Natan Zach and the Poetic Memoir

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Nathan Zach’s poetry and critical writings set a new ideal in Hebrew poetry, featuring a “personal” self who speaks in the singular and separates itself from the collective, whose poetry corresponds with “the biographical reality of the poet or the vision of his surroundings.”[[1]](#endnote-1) As Hamutal Tzamir has shown, Zach’s assertion represents a simultanous claim to both an individual and a universal “I.” Tzamir analyzes the internal contradiction at the foundation of Zach’s poetry—and, in her view, at the foundation of the poetry of the entire “Statehood Generation” (the Israeli writers of the 1960s): between the specific and the concrete, the abstract and the general; a tension rooted in an imagined opposition between the personal and the national.[[2]](#endnote-2) Extending Tzamir’s argument, Zach’s poetry can be said to render the biographical dimension redundant precisely by creating a national and local “I,” whose belonging is self-evident. Despite the attempt of the poetry from the 1950s, and its creators, now known as the *Likrat* (“Towards”) Generation, to shake off the collectivist norms of Palmach literature, the “I” that was shaped at that time generally remained non-biographical and usually lacked specificity. Zach’s well-known critique of Alterman for the lack of a personal and concrete dimension in his poems (later echoed by Wieseltier’s similar critique of Zach)[[3]](#endnote-3) nevertheless did not call for autobiography.

In criticism of Zach’s poetry, there is a general consensus that, as Michael Gluzman puts it, his poetry places, an “‘I’ that is elusive and withdrawn, devoid of biography and history” at its center.[[4]](#endnote-4) In a manifesto that has already become a landmark in the criticism of Hebrew poetry, Haviva Pedaya attacked the norms of Zach’s elusive, detached “universal I,” and called for the urgent contraction of this poetics, which, according to Pedaya, follows in the tradition of Western literature and has dominated Hebrew poetry since the 1960s. She argues that the “I” in Zach’s formulations “covers up un-situatedness in place, in time, in language,” and that it is essential to achieve distance from it in order “to hasten the breakthrough of new and additional poetic modes,” which will include “a more complete presentation of narrative, concrete descriptions, characters, events, complete images.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

Pedaya’s appeal to Zach’s poetry as a model for the “I” that has become rooted in Hebrew poetry relies on a uniform reading of his poetry as Hebrew modernism, based on T.S. Eliot’s claim to an impersonal “I,” and to the erasure of historical and biographical elements from the content of poetry. This approach to reading Zach’s poetry is based on his early poetry and the manifestos he wrote in the 1950s and 1960s. Later on, his poetry underwent radical transformation. Sigal Naor Perelman has demonstrated that starting from the 1980s, autobiographical elements began to penetrate his poetry more and more, reaching their peak in the collection *Kayvan she’ani basevivah*, published in 1996.[[6]](#endnote-6) She argues that this trend is related to political changes and the death of Zach’s mother.[[7]](#endnote-7) Gluzman writes that the “poetics of erasure” in Zach’s poetry began to crack in the 1970s, a process that culminated in the collection *Mot immi* in 1997,[[8]](#endnote-8) although he claims that “even in this book, Zach covered more than he revealed.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

In this article, I seek to link Zach’s “autobiographical turn” to the general trend in contemporary Israeli literature toward autobiographical and memoiristic writing. The autobiographical element is very pronounced in his book, *Mot immi*, which is a unique work in his ouvre. In fact, the openness of literary criticism to a biographical reading of Zach’s poetry—as in Perelman’s and Gluzman’s books—is itself an integral part of the current poetic approach to what is commonly called in criticism the “Age of the Memoir.” Of course, life stories and memories have been recorded since the dawn of literature, and, as noted, played an important role in the growth of modern Hebrew literature. It seems, however, that the ever-increasing flow of memoiristic, biographical, and autobiographical literature during this period cannot be compared to any other era in Hebrew literature: publications of life stories, autobiographies, books of memories, letters, and personal diaries, penned by writers and prominent figures, as well as by unknowns for whom this is their first book, and sometimes also their last. The interpretation of this contemporary phenomenon deals almost entirely with prose works.[[10]](#endnote-10) It seems to me that the field of discussion should be expanded to include poetry, since this trend takes on a special form in contemporary Israeli poetry: poetic memoirs.[[11]](#endnote-11)

*The Poetic Memoir*

I define poetic memoirs as poetic works that meet this description of a memoir:

* The speaker is clearly the poet, who uses the empirical first-person “I”.
* These works document an experience, event, person, place, or time from the concrete or historical reality of the poet’s life.
* Usually, these works mention 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 entire lifetime; rather, they are complete collections of poetry that focus on a certain subject, within a defined space and duration.

This definition does not relate to poems with merely an autobiographical dimension—the likes of which have existed since the inception of modern Hebrew poetry. It seeks to delineate entire works dedicated to the documentation of some reality in the poet’s life.

Many works published by Israeli poets belong to this category, especially, starting in the 1990s. I will name just a few of them here: Dan Pagis, *Abba*;[[12]](#endnote-12) Mois Benarroch, *Qinat hamehagger*;[[13]](#endnote-13)Eli Hirsh, *Tiyyul bishloshah*;[[14]](#endnote-14) Zali Gurevitch, *Yom yom*;[[15]](#endnote-15) Rachel Chalfi, *Temunah shel abba veyaldah*[[16]](#endnote-16) and *Temunah shel imma veyaldah*;[[17]](#endnote-17) Aharon Shabtai, *Tanya*;[[18]](#endnote-18) Tamir Lahav Radlmesser, *Giluy Na’ot*[[19]](#endnote-19) and *Ḥeder leshnayim*;[[20]](#endnote-20) Erez Biton, *Beit happesanterim*[[21]](#endnote-21)and *Tefarim*;[[22]](#endnote-22) Mordechai Galili, *Ratsiti lirshom nof aḥer*[[23]](#endnote-23)and hisbooks *Shnei Qolazhim*[[24]](#endnote-24) and *Masa shenigmar beriqqud*;[[25]](#endnote-25) Efrat Mishori, *Ishah nesuah veshirim bodedim*;[[26]](#endnote-26) Lali Tsipi Michaeli, *Habbayit hameshuga*[[27]](#endnote-27) and *Papa*;[[28]](#endnote-28) Eran Hadas, *Santer*;[[29]](#endnote-29) Dana Amir, *Qaddish ‘al* *ḥashekhah ve‘al or*;[[30]](#endnote-30) Shlomi Hatuka, *Iy*;[[31]](#endnote-31) and Orit Gidli, *Hate’omim*.[[32]](#endnote-32)

Some of these, such as the works of Pagis, Lahav-Radlmesser, and Amir, straddle the line between poetry and prose, blending different elements and genres, mixing poetry and prose sections, and featuring a variety of markers of the two genres (such as text with vowels, appearing in long lines, or unpunctuated text that appears in short lines).

Poetic memoirs can cover any subject, but several common recurring themes include: mourning for a loved one, portrayals of people or places, childhood and youth, war experiences, childbirth, journeys.

The abundance described above attests to the existence of a poetic channel joining the general trend towards self-documentation and auto/biographical writing, and the rise of poetic values ​​of specificity, realism, and authenticity. While this kind of writing existed in Hebrew literature even before, its scope was much smaller.

