Halfi, Erez Biton, and others. Conversely, young poets today may publish a poetic memoir in their second collection of poems (such as Hadas Gil’ad, Shlomi Hatuka, or Noa Barkat), or even in their first, such as Sharon Arik Cohen in his book *Rashomon Maroka’i* (“Moroccan Rashomon”) or Amichai Shalev in his book *Mercicide* (2019) and Yair Asulin in his book *Minchen* (“Munich,” 2014). This is one indication of the upswing in this type of literature, shared by seasoned and novice poets alike. However, most members of the new generation do not seem concerned by the issues that troubled Zach.

Thus, in a complete reversal of Zach’s apologetics, Maya Tevet’s book *Kedei le-Histader ‘im ha-Matzav* (“To Cope with the Situation”) is a poetic memoir that documents episodes from the poet’s personal life while living in Canada, or when her mother died, or while quarantined during Covid. At the book-launching in Beit Bialik, the poems were screened alongside pictures of the poem’s protagonists: the author, her daughter, and her mother. Not only was there no attempt to separate the poems from the life materials that inspired them, their concrete realistic background was explicitly declared, and the para-textual moments played a crucial role in this grounding. Rimbaud’s famous declaration “‘I’ is another” became a kind of slogan that defined the lyrical speaker; today, it seems, ‘I is I’ and not another.

1. The memoir-poems of the beginning of the twenty-first century are almost the opposite of the memoir-poems from the second half of the twentieth century. U.Z. Greenberg, for example, uses the autobiographical element to mythicize the self and present the ideological moment as pure ‘truth,’ in ways that bolster the creation of the poet’s prophetic persona (Mintz 2003; Oppenheimer 2004). In Shlonsky’s poetry, the personal experience undergoes generalization through metaphor and symbolization which elevates it to the spheres of history and culture (Miron 1999, 325); while Leah Goldberg channels the autobiographical element to the sum of universal and existential experiences (Bar Yosef 2012, 19). Later poets, such as Amichai and Horovitz, place an experiencing and perceiving soul at the heart of the poem, and the emotive claims the role of concrete referential. For example, Horovitz’s poem *Tom u-Tehom ve-Kayam* (“Innocence and Depth and Real,” from *Narkisim le-Malkot Madmena*, 1972) includes concrete autobiographical details related to the poet being orphaned from his father when he was eight years old, however, these details lend it an existential meaning more than a personal experience, and bolster the poem’s contemplative aspect, that which questions God’s existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)