

GABRIEL PREIL

The poetry of Gabriel Preil receives pride of last place in this study not only because, born in 1911, Preil is the youngest of the group, but also because his work represents, in many senses, the culmination of the enterprise of American Hebrew poetry. Preil is the only American whose work succeeded in garnering the kind of enthusiastic and sustained critical reception among Israeli readers that had been so sorely desired by all who preceded him. The achievement is all more remarkable because, unlike Efros, Halkin and Regelson, who settled in Israel around the time of the establishment of the state, Preil remained in New York and visited Israel only several times later in his life. Moreover, although others took a serious interest in British and American poetry and wrote about it for Hebrew readers abroad, it is only in Preil's case in which the poetry itself maintains an active dialogue with developments in modern English verse. *[To me, this implies continued response to developments; not sure that's the case.]* This is even truer about Preil's contacts with the "other" American Jewish writers who did not write in English, the introspectivist Yiddish poets, whose modernism exerted a formative influence of Preil's poetic practice. Finally, there is New York City itself. In contrast to the prose writers, American Hebrew poets had a general aversion to city life as a poetic subject, and when they did engage America as a place, they largely sought out the countryside and its denizens from an earlier age. Although Preil has many fine poems that are set in the landscape of his beloved New England, he remains in the great preponderance of his work a walker in the city observing urban life and observing his own reactions to his daily encounters with the human landscape of the metropolis.

The style Preil achieved in his mature poetry fulfills one of the central aspirations of American Hebrew poetry: simplicity without avant-garde vulgarity. American Hebrew poetry emerged out of the Romantic turmoil of such great figures of the Tehiyah (Revival) Period as Bialik, Tchernichovsky and Schneur. In Palestine their sway was decisively thrown over in the 1920s by the incursion of the revolutionary poetics from Russia, France and Germany in the form of Symbolism and Expressionism. In America, by contrast, Hebrew poetry in its main thrust—especially in the work of Israel Efros, Hillel Bavli and Eisig Silberschlag--sought to simplify and domesticate the romantic inheritance by limiting its reliance on classical allusion

and tamping down its pathos. It sought a way, in other words, to modernize Hebrew poetry without recourse to what was considered the barbarism of foreign trends. (This was of course not the only path of American Hebrew poetry, as we have just seen in the work of Shimon Halkin and Abraham Regelson, poets who leveraged the English Romantics to create a supercharged American Hebrew idiom.) Yet it was not until the belated arrival of Gabriel Preil on the scene of American Hebrew poetry that the aspiration toward simplicity could be said to be fulfilled. Preil accomplished this on his own terms and not without resort to the transformative resources of modernism. But from the quiver of modernism the arrow Preil selected was the most American: the Imagism of Amy Lowell and HD as refracted through the lens of the American Yiddish poetry of Jacob Glattstein and the In-Zich poets. This was a sympathetic strain of modernism that Preil could integrate with a highly refined Hebrew romanticism in complex and variable ways that will be described in due course.

However we might account for the complexity of Preil's achievement, the signal fact remains that it allowed the last act in the drama of American Hebrew poetry to end on a note of elegiac triumph. And, one might add, to end *in* America; at a time when many of the strongest voices had relocated to Israel, Preil stayed on. With the tottering of Hebraic educational institutions, the disappearance of readership, the aging of its writers, and the vigorous glamour of Hebrew in the new Jewish state, American Hebraism experienced a precipitous decline in the period after World War Two. The Hebraists were fond of conveying the pathos of their situation by calling themselves, in a phrase that reflects their fascination and identification with American Indians, the last of the Mohegans [*Mohicans*]. Preil, in this sense, was the last of the last. There may yet be Hebrew creativity in America, but Preil's death in 1993 signaled the conclusion of a coherent, century-long project. What joy, then, that this ending could come in the form of breakaway success rather than anonymous failure?