In a 1999 essay, Avner Holzman observed that confessional-documentary prose became a central phenomenon in Israeli literature during the 1990s, especially prose that focuses on the relationship between the author and his or her parents, despite its almost absolute absence in the four preceding decades. Holzman references 16 works by writers such as Haim Be’er, Yoram Kaniuk, S. Yizhar, and Aharon Appelfeld. However, he does not specifically single out the poets he mentions, Dan Pagis with *Abba* (1991) and Natan Zach with *Mot immi* (1997), despite their significant differences in style and structure. These poetic works are fragmentary, non-chronological, devoid of unity and closure; they jump from one theme to another and feature intricate concealments, “suspicious” silences, doubts, and deceptive ironic indications. They are works by two influential senior poets who, for years, were described as avoiding autobiography and personal exposure. Yet, in these works, they took – as if unexpectedly – a step that seems contradictictory to their writing careers. I view their works as a clear signal of the start of the “The Memoir Boom” in Israeli poetry, a 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 substantial portion of the poetic works published today are poetic memoirs.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The prevailing trend in Israeli poetry today diverges significantly from the version dominated by Zach’s poetry in the 1950s and 1960s—a version that, under the influence of broad movements in modern literature, which differed from the local field, gave rise to hostility towards personal history and details of real life.[[34]](#endnote-34) This hostility has gradually undergone transformation—also, in part, due to the influence of Western trends, such as the American “confessional poetry,” so that ther is an ever-increasing orientation towards poetry that records life experiences and concrete realistic content. Thus, the series of poems published by Harold Schimmel, Aharon Shabtai, and Mordechai Galili in the 1970s and 1980s can be called memoir-like in that they are spoken by an empirical concrete “I” in, and in relation to, a specific context.

The transformations that poets such as Schimmel, Shabtai, and Galili underwent in the 1980s essentially heralded and promoted the turn toward personal documentation and the poetic memoir, a trend that grew stronger over the following decades. Even when their poetry is not typically memoiristic, these poets clearly incorporate empirical, concrete details from their real surroundings and personal biographies. In their poetry, the details of reality appear as *peshat* and not as *derash*, without generalization, symbolism, interpretation, or sublimation to an “ideal.” The anti-biographical approach considers poetry to be more “artistic” when it omits specific life details or when it sublimates them through conceptual abstraction. The contemporary poetic memoir usually takes the opposite stance: it exposes and underscores personal experience and specific, real, and concrete materials in and of themselves, without seeking to distance to distance itself from them to to “elevate” itself above them.

The pursuit of non-symbolic concreteness, the crafting of splintered and fragmentary sequences, and the presentation of a permeable, fluid, and/or fragmented ‘I’ shaped by its context – these features differentiate the contemporary poetic memoir from most of the autobiographical poetry that preceded it.

The autobiographical poems from the first half of the 20th century are almost the antitheisis of works of this genre composed in the beginning of the 21st century. In the poems of Bialik, Uri Zvi Greenberg, Goldberg, and Amichai, among others, personal experience has the function of exemplifying broad and abstract meanings, fortifying the lyrical “I” as a unified structure that attacks itself. In Greenberg, for example, the autobiographical element serves to mythologize the self and to present the ideological moment as pure “truth,” in ways that strengthen the creation of the poet’s prophetic persona;[[35]](#endnote-35) In Shlonsky’s poetry, personal experience is generalized through metaphors and symbolism that elevate it to the realms of history and culture;[[36]](#endnote-36) while Leah Goldberg channels the autobiographical element into universal and existential experiences.[[37]](#endnote-37) Later poets, such as Yehuda Amichai or Yair Horvitz, place at the center of their poems a soul that experiences and perceives, so that emotiveness is its main characteristic, rather than concrete referentiality. In contrast, today’s poetic memoir refrains from posing personal experience as a symbol, myth, or paradigm. Often, it does not create a coherent, autonomic, and distinct ‘I,’ but rather the opposite: a fragile and fragmented ‘I,’ with questionable authenticity.

Frequently, the poetic memoir does not create an autonomous and articulated “I” but, on the contrary, it deconstructs such coherence and exposes it as an illusion. Many poetic memoirs – and Zach’s *Mot Immi* is a good example – present a fragmented narrative that crumbles subjectivity and undermines the borders between in and out, truth and falsehood, “I” and Other or the environment, and expose the shaky foundations of the pretension of the “I” to subjectivity and autonomy. Such texts present the ‘I’ within a web of associations, thus avoiding solipsism. The ‘personal’ is usually not only personal but social or political as well. It is framed within the surrounding, concrete world and life conditions, saturated with a strong awareness of them, and reflects upon them, upon itself and upon the act of writing. In *Mot Immi*, for example, the autobiographical aspect is not focused 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 from Israeli society; a community in which the presence of death seemed to be the most dominant of their shared characteristics.

In his book *Shirat hattevuim*, Michael Gluzman writes that in his early poetry, Zach posits a solipsistic and autarkic “I,” which “exists without any need for others, is self-sufficient and completely detached from the surrounding society.” He states that the abstraction in Zach’s poetry is a “psycho-ideological act of erasure and repression”: “It appears that Zach, who asserted in several places that ‘poetry will express rapport with reality,’ turned his back, in the late 1950s, not only on socio-political reality but also on the biographical and historical sources of the ‘I.’”[[38]](#endnote-38) How then can we understand a work whose prominent attributes are so far from the poetic principles that guided not only “the early Zach,” but also the way in which the nature of his poetry has been defined in literary scholarship? For the “I” that appears in *Mot Immi* is evidently not solipsistic, not autarkic, not disconnected from its environment, and does not deny its biographical and historical sources, but rather makes them the subject of the work.

This is where I seek to read Zach’s autobiographical creation as a poetic memoir, written by a poet whose poetry was cast on the principle of distancing himself from the autobiographical. In other words, it is a text that is stretched to the breaking point between two opposing extremes pulling in contradictory directions – between the norms that Zach outlined for himself, including the figure of the foreign, alienated, and rationalist self that he created in his poems, and a poetics of an essentially different kind, built on the biographical, the specific, the identified, and the shared. Unlike Gluzman, my reading does not seek to find a psychological foundation (trauma, repression, and erasure) for Zach’s poetic choices, but rather to discuss the system of internal tensions and resistances to this work, entangled in the threads of the creation of a genre in which Zach was one of the first to operate, in its new incarnation in the poetry of the 90s. The work he produced reflects his struggle between his loyalty to the principles of his poetic portrait, and the needs of a new genre demanding a poetic change from him. *Mot Immi* is therefore the product of a struggle, in which the biographical and the concrete undergo alienation in order to meet the conditions of Zachian poetics.

*Things as They Are. Not Poetry*

In his book, Zach relates briefly – and somewhat apologetically – to his “unplanned” 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, unintentional as they were.

Is it because I fear the exposure, hesitant to bare my sorrow – and not only mine – in public? 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 impairing the very ability to write poetry?

“For a tear is an intellectual thing.” Once, I quoted Thomas Hardy, who quoted this line from one of William Blake’s famous poems […].[[39]](#endnote-39) This statement is perverse, and stems from the same attempt, in poetry, to escape the ‘real thing,’ which is never a poem. Yet, even so, what a wonderful ‘poetic’ aphorism. But here, in these pages, only things as they are. Not poetry.”[[40]](#endnote-40)

Zach’s short meta-poetic vignette appears in the heart of the memoir, among personal documentary passages. It seems like a sort of apology, or a moment when Zach “grabs hold of himself” to ask: what makes me write about these experiences? Is this poetry at all? What is the point of writing about personal experiences “from experience”? His astonishment at himself is clear to anyone familiar with his early poetry, which asserts that “when emotion fades, the right poem speaks,” or – “when loneliness is not fear / poetry is born,” and requires emotional distance from experience: “You hear the children / yelling / in their play / like through screens, sea / and you don’t flinch.”[[41]](#endnote-41)

In his words, Zach articulates conscious aesthetic norms in the spirit of Pound, Eliot, and the “New Criticism” school, which demanded a “continual extinction of personality” (as TS Eliot claimed in his influential essay “Tradition and Individual Talent”).[[42]](#endnote-42) He sharply distinguishes between his poetry, mainly as it was established in the literary discourse – anti-experiential and far from personal, family, or social experience – and “these pages” (which are written as diary-like fragments in prose – in the hands of a poet – and also include pieces of poetry), which express his “sorrow” in prose and therefore are “not poetry.” However, the short meta-poetic passage is full of internal contradictions, layers and inversions, and, in keeping with Zach’s style in poetry, abounds in deceptive, multivalent, patently not innocent expressions. Thus, his quasi-apologetic statement, “This is how things turned out, unintentionally,” which raises the question of what, in fact, was not intentional? Was the avoidance of writing about his relatives unintentional, or was it the very act of writing about them at the moment? To this, we add our knowledge that Zach, to say the least, is not precise in his words that he’d never written about a current event or about one of members of his family – in any case, his 1984 book *Anti-meḥiqon*,[[43]](#endnote-43) (and not only this book), refutes his claim.

Zach points to the view that what makes poetry poetry is the fictional element, in keeping with the saying that “art is a lie that tells the truth,” (variously attributed to Jean Cocteau or Picasso). “The real thing” will never be a poem, and therefore, this text, which transmits, so to speak, true and real things, is not poetry. By quoting a line from the poem “beintayim” (from *Anti-meḥiqon*), which appears in *Mot immi* immediately before this passage, he indicates that he did not dream of his mother at all, but fabricated this in the poem. But was he really faking? Isn’t the poem itself a dream? And this time, one dreamed by the poet? The illusion continues in the concluding line: “Here in these pages are only things as they are, not poetry,” which Zach immediately follows with a quote from a poem, by Paul Celan: “It is the truth / itself that has penetrated / into the people’s insides, / in the heart / of the fog of metaphors.” If “the truth” is actually hidden within “the lie” of poetry, what is the weight of those “things as they are,” which are not, so to speak, poetry? truth or fiction?

It is evident that Zach is torn between contradictory directions. On the one hand – his image as a poet, relying on distilling emotion into something else, and transforming the sorrow, which originates from the “real thing,” into something intellectual and objective. On the other hand –there are things that unfold “unintentionally.” His words reflect an ambivalent vacillation between spontaneity, an immediate expression of experience and emotion, and strict poetic demands to filter poetry from any personal, experiential or subjective aspect.

*What bothers Zach?*

The emphasis placed on concrete biographical details in poetic memoir is a counterforce to the fundamental norms of lyric poetry, especially in its modern incarnation, which has repudiated the idea that poetry is a genre of authentic self-representation and clear autobiographical expression. As Jonathan Culler has written, the conception of lyricism as a representation of the poet’s experience has been rejected in favor of the idea that the lyrical speaker is a fictitious construct whose position and motives must be reconstructed in an interpretive act.[[44]](#endnote-44) The general concept of the “lyric I” relates to a subjective self that is independent of time and space.

Helen Vendler writes of the endless desire of the lyric “I” for abstraction and absence of social markers: “In lyric poetry, voice is made abstract. It may tell you one specific thing about itself – that it is black, or that it is old, or that it is female, or that it is celibate. But it will not usually tell you, if it is black, that it grew up in Atlanta rather than Boston; or if it is old, how old it is; or, if it is female, whether it is married; or, if it is celibate, when it took its vows.”[[45]](#endnote-45) The lyric voice is perceived as abstract, eternal, and universal. This enables the readers’ immediate identification, despite their disparate time and place, and suggests they integrate their subjectivity with that of the poetic speaker without necessarily involving an actual reference beyond the text. By contrast, the ‘I’ of the poetic memoir is well-connected with real external references, enabling readers to hold both the empirical ‘I’ *and* the lyric ‘I’– even when they seem to pull in opposite directions.

“For a tear is an intellectual thing,” Zach quotes Thomas Hardy, who quotes William Blake (from his poem “The Gray Monk”), and adds that this is indeed a perverse statement, but it is a wonderful poetic statement. This movement between the “perverse” and the “poetic” here becomes a hallmark of poetry, and indirectly also points to the book *Mot Immi* itself as a “poetic” writing, despite Zach’s disclaimer that follows immediately after these words. Zach attaches himself to the poets’ citation chain (Blake-Hardy-Zach-and Zach, quoting Zach from time to time);[[46]](#endnote-46) that is, he presents himself as a poet to state that here there are only “things as they are” – prose, apparently – and not that poetic “perversion.” However, those “things as they are” in the fragmentary memoir that he wrote appear by themselves as a perverse poetic act, undergoing compression and disintegration in Zach’s poetic laboratory: “perversion” is a term that is not foreign to what is happening in this memoir, as anyone who reads it discovers.

For Gluzman, Zach’s avoidance of biography serves a strong need to suppress a traumatic past.[[47]](#endnote-47) From this perspective, the conflict that Zech testifies to – between the poetic values he established in his early poetry and the practical need to document an experience in writing – is an internal psychological one. But from the perspective of genre, which relates to the characteristics of the poetic memoir, one can identify a conflict whose main concern is poetic. This entails the fundamental tension between aesthetics and the representation of reality – a tension that Zach seemingly “resolves” – but, in fact, does not resolve at all – by defining the text as “not poetry.” In this vignette, Zach raises the most relevant questions of Ars Poetica, the core questions about writing.

Are those “things as they are” prose or poetry? First, I believe that Zach’s text does not fully comply with any genre definitions. In contrast to Zach’s attempt to establish a sharp distinction between poetry and “non-poetry,” it seems that his text moves freely between them, and in many ways is closer to what is commonly called prose poetry. In a lecture entitled “On the Prose Poem,” which he gave at at the**Poetry Festival in Rotterdam** on June 1, 2010, the poet Charles Simic described the difficulty of defining this form: most treatments of the subject do not go beyond the tautology of observing that prose poetry is, simply, poems written in prose. Thus, for example, in the introduction to the anthology *The Prose Poem*, the editor Michael Benedikt wrote that a prose poem is a poem that intensively uses all the qualities of poetry, with the exception of line breaks.[[48]](#endnote-48) Zach may not use “all the poetic features” in this memoir (he avoids, for example, rhyming or repetition of short units), but his poetic voice and stamp are clearly visible in it.

Simic, who wrote many prose-poems, points out the formal freedom that is characteristic of these poems, and the quality of “non-planning” at their foundation, their informal, unambitious, sometimes awkward, sometimes hasty nature, “like the rapid, unfinished caricatures left behind on café napkins,” which undercuts the conscious and heavy-headed aesthetic nature of “serious” poetry. In his view, “Prose poetry is a monster-child of two incompatible impulses, one which wants to tell a story and another, equally powerful, which wants to freeze an image, or a bit of language, for our scrutiny. In prose, sentence follows sentence till they have had their say. Poetry, on the other hand, spins in place.” This raises a suspicion for us that there is more to it than than meets the eye, and stimulates our imagination to make associations between scattered components. Prose-poems, writes Simic, “look like prose and act like poems, because, despite the odds, they make themselves into fly-traps for our imagination.”[[49]](#endnote-49)

The rhythmic fragments that Zach wrote also express something of the same “clash” between prose and poetry, since many of them operate in a way that impedes the formation of a narrative, urging us to dwell on the details presented in it. However, more than that, in my opinion, Zach’s book invites us to examine it as poetry (written “in prose”) precisely because Zach himself examines it in relation to his own criteria as a poet. Nowhere in his book does he simply declare: “This time I have chosen to write prose” – a declaration that would simplify the dilemma, perhaps even resolve it. Rather, he declares – in the summary of a convoluted and complex fragment – that what is written is “things as they are,” because they do not live up to his own demands of himself as a poet. The whole matter is presented by him as a problem, imbued with acute ambivalence about his own deed. The very assertion that here is “not poetry” establishes poetry as a haunting phantom pain, or as a ghost that casts its great shadow over that which is written and sets strict standards for it. Thus, Zach’s assertion that these are “things as they are” invites skepticism and objection, especially against the background of Zach’s own views as a poet and literary critic. Dan Miron describes Zach as “the most anti-Aristotelian and anti-mimetic critic,” who “based his critical theory and practice on the rejection of mimesis, in which he saw, at least at the beginning of his poetic path, an illusion, something that cannot be realized and at the same time is also unnecessary.”[[50]](#endnote-50) What is the place of “things as they are” for someone whose literary work expresses such a fundamental suspicion of the possibility of writing “things as they are”?