Preil was born in Dorpat, Estonia in 1911 and raised as a child in Krakes, Lithuania. His paternal grandfather was Joshua-Joseph Preil (ca. 1850-1890), a rabbinical scholar and also a man of Hebrew letters, who polemicized with Moshe Leib Lilienblum in the pages of *Hamelitz*. More "enlightened" than rabbinic, Preil's father, Faivl Shraga Preil (ca. 1880-1921), was an ardent Zionist who struggled to make a living as a druggist and banker. Like her husband, Preil's mother, Clara Preil (nee Matzkel, ca. 1888-1977), was well versed in Hebrew and read Russian and German literature as well *[this might be exaggerated; could ask my mother, if you*

wish]. The father's early death led to the emigration of mother and son to the United States in 1922. Preil attended the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary and the Teachers Institute at Yeshiva University; his extensive familiarity with English and American literature was acquired through his own reading [*Did he not graduate either? Did he attend Yeshiva College or take courses elsewhere? I wouldn't necessarily discount possible exposure to poetry in general and even modern poetry in NYC schools of the time -- I have a verse exercise of my father's from Seward Park HS, I believe. One could also debate "extensive," but inarguably he had a poet's working knowledge of what he needed.*]. His mother married Helman Kushner, who taught Talmud at the Rambam Yeshiva in Brooklyn [*Stepfather commuted from Bx to Bklyn the whole time?*]. Both were supportive of Preil's poetic vocation. Until their deaths, Preil lived with his mother and stepfather in the Bronx. He never married and, with brief exceptions, did not work.¹

Preil's first Hebrew poem appeared in *Hadoar* in 1936 at about the same time that he began to publish verse in Yiddish. His first book of Hebrew poems, *Nof shemesh ukhefor* [Landscape of Sun and Frost] was published in a small run in New York in 1944. Although the volume was noticed by critics in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, it was not until the next two books, *Ner mul kokhavim* [1954, Candle Against Star] and *Mapat 'erev* [1960, Map of Evening] were published in Israel that his critical reputation flourished. Preil's first visit to Israel took place in 1968 around the publication of his fourth book of poetry, *Ha'esh vehademamah* [Fire and Silence]. A milestone in Preil's career was the publication by Mossad Bialik of his collected poetry in 1972 (*Mitokh zeman venof: shirim mequbatsim* [Of Time and Place: Collected Poems]). He continued to write and publish prolifically; he visited Israel again in 1977 and in 1983, when he received the Bialik Prize. In 1993, the poetry Preil published in several subsequent books was gathered together in *Asfan setavim, shirim 1972-1992* [Collector of Autumns, Collected Poems 1972-1992]. Having come to Israel on the occasion of the book's publication, Preil died in his hotel room in Jerusalem June 5, 1993.

Preil's future biographer will not have an easy time adducing a life fraught with incident. [*Not really, not after early life -- less outward incident than almost anyone else I've ever known.*] Perhaps the most difficult experience in Preil's life was immigration to America after the death of his father. The boy and, later, young man endured a prolonged period—some fifteen years--of learning English and becoming acquainted with American culture before he felt settled

enough to present himself to the world as a poet.² [*True, perhaps, but sounds odd here, since you're speaking of development of a Heb poet who needed to master Heb.*] Of these struggles there is no record in the poetry. Even though this is a poetry that is largely written in the first person and in which the lyric "I" continually identifies the speaker of the poems with their author. This is the peculiar paradox of Preil's verse: The poet provides abundant information about his changing moods and the circuit of his day and his responses to rain and snow and heat. Yet at the same time he is exceedingly reticent about what might be called the more personal events of his life. So while many of the poems begin with feelings felt by the "I" of the speaker, the action of the poems inevitably moves away from the self toward the world.

In the 1970s, however, Preil began publishing a series of poems that endeavored to present a kind of autobiographical portrait. To be sure, the reticence about the inner, intimate life persisted, but what was new was Preil's desire to construct a family literary heritage that justified the anomalous vocation of writing Hebrew verse on American soil. This wave of self-presentation seems to have been the paradoxical result of the gathering excitement around Preil's poetry among the younger Israeli poets of the time. Israel had long been a society in which Hebrew poetry served as a central mode of national experience rather than the private preserve of sensitive readers or a literary avant-garde. The 1960s were a period of profound polemical ferment over the nature of Hebrew poetry and its role in the life of the nation. The object of attack was the poetic norms of Natan Alterman that had long dominated the literary scene: lush figurative language, virtuoso rhyming, elevated diction, large national themes, and an essentialized, trans-personal voice. This dominance was assailed by a group of younger poets—among them Natan Zach, Yehuda Amichai, Dahlia Ravikovitch, Moshe Dror, and David Avidan—who began to publish in the years after the establishment of the state. The critique, which was formulated and projected by Zach, was essentially a defense of the poetic practice of this new generation: poetry must renounce its inflated eloquence and instead reflect the natural language of man; regular rhyme and metered music are inauthentic expressions of the modern situation; poetry's chief vocation is to explore the private, existential space of the individual.