It goes without saying that the memoir, like all types of Life Writing, is a genre that is not at all taken to represent – and in its modern incarnation it does not pretend to represent – “things as they are,” or to insist on the validity of the experiences described in it as irrefutable facts. In keeping with Paul de Man’s diagnosis, that an autobiographical text is not only a product of a life lived, but also “produces” a life, determining the portrait of the character and its life using the tools of the linguistic medium,[[51]](#endnote-51) it is understood that the extratextual reality does not necessarily precede the text , but is produced by lyrical expression. Memoirs, in short, do not present themselves as a stable and final truth but as a “form of truth” (from among several possible forms). Here the proximity of the memoir to poetry is also discernible, since poetry, too, is a genre whose claim to “truth” does not rely on factual validity but on the relationship between form and self-expression.

As much as this applies to the form of Zach’s poetic memoir, it calls attention to itself and emphasizes precisely the extent to which it is not about “things as they are,” but actually about the **impossibility of transmitting them**. The final text is fragmented, incomplete, composed of gaps, empty spaces, and silences, more than a continuous discourse; containing more hints than statements; jumping between earlier and later events, between documentation of the present and memories, associations, and impressions. The fragmentation of the text is parallel to the process of fragmentation of the mother herself, of her disintegrating consciousness and body, and it illustrates the same loss of logic that blurs the distinction between imagination and reality. “So it often was: her words began with something that sounded logical. Afterwards, the logic of the words got messed up.” And as a reader of poetry, Zach adds: “Usually I was able to decipher, after a while, the connection of the associations.”[[52]](#endnote-52)

*Betrayal, guilt, and filth*

The tone of apology and justification for the memoir recurs throughout the book. Already on the first page, Zach comments:

I find it necessary to apologize for releasing these private pages into the public domain [...]. Maybe they will be of interest even to those who have not been through similar experiences. After all, our lives are as similar to each other as they are different.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define the memoir as the life story of a subject situated historically in a social environment, as an observer or as an active participant.[[54]](#endnote-54) In contrast to the common criticism of memoir writing as a narcissistic expression of self-centeredness at the expense of awareness of and attachment to the surrounding world, memoirs – and Zach’s book as a whole – are usually written in connection and relationsip with the community and the space in which they are created.[[55]](#endnote-55) Reading them is often based on feelings of identity, empathy, and shared life experiences – after all, “our lives are similar to each other,” although Zach’s distinctive style is deceptive even in these simple words, since “even those who have not been through similar experiences” might find interest – because their lives are (nevertheless) similar.

Zach’s conspicuous awareness of the dimension of reading and reception of his text –what he calls the “public domain” – is related to the characteristics of the genre in which he immerses himself here for the first time, with considerable doubts and reservations. For the memoir is a work written within a public, shared, and communicative space – one that requires a poet, who has thus far attempted to isolate himself, and usually placed himself at a demonstrable distance from others, a distance that is necessary to him for the very sake of writing (“I sit on the edge of the street / and look at people / they don’t know / that I am looking at them”). Zach opens the work with the circumstances of the publication of the unusual text that he presents to his readers this time: he returned from the funeral of his friend, the writer Emile Habibi in Haifa, and searched, “muddleheaded,” for translations that he wanted to publish. As he opened drawer after drawer, he, again, “muddleheaded,” flipped through the disorganized pages. The repetition of the expression “muddleheaded” sets the stage for the “muddledness” of the fragmentary text presented to us, as well as for implicit similarities between the mother’s dementia and the son’s distracted voice. At the same time, it emphasizes the “fateful” coincidence of the event – a clear sign of poetry, which turns a tear into an “intellectual thing,” meaning that it bestows fateful design and meaning upon unexplained coincidences:

In the third drawer, I found a bundle of handwritten notes I didn't remember. I sat down and started reading. It soon became clear to me that I’d written them many years ago, right after my mother’s death. The more I continued reading, things became more and more difficult. If I had not found them, by chance, these pages would have remained hidden in the plastic drawer.

Strange, I mused, a person returns from a funeral and finds, just then, pages he wrote, but doesn’t remember writing, fifteen years ago, about his mother’s death.

The death of a friend after a terrible illness. Anglican Cemetery. Haifa. A drawer that had been closed for years. A forgotten bunch of pages. No, I don’t believe in coincidences.[[56]](#endnote-56)

These old pages served as the raw material from which Zach composed the memoir, after he added some notes from the present time of composition. Although Zach does not disclose which of the fragments were written sometime in the past and which were composed close to the printing of the book, it can be inferred that the poem “Meanwhile” on page 73 (taken from his *Anti-meḥiqon*) serves as a sort of transition between the earlier notes and the later ones. In terms of chronological order, the discovery of the pages and the decision to publish them occurred between these two “sections.” What happened between the “then” and “now”? What, then, leads Zach to publish a text that is not intended for publication? The discovery of the pages is his second encounter with the text that he wrote, and from a distance of fifteen years, a distance that makes him a reader of those pages more than the one who wrote them. It seems to me that his placement in the position of reader is what opens up the possibility of the memoir, which involves participation in a community, in a shared social space, among others similar to him.

And yet, it is impossible not to feel Zach’s discomfort with his own act. It seems that the realization that this time it is a matter of writing rooted in real-life experiences causes him embarrassment, since this has the effect of inviting the readers to identify his words with himself, to connect the described events to his actual life. Peter Abbs writes that in such a situation, the danger arises that the autobiographical situation will become interesting in itself, and its power will only be expressed by encouraging identification with the emotional power of the experience, and not with the aesthetic power of the text. Thus, reducing the complex patterns of the enactment of the self in the speaking “I” to a monophonic autobiographical subject means destroying the wealth of interpretive possibilities.[[57]](#endnote-57) Zach’s unconvincing justification for the publication of his memoir – “our lives are as similar to each other as they are different” – can therefore be understood as another attempt to obscure the concrete specificity of his portrait, to resist that narrowing identification that would confine his lyrical “I” within a monophonic autobiographical range.

This reluctance is, in my eyes, at the core of *Mot immi*. Throughout the memoir, Zach weaves insinuations that refer to the autobiographical act he performs as a shameful, polluted, and “murderous” act, and therefore also soaked in guilt and self-flagellation. Many fragments in the book illustrate situations of financial loss, reduction in status, and the loss of social and personal dignity. Examples include his father sinking into debt, and being forced to work in construction, and to sell vegetables in a store across from the coffee shop where his poet son would drink and get drunk, or the celebrated artist whose last exhibition draws no visitors. Alongide these, are attempts, sometimes pathetic and sometimes extreme, to “maintain dignity” – beginning with the Jewish father reporting to the Nazi consulate in Paris to register change of address, or the sick mother trying to conceal her blindness, and ending with an uncle who ended his life after being accused of embezzlement. The proliferation of references to the question of honor reinforces the general impression that Zach understands his own act – writing the book and releasing it to the public –as an act that violates the honor of his family members, and his own honor – as both a person and a poet.[[58]](#endnote-58)

It is clear that the guilt and embarrassment that the text expresses are also related, at least in part, to an acute sense of ethical betrayal involving the loss of privacy and the exposure of the “I,” parents, and relatives in their weakness, disgrace and smallness. “Without betrayal, memoirs would not exist,” writes Nancy K. Miller,[[59]](#endnote-59) and it seems that Zach does not seek to soften or mitigate the act of betrayal, or to activate various mechanisms that could help him exonerate himself from the guilt involved in it. His treatment of the person his mother was before her disintegration are few and far between, appearing in scattered details that do not coalesce into a character with a clear and distinct identity, and the text only reaches these at a late stage. The readers’ acqaintance with the mother begins precisely in her moments of disgrace, moments of filth and degradation, secretions, and decline:

Once, after despairing, I told her about the pile of used toilet paper that had accumulated near the toilet in the boathroom. She responded to that: It’s not me. It is the landlord who forces me to do such things to get me out of the apartment.

Another time she said: “It’s you. You want to see me in my shame.” Yet another time, I found her hitting one hand with the other hand and scolding herself: “It’s not good what you’re doing. It’s wrong. They’re going to kick you out of the house because of this.”

About the building, which wasn’t particularly noisy but also not as quiet as the houses she was accustomed to in Europe, she would say: “This is not a good house. You can hear the neighbors going down the stairs and using the bathroom. A house where you hear the neighbors going down the stairs and using the bathroom is not a good house. It’s not my house, either.[[60]](#endnote-60)

This fragment – the third in the book’s sequence – illustrates well the “poetic” character of the Zachian prose, its nature, as Simic described it, as “a flytrap” that captures the readers’ imagination and stimulates it to create connections between different components of the text.

Fundamentally, this section deals with the oppressive sense of disgrace associated not only with the mother,[[61]](#endnote-61) but also, and primarily, with the act of memoir writing. The rebuke of the mother about the used paper that has accumulated, comes only two pages after the son confessed to his readers that the book in his possession is a product of “used papers” found in a forgotten drawer. This deed is laced, as noted above, with sharp guilt, articulated in the form of the mother’s accusation: “It’s you. You want to see me in my disgrace.” Thus, by means of the “It’s you,” he signals that his words about the mother actually pertain to him, himself, and to the step he is taking here in order to see – and to show – his mother (and himself) in their disgrace. The moment of identification and empathy with the mother occurs precisely at the moment of separation from her and betrayal of her, a step entwined with a deep internal conflict and unresolvable ambivalence – one hand striking the other, the hand that writes: “It’s not good… It’s wrong. They’re going to kick you out of the house because of this.” What is the “house” from which the threat of expulsion hangs? In a certain sense, this house is the poetry from which Zach feels he is expelling himself – a house that people can now invade, unlike in the past, to be exposed to its filth, and “use its toilet,” meaning to contaminate it with their selves. Those unreadable “invaders” (the readers) parallel the writing son himself, as written in another fragment – “chanced to be, unbidden, in the family picture.”[[62]](#endnote-62)

Dan Miron presents a portrait of “the early Zach” as a poet “with an ethos of doubt and tireless self-examination,”[[63]](#endnote-63) who deals with the epistemological limits of knowledge and clarification of the distinctions between falsehood and truth. As we have seen, the opening of *Mot immi* also addresses these questions, which Zach never actually let go of. It seems that the mother’s state of old age, dementia, and disintegration evokes a well-known anxiety in Zach’s poetry, which Miron describes as follows:

The anxiety about decline, loss of concentration, sinking, and death becomes, for Zach, anxiety about a state of ignorance and a false understanding of reality. Zach’s fear of death is much less than the fear of the romanticization of death, that is, of the false vision, which allows itself to see in death what is not and cannot be, to charge it with mystical meanings, or to glorify devotion to it as an act of heroism and self-loyalty [...] His frontal attack on the romanticization of death did not stem from the dynamics that arouse fear of life’s finality but from the impulse to denounce falsehood.[[64]](#endnote-64)

This is also how we should understand Zach’s non-commital attitude about writing either a conventional autobiographical poem, or a continuous, coherent and complete prose text about his mother and her death. His writing performs an act of intentional sabotage to the very possibility of autobiographical fullness and coherence. Hence his choice of a form of noncontinuous fragments, which thwarts any possibility of romanticizing, elevating, or attributing excess meanings to his mother’s death and her life. “The place you are going to does not lack anything, it is a whole place,” writes Zach in a poem to his mother – only death alone is a “whole place.” Writing that is unwilling to lie must remain broken and fragmented. This poetics is supported by the design of the printed book (by Ofer Shapira) – full of blank white pages, like a sea of silence and the absence of language around small islands of speech fragments, together with a graphic element where some pages display dotted and enlarged letters, echoing the disintegration of language, consciousness, and communication. This disintegration is presented in the book as a “natural” continuation of a life narrative marked entirely by the absence of a common language or open and unmediated communication. Zach attests that his parents married even though they did not speak the same language.[[65]](#endnote-65) His mother never acclimated to the Hebrew-speaking environment, and even in the nursing home, she refused to speak in a language in which people could understand her, and thus condemned herself to loneliness.

The absence of language as a means of communication engendering closeness and understanding later colors the alienation, remoteness, and estrangement in Zach’s poetry as a poetics attached by an umbilical cord to his origins and his “drinking scenes.” This is the sense in which Zach is both similar to Bialik and different from him at the same time. What served Bialik as a source of inspiration, galvanizing him towards his destiny as a poet, and justifying it, is used by Zach precisely to strip his poetry of characteristics of vocation, experiential fullness, and communication. In the case of Bialik, as Miron writes, “poetry is presented as the fruit of experience, but poetry is also what imparts value and meaning to the experience.”[[66]](#endnote-66) That is, biography and poetry act as two forces that strengthen each other and influence each other into a complete and validating unity. With Zach, on the other hand, wholeness is only possible “in a place of absence, which is created and engraved in the contours of what was, and is lost forever.”[[67]](#endnote-67) In such a place, biography cannot grant meaning, except in its absence.

The drawing of the portrait of the mother, suffering from dementia, and slowly dying, is achieved through various insignificant details, “petty things,” reminiscent at times of personal notebooks in which parents record the “wisdom” of their young children, whose logically or linguistically garbled words are perceived as capturing profound truths. “About her musician father who died young, she used to say: he didn’t live well, he played too short”;[[68]](#endnote-68) or: “One day she got bored: there are too many days. When I was young there were much fewer days.” This process indicates a role reversal marking Zach’s position in relation to his mother, as a sort of “belated father” to her (in two fragments, he also recounts two different instances in which she called him “father”). The position of father, which was “forced” on him, as it were, on the practical level, is duplicated in the position of writing, a parental position that turns the documented mother into a kind of “child” of the author. At the same time, this is a position that emphasizes not only the process of Zach becoming an orphan through bereaevement but also his self-perception as a motherless child from the beginning, as an existential position. His book is full of moments of renouncing family ties. Exposing the mother’s story is, to a large extent, exposing his perception of himself as a “foundling,”[[69]](#endnote-69) as someone whose mother was not a mother to him and his father was not a father.