It was not easy for the new poetry to make headway against the weight of what amounted to an official national poetics. To enhance the acceptability and legitimacy of this revolution, Zach and others searched for earlier poets who could be construed as precursors or forbearers of the new aesthetic and thus provide it with a respectable lineage. An obvious choice was David

Fogel, a poet of minimalist imagist verse who wrote in Europe between the two world wars; another was Gabriel Preil, who began publishing before World War II. The conversational tone of Preil's poems, the eschewing of all formal structures for free verse, the brevity of the poems, which were spoken by an ironic lyric "I"—all these features made Preil a perfect figure to be enlisted as a precursor whose innovations could be adduced to camouflage the subversiveness of the new poetry by making it seem less unprecedented. The timbre of Preil's poetic voice seemed so natural to Israeli ears that readers discovering him for the first time could hardly be persuaded to believe that he had never stepped foot in the Holy Land. Moreover, the fact that he, like Fogel, wrote from outside Israel, one from Vienna and one New York, underscored the oppressiveness of the literary establishment. The new style could demonstrate its first signs of innovation only beyond the reach of this cultural hegemony before gaining recognition on native grounds.

Being taken up in this way was a mixed blessing for Preil. Writing from the extreme margins of the map of Hebrew literature and from within a culture indifferent to his work and largely incapable of reading it, how could he not rejoice to become the subject of attentive and substantive critical notices and to garner the attention of enthusiastic readers? Bavli, Lisitzky, Silberschlag and the other American Hebrew poets senior to Preil could only have dreamt of stimulating a similar level of interest in the Israeli literary community. At the same time, however, Preil could not have been sanguine about being pressed into service as a figure in a narrative not his own. For the theorists and practitioners of the new Israeli poetry, the significance of Preil's work lay in its being a forerunner of a literary trend that came to full flower only in *their* poetry, as if it had been his good fortune to have set the scene for their work. In point of fact, Preil's poetry had in fact come from someplace else, and although admittedly there were evident similarities and intersections, it was a mistake to assimilate him into the new developments in Israel.

There was no explicit or public way in which Preil attempted to resist this appropriation. He was not a theorist of poetry despite his occasional essays on other writers; critical statement was not his idiom. And the spotlight of adulation must not have been entirely unwelcome. *[I'll say!]* When he mounted a response, it was on his own grounds, that is, through poetry, specifically a series of poems he wrote in the 1970s. Rather than taking issue with the presumptions of others, these poems make a positive assertion about the very particular identity

of Preil as a poet. This is an identity that can be fathomed only in its multiple contexts: There is Preil the bearer of the romantic Hebraism of his Lithuania ancestors; there is Preil the youngest member of the collegium of the Hebrew and Yiddish writers in America; there is Preil the diaspora Hebrew poet who identifies with Beryl Pomerantz in Poland, Haim Lenski in the Soviet Union, David Fogel in Austria and France and other poets writing outside of the center in Eretz Yisrael; there is Preil the citizen of the American republic of letters who resonates with the poetry of Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, Edward Arlington Robinson, Conrad Aiken and Robert Frost; and, finally and undeniably, Preil the poet who was adopted and naturalized into post-war Israeli verse.

*[Indent]*Of these many contexts, the Lithuanian connection is asserted with special urgency in Preil's later poetry. Lithuania, or Lita in Jewish parlance, was a region within the Russian Empire of ancient Jewish settlement in which the sway of Hasidism was much less pronounced than in the south. The standard of rabbinic learning among males was high, and the great yeshivot of Lita, which drew students from all over Europe, also became underground centers for Haskalah and later Zionist ferment. Preil's (maternal?) *[delete parenthetical?]* grandfather was Joshua Joseph Preil (1858-96), the rabbi of a small town near Kovno, embodied many of the traits associated with Lita. He was a distinguished talmudic scholar who also at home in European literature and the Hebrew literature of the Haskalah. In the pages of *Hamelits*, the preeminent Hebrew journal of the time, he conducted polemical correspondences with both ultra-Orthodox figures and with reformers like M. L. Lilienblum. *[I'd delete second "with". Some of this repeats p. 2, also periodical is spelled with final "z" on that page.]* In his essays, he argued for the legitimacy and the desirability of an Orthodox belles-lettres.³ In a poem that figures prominently at the beginning of Preil's 1975 collection *Zeman aher* [Other Time], as well as at the head of the collected poems (*Asfan setavim* [Collector of Autumns]), Preil compares himself to his grandfather. *[Need to paste in correct poem.]*