*Memoir and Murder*

Becoming orphaned is (also) poetic. Even though his poetry achieved canonical status in Hebrew literature, even from its inception, and he himself became a well-known and prominent figure in Israeli culture, Zach says that his parents were not impressed by this at all, and his identity as a poet is presented as meaningless to them, even as a negative: “She never showed any interest in my poems. I didn’t bother to tell her [...]. Without questioning, she accepted my father’s ruling, that poems are a thing that does not allow a person to live with dignity. And therefore they are worthless, just a waste of time [...]. She herself did not read poetry, not even in her own language. Even the nuns, her childhood teachers, warned her against frivolous literature.”[[70]](#endnote-70) In a certain sense, we can understand his choice to write about the mother in what appears to be prose – a choice that is puzzling even to himself – as an indirect gesture towards someone who remained a stranger to his poetry in particular, and to poetry in general, but loved to read prose. He describes his mother’s reading habits as follows: “She was never able to withstand the tension of a book that captivated her as she was reading [...]. She wanted to know in advance how things would end [...]. Only after making sure of the end, good or bad, would she return to the place where she had stood before in her reading.”[[71]](#endnote-71) It seems that as part of the game of approaching and distancing, similarity and difference, that he plays with his mother, he devotes himself to her reading habits: if she had not shown interest in his poems, perhaps, so to speak, she would have been interested in this book, which is ostensibly written in prose, and especially, which “begins at the end,” since the book opens at the end of his mother’s life, and with his mother’s death, and only towards the end does he touch upon her character as a young woman. Compared to prose, poetry is, of course, “ frivolous literature,” and Zach is, therefore, a prodigal son, in both senses of this word – both as one who was abandoned by his parents, and as one who desecrates their memory by an act of wanton abandonment, such as by writing this book.

Such indirect gestures do not obscure the harsh impression left by Zach, of the writing of the memoir as a violent act, and even as an act of murder, dismemberment of the body into fragmentary pieces, and filthy play with its parts. The other side of the violent act is also aimed at the self here – hence the text’s repeated preoccupation with suicide:

Again and again, in those rare moments of lucidity, she pleads: “Do me a favor, bring me pills.”

And I know which pills she means. And I also know that she is right, that it’d be better that way. But should a son rise up against his mother to kill her? One day I decide one way, and another day – another. And yet, a few days after her death, I contacted my friend A.R., one of the founders of the organization “Euthanasia” (mercy killing), which is illegal in Israel, and received instructions from him, what, who, and how. And in my ind, I concluded: I will not go through with this. Only when the first signs are revealed in me...[[72]](#endnote-72)

The clear allusion to the story of Cain and Abel, and more than that, the prominent use of the term “euthanasia” – an unusual phonetic transliteration that emphasizes the murderous meaning that the Nazis gave to this term – underscore Zach’s profound preoccupation with murder, death, and the heavy guilt associated with death. Death emerges as the theme that envelops the memoir, which, not coincidentally, opens with the return from a funeral. Its many manifestations go far beyond the concrete narrative of the mother’s death, and include references to the future death of Zach himself, to various forms of death – some violent or by suicide – of relatives, grandmothers, uncles and acquaintances, to the death and burial of Nellie, the mother’s dog, and a special consideration of the issue of euthanasia, through an extensive quote from Dr. Christian Bernard’s, To Live Well – To Die Well.[[73]](#endnote-73) This quote functions as a sort of “will” planted by Zach in the heart of his book, instructions for handling his own death, written in connection with the death of the mother. Zach constructs the argument in a way that does not allow him to escape guilt: he understands the possibility of fulfilling the mother’s request for euthanasia as an act of murder, but the failure to fulfill her request is also a betrayal, and this becomes apparent when, just a few days after the mother’s death, the son already begins to engage in arrangements that would seemingly ensure that he would not suffer a fate similar to his mother’s.

The exploration of the question of euthanasia also seems to be an introduction to a story that Zech tells later, in a misleading tone ranging between shock and pleasure, about “Uncle Heinz” (actually, his father’s cousin) who ended his life after being accused of embezzlement, not before he “slit the throat of his wife and his little girl with a knife.” A horrifying murder, about which Zach comments: “To this day I am convinced that he did it for their sake. They wouldn’t have been able to survive without him.”[[74]](#endnote-74) Here too, murder is linked to questions of integrity and honor and is perceived as an act of kindness. This case joins the series of incidents where the description conveys a certain glorification of death as a noble, impressive choice, the “heroic” side of the rigid “Yekke” stereotype. So, too, the suicide by the sculptor Miriam Karoly, who took her own life, together with her partner who was suffering from Alzheimer’s, even though she herself was not sick at all, because she “did not want to see him deteriorate.”[[75]](#endnote-75) As in his hesitation to assist his mother in her death, Zach also here engages in self-blame, implicating himself in betrayal:

I managed to place some of her marble sculptures in the Tefen Museum. Her last exhibition, in a gallery, if one may call it that, actually a private house in Neve Tzedek, was a complete failure. No one came, and no one wrote a word. I also didn’t find the time to visit. Perhaps that, too, contributed to the decision.[[76]](#endnote-76)

Implicitly, not unequivocally, Zach presents himself as a sort of “indirect murderer,” as someone who had a certain, if small, part in pushing the sculptor to the decision to commit suicide. The vague self-accusation is part of a tapestry that is slowly woven throughout the memoir. It is a map of traces and allusions that Zach leaves behind, like a criminal who does not destroy his tracks, and painting his portrait as someone carrying a burden of murderousness – whether as a personality trait that he cannot deny, or as an apparently “hereditary” burden, since Zach emphasizes, almost with pride, the closeness of his family ties (on the mother’s side) with a pilot in the Nazi Air Force and with an activist of the Fascist Party in Italy. This murderous load, as it were, finds its outlet in the textual act of writing the memoir. Thus, in one of the later passages of the book, which, according to Zach’s testimony, was written “fifteen years after my mother’s death” – that is, around the time of the discovery of the pages that led to the writing and compilation of the book, and the decision to release it “to the public domain” – Zach brings a dream he had, in which, in the presence of his acquaintances, his mother addresses him with harsh words of accusation:

[...] Everyone is amazed: What a lovely mother you have. I want to tell them that I don't have one, but my voice, if I did in fact speak, is drowned out by the other voices.

Suddenly she sees me and addresses me. Her words are dripping with hatred: What, you again? What do you want from me? After all, you took everything you could take. Do you want to steal something from me? You already took everything.

I am unable and have no desire to pronounce the word: mother. Instead, I give her a **murderous** look, but all that comes to mind to say to her, in the dream, is that I live in a shabby hotel room, a real ruin, opposite her house [...]. I wake up and record the dream on a piece of paper next to my bed. Where am I? in Haifa? in Tel Aviv? in a dream? Only after a few frightening seconds of wakefulness do I recognize where I am.[[77]](#endnote-77)

The story of the dream dramatizes Zach’s perception of the act of writing the memoir and the exposure of his mother to the eyes of the readers. First, the ethical betrayal: dispossessing the mother of her privacy, the theft of her life from her domain, and the expression of murderousness towards her. For this act he is “punished” through the poetic betrayal: the loss of the readers (they are the “acquaintances”), who are focused on his mother and not on him, and do not recognize his orphanhood, i.e. the independence of his poetic identity on his “parents.” But worse than that, he was punished by the loss of his unique voice, which was “drowned out by the other voices,” and by the loss of his “home,” which is poetry, his poetic existence as a poet, a loss that condemns him to an ephemeral, marginal, and isolated existence in a rundown hotel, not knowing where he is.

Zach’s wrestling throughout the text, between a poetic existence and autobiographical expression, is an intense conflict between the “I” that seeks to eliminate personality by distancing itself from experience and presenting itself as detached from it, and the “I” that is bound by its oppressive origins and specific life experiences. This struggle can ultimately be decisive, in a homicidal act, which can also be understood as “mercy killing.” While the identity of the “murderer” becomes clearer from page to page, the identity of the “murdered” is less clear – and the victim’s identifying marks are only sketched in the last pages of the book.

The murdered is none other than the memoir, for the new options that it offered its author: the exposure of the “I” and its origins, writing linked to experience and the creation of a contextual, social, and spatial continuum between him and his community, his family, and his mother. What began with a hesitant and apologetic step, in restrained language, fragmented and sparing in details, continued with a more generous description, in fragments that got longer and longer, providing family history and friendship ties, but culminated in a deliberate rejection of the memoiristic option. The conclusion of the memoir, immediately after a description of a dream he had about his parents, appears as Zach’s renewed contact with the same claim to the “continual extinction of personality,” which here takes on a particularly morbid form.

“And in conclusion, a small tale, entirely the product of the imagination,” writes Zach in the final prose fragment, and he tells a sort of diluted, amputated, plotless version of the story “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” about “three dwarves, big, medium, and small” who lived in one house and “they almost never spoke to each other, apart from the customary polite words when they would meet in the morning or when each went to his room in the evening. And they also never helped each other at all,”[[78]](#endnote-78) and then they disappeared from the world, one after another. This is a “tale” that has no actions and no story; the main characteristic it shares with the genre is the definition of the characters as “dwarves,” in a way that echoes Zach’s dream, which he presented in the previous fragment, in which the figure of his mother appears before him and “her height is about half the height of my mother.”[[79]](#endnote-79) Zach turns away from the personal-family history to a generalized and ironic tone, of a distorted children’s story. The murder, as it were, is completed: disconnection from the autobiographical sequence that originates in blood ties, denial of the possibility of the story and the existence of a story, amputation and removal of that part of the “I” that is connected to others, and the reshaping of the self as alien. The autobiographical “I” has returned to being an impersonal “I.”

This is also the moment when the memoir gives way to poetry. The cycle of poems presented at the end of the book – whose style is most reminiscent not of “early Zach” but rather of the hermetic fragments of poetry, striving for silence and stifling, by Paul Celan (and especially in Shimon Sandbank’s translation in the book of selections, *Soreg safah*)[[80]](#endnote-80)– seems at first glance like an excessive and superfluous section, but in fact its function is to complete the thwarting of the memoiristic possibility, to renounce it, and declare it a failure:

The Refusal

Last wooden cabinet/coffin/cupboard

Suddenly blooms

Persimmon flowers

He serves the pharynx

Inedible food

הַסֵּרוּב

אֲרוֹן עֵץ אַחֲרוֹן

פּוֹרֵחַ פִּתְאוֹם

פִּרְחֵי אֲפַרְסְמוֹן

מַגִּישׁ לְבֵית הַבְּלִיעָה

מָזוֹן לֹא אָכִיל

It seems that Zach here is actually praising his refusal to “give himself” to his readers, the deception by means of which he withholds an autobiographical narrative from them, and stuffs them with “inedible food.” The words are emptied of their power (“Words that were spoken / fishing rods of the incorporeal/ have become desolate as words”); Language is unsuitable for expressions of emotion (“The narrow window of yearning / is hermetically closed // at a distance of language / from love”) and the venting of emotion is rejected with stinging sarcasm (“The ripple of lamentation / that you scrawled at the time of parting / will not grow to a wave// of sweet emotion / perforating wasps.” In this way, the memoir as a whole is framed as a failed venture, leading astrtay, irreconcilable, an inaudible lament.

No

Not the first completion

And likewise cunning

Coiled like a snake

From the old ashes

To a new zero

In the cages of the pages

Lament, are you still

With me?

לֹא

לֹא מֻגְמָר רִאשׁוֹנִי

כְּמוֹ כֵּן עַרְמוּמִי

מִסְתַּלְסֵל כְּנַחַשׁ

מִן הָאֵפֶר הַיָּשָׁן

אֶל אֶפֶס חָדָשׁ

בְּמִכְלָאוֹת הַדַּפִּים

קִינָה, אַתְּ עוֹד

אִתִּי?

*Mot immi* is a lament on the impossibility of lamentation, a memoir that defeats its appearance as a memoir. However, the “mercy death” that Zach performs here in the memoir was not intended to “annihilate” the biographical self, but to set new conditions for its existence – as a **poetic** memoir. That is: as a text situated on the seam between poetry and life story, a work that is the product of a difficult struggle between the impersonal norms that shaped Zach’s poetry from its inception, and the possibility of the expression of an empirical, mnemonic, and experiential “I,” connected to time and place, family and society; between the “I” determined to expose the fictitionality of its position as “I,” and the “I” that is attentive to the Zeitgeist, awakening to documentary and concrete expression of life experiences and identities; and between the aesthetic directives of poetry and the linearity and relative freedom of prose. The positioning on the seam, in between, allows the genre to emerge as a unique form that holds both ends of the spectrum between autobiographical expression and poetic expression, and for Zach “to be born” as a poet who gives away the details of his life to the public and yet insists on the otherness and fictionality of the poetic “I.” In his subsequent writings, Zach devoted more and more space to memories, experiences, and characters from his life, and with much less hesitation and ambivalence. It is possible that the passage through *Mot immi*, through the poetic memoir, about the forces of death and birth that he expressed, is what opened the door. He dedicated his 2009 book *Mishanah leshanah zeh*, a memoir, to two familiar strangers, with their full names: “To Clementine Cavallazzi and Norbert Seitelbach.”[[81]](#endnote-81)

**ביבליוגרפיה:**

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1. Nathan Zach, “le’akliman hasignoni shel shenot haḥamishim vehashishim beshirateinu,” *Ha’aretz*, July 29, 1966. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hamutal Tzamir, *beshem hanof: leumiyut, migdar, vesubyektiviyut beshirah hayisraelit beshnot ha*ḥ*amishim vehashishim.* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Meir Wieseltier, “ḥatakh-’orakh beshirato shel Natan Zakh,” Siman Kria 10 (January 1980): 405–29. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Gluzman, *Shirat hattevuim: hamelankolia shel haribbonut beshira ha‘ivrit* *beshnot ha*ḥ*amishim vehashishim.* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, Yediot Ahronoth, Sifrei Hemed, 2018), 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Haviva Pedaya, “Higi‘a hazman lomar ’ani aḥeret beshira ha‘ivrit,” *Ha’aretz*, May 3, 2006; May 10, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Nathan Zach, *Kayvan she’ani basevivah*. (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Sigal Naor Perelman, *Besdot ’az ’ulay: poetibiyografiya, iyyun beshirato hameu*ḥeret shel natan zakh. (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Nathan Zach, *Mot immi*. (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Gluzman, *Shirat hattevuim*, 114. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. See, for example, G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Helena De Bres, *Artful Truths: The Philosophy of the Memoir* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021); Julie Rak, *Boom*: *Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013); Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead, 2010); Alex Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Due to space constraints, in this article I will avoid extensive discussion of the distinctions between different sub-categories of biography. I will only note that in literary criticism, there is not one single accepted definition of the term “memoir.” It is customary to distinguish between an “autobiography,” which is defined as a work that focuses on the personal and emotional development of the subject, and “a memoir,” which gives greater weight to external reality, and places the individual’s life into a broader context of historical and public circumstances. Other approaches see the difference between an autobiography and a memoir as a matter of duration and scope – an autobiography seeks to cover a prolonged period from childhood to adulthood, while a memoir is dedicated to a specific period of time, or focused on a particular aspect of the author’s life (Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History*. [New York: Riverhead Books, 2009], 1). Nevertheless, the distinction between the concepts of “autobiography” and “memoir” has almost entirely blurred today, and in the field of literature, they are often used as synonymous terms (Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. [Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2010], 198), or interchangeably (Rak 2004, 305). My preference for the term “memoir” aims to capture the dynamic essence of this form, relying specifically on its generic flexibility, on its position on the seam between the “I” and the Other, between the private and public, between life-story and historical-social narrative, and between writing memories of the past and diary-like writing of the present.Top of Form [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Dan Pagis, *Abba*. ( , 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Mois Benarroch, *Qinat hamehagger*. (, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Eli Hirsh, *Tiyyul bishloshah*. (Tel Aviv: *Hakkibbutz hameuchad* 1997)*.* [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Zali Gurevitch, *Yom yom* ( , 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Rachel Chalfi, *Temuna shel abba veyaldah* (, 2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Rachel Chalfi, *Temunah shel imma veyaldah* (, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Aharon Shabtai, *Tanya* (, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Tamir Lahav Radlmesser, *Giluy Na’ot* (, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Tamir Lahav Radlmesser, *Ḥeder leshnayim* (, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Erez Biton, *Beit happesanterim* (, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Erez Biton, *Tefarim* (, 2022). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Mordechai Galili, *Ratsiti lirshom nof aḥer* ( , 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Mordechai Galili, *Shnei qolazhim* ( , 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Mordechai Galili, and *Masa shenigmar beriqqud* ( , 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Efrat Mishori, *Ishah nesuah veshirim bodedim* ( , 2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Lali Tsipi Michaeli, *Habbayit hameshuga* ( , 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Lali Tsipi Michaeli, *Papa* ( , 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Eran Hadas, *Santer* ( , 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Dana Amir, Qaddish *‘al* *ḥashekhah ve‘al or* ( , 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Shlomi Hatuka, *Iy* ( , 2020) [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Orit Gidli, *Hate’omim* (, 2022) [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Like Zach and Pagis, most of the poets—and especially those of the 1960s and 1970s—turned to the poetic memoir at an advanced stage in their poetry careers, after they’d already written many collections in other genres. Thus, Zali Gurevitch, Rachel Chalfi, Erez Biton, and others. In contrast, young poets today are likely to publish a poetic memoir already in their second collection of poetry (like Hadas Gilad, Shlomi Hatuka, or Noah Bareket) or even their first (like Sharon Arik Cohen in his book *Rashoman Maroqai*, Amichai Shalev, in his book *Mersiseid* [2019] and Yair Assulin in his book, *Minchin* [2014]. This is one of the signs of the flourishing of this literary form, in which both veteran and novice poets participate. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Thus, for example, in his article on Zach, Meir Wieseltier condemns the autobiographical “I” in Amichai's early poems as excited, immature, and “all-consuming,” and states that “the biological-biographical I in itself cannot serve as a sufficient basis for a new poetics” (Wieseltier 1981, 411 ). As a rule, poetry criticism tends to identify the distance from biography and/or its reduction as a high-order psychological mechanism, which reflects a sublimative ability and is therefore also more “artistic.” In the spirit of this tendency, Miron concludes that it was Alterman's confrontation with his dark inner self that gave birth to his poetics in the formula of distancing himself from personal experience. In a similar interpretive move, Gluzman sees Zach’s alienated “I” as the traces of post-traumatic repression. To some extent, “exposures” such as mechanisms of sublimation contribute to a rise in the value of poetry that actively works to extract from itself the specificity of life materials, or to “rise” above them, in a sublimative mechanism, to an impersonal abstraction. (In many ways, this position is also at the root of the devaluation of women’s poetry. See Helen Farish, “‘Faking it up with the Truth’: The Complexities of the Apparently Autobiographical ‘I,’” *Life Writing*, 6:1 (2009): 143 – 147. Top of FormBottom of Form [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See Alan L. Mintz, *Ḥurban: teguvot besifrut ha’ivrit ’al ’asonot le’umiim*. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 2003, and Yochai Oppenheimer, *Hazekhut hagedola lomar lo: shira politit be’yisrael*. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Dan Miron, *Ha’adam eino ela*: *Ḥulshat hakoaḥ, otsmat haḥulshah: iyyunum be’shirah* (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1999), 325. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Hamutal Bar Yosef, *Lea Goldberg*. (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2012), 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Gluzman, *Shirat hattevuim*, 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. See William Blake, *Shirei Tom ve’nisayon* (transl. Ronen Sonis). (Tel Aviv, Olam Hadash, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Zach, *Mot immi*, 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Zach, *Kol haḥalav vehadevash*, 1966. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. See Eliot, “*Hamasoret vehakisharon ha’individuali*,” (transl. Elinoar Berger), “Ho!” 15 (2017): 93 – 98, at page 96. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Zach*, Anti-meḥiqon*. (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. HelenVendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry*. (Belknap, Harvard University Press, 1996), 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. “For a tear is an intellectual thing” is the opening line of Nathan Zach, *Tsefonit Mizraḥit: Shiriam 1967 – 1978*. (Tel Aviv*:* Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Gluzman, *Shirat hattevuim*. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Michael Benedikt (ed.), *The Prose Poem: An International Anthology*. (New York: Dell, 1976). [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Charles Simic, Charles. “On the Prose Poem”. 2010. https://plumepoetry.com/essay-on-the-prose-poem-by-charles-simic/ [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Dan Miron, *Od*!: *Tashtiyot Kognitiviyot beshirah hayisraelit hamuqdemet*. (Ramat Gan: Afik, 2013), 453. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Paul de Man, “Autobiogradia kehashḥatat panim,” (transl. Shai Ginsburg), Mikan 16 (March 2016): 244 – 255. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Zach, *Mot immi*, 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Zach, *Mot immi*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 198. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. For the conventional criticism, see Gass’s well-known article: William Gass,“The Art of Self: Autobiography in the Age of Narcissism,” *Harper’s Magazine* (May 1994): 43–52, and Inbari’s note, bearing an almost identical title: Assaf Inbari, “autobiografia be‘idan anarqisizim,” *Haaretz* (12 December 2019). See also, Neil Genzlinger, “The Problem with Memoirs,” *New York Times. Sunday Book Review* (30 January 2011):14. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Zach, *Mot immi*, 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Peter Abbs, “Autobiography and Poetry,” in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing. Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, ed. Margaretta Jolly. (London/Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), I:81–83. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. I take the liberty of supposing that the work of translating Ginsberg’s major work, “Kaddish” – which is also a poetic memoir that exposes the figure of the mother in her deterioration and degradation – influenced Zach significantly in his composition of *Mot immi* and in his decision to publish the book. See Allen Ginsberg, *Kaddish ve’shirim a*ḥerim (transl. Nathan Zach). (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Nancy K. Miller, *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Zach, *Mot immi*, 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. See Julia Kristeva, *Koḥot ha’eimah: massah ‘al habezut* (transl. from French, Noam Baruch). (Tel Aviv: Resling,

2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Zach *Mot immi*, 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Miron, *Od!*, 404 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Ibid., 443-442. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Zach, *Mot immi*, 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Dan Miron, *Hepereida min ha’ani he‘ni: mahalakh* *behitpatḥut shirato hamuzdemet shel Ḥayyim Naḥman Biyalik 1891 – 1901.* (Tel Aviv: Open University Publ., 1986), 351. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Miron, *Od!*, 417. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Zach, *Mot immi*, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Zach saw in “the foundling” the most significant poem of Alterman, his rival, and a source of deep identification with him. See his poem, “le’Natan A.” in Nathan Zach, *Min hamaqom shebo lo hayyinu el hamaqom shebo lo nihiyeh*. (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Zach, *Mot immi*, 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Ibid., 91. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Christian Bernard, *Liḥyot tov: emdato shel rofe be’ad hamatat ḥesed ve’hitabdut.* (transl. Meir Wieseltier). (Tel Aviv: Tevel, 1986). The quote is in Zach, *Mot immi*, 63–61.) [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Zach, *Mot immi*, 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Ibid., 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., 111–113. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid., 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid., 111. The characteristic of “dwarvishness,” smallness of stature, recurs in Zach’s book in several key places, and attests to the mechanism of contraction that Zach activates in relation to this family members, as an inversion of the way small children perceive their parents. Thus, the mother says of her father: “He was very big.” Then, by way of explanation: “He was a father.” Whereas, Zach testifies about his father that he was “a man of small stature and gaunt.” (Zach, *Mot immi*, 47; emphasis added.). [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Shimon Sandbank’s translation in the book of selections, *Soreg safah* ,1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Nathan Zach, *Mishanah leshanah zeh*: *pirqei biyografiyah*. (Bnei Brak: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-81)