זמן אחר

אין מנוס מן הזמן שלי.
הוא ליטא, הוא אמריקה, הוא ארץ-ישראל.
אני העתק מיוחד של ארצות אלו;
איכשהו הן קלטו ממזגי אירי.

כן, אני צולל לתוך מים
עמקים מדי.
אני חושש שהמים
אינם עמקים למדי.

בין כך וכך כנראה
שאני רוצה להסתגר
עם הזמן הנכון שלי:
אל יהיה חלק בו
לזמנים אחרים.

יש כאן מדת יהירות
ומחשבותי ודאי שהיא
מפשטת, מתיפופת.
אך פעם, מאחר בערב,
מול רעם הסבין ביד חמסן
הסתכל בי זמן זר עירום
מבעד לזכוכית בהירה עד לשגעון,
על להב מתהפך נצב קופא.

See the grandfather in his Lithuanian shtetl. /His habit was to rise early every morning/ and after prayers he would write down his Torah insights,/ prepare an article for *Hamelits* and discover the taste of manna/ in a piece of dry bread and a cup of boiling water./ He was a great man.

See me, a young man on American soil./ Not exactly an exceptional creature/ who writes his poems in Hebrew. A man/ who prays from silence, drinks at noontime/ his tepid morning cup and persuades himself that he has found in it/ the taste of something rare and dreamt of.

Each man his own manna in his own time;/ this is an autobiographical tablet approved for consumption until the beginning/ of the last quarter of the twentieth century./ The time from then on: clowns/ hesitantly skating on thin ice.

It is hard to imagine what Grandfather would have said about them./ In any event, I would have liked to live his time.⁴

The fact that Preil never knew his grandfather, who died at the age of 48, makes the comparison of the two at the center of this poem a willed exercise rather than an instance of recollection. Our taking notice of the two, in fact, comes in response to a set of instructions issued by the speaker to observe each figure. (In the body of the poem, we see first the grandfather and then the grandson, although the order is interestingly reversed in the poem's title.) Of the many and diverse possible points of comparison between these two complex lives, the poem rigorously focuses on three: place, writing, and the routine of an everyday morning. At first sight, the distance between the Lithuanian shtetl and American soil would seem vast; yet for the Hebrew reader, for whom the natural site for Hebrew writing is Palestine/Israel, these two locations are ironically joined together in their both being diaspora outposts of Hebrew creativity.

It is likewise Hebrew itself that is the only common denominator between the literary activities of each. The grandfather composes both *hidushim* and *ma'amarim*. *Hidushim* ("novellae") are solutions to cruxes in the interpretation of talmudic texts; they

represent the contribution of individual genius to the collective tradition. *Ma'amarim* are articles, contributions to the new Hebrew periodical press, of which *Hamelits* was the flagship publication; the grandfather was a controversialist who participated in print in the great debates of the day. The verbs associated with these endeavors, *rasham* [record] and *hekhin* [prepare], connote a businesslike seriousness of purpose. The grandson, in contrast, merely writes poems. He neither contributes to the elucidation of the sacred tradition nor takes a public stand on the grave issues confronting the Jewish people. The poems that he writes are *his* poems (*shirav*), lyric poems, which are by their nature minor and solipsistic.

Apart from their writing, their characters are revealed in the conduct of daily life. The grandfather rises very early and fits in his writing between prayers and what it undoubtedly a heavy round of rabbinical responsibilities in the community. For refreshment, he gets by on a cup of boiling water—not even tea!--and some dry bread. The grandson, who has given up prayer, or who only “prays from silence,” drinks a cup that is lukewarm, which he manages to get to only in the afternoon. Whereas the grandfather succeeds in revealing a miraculous quality, the flavor of manna, in his poor fare, the grandson has to persuade himself that he has come across a taste that is rare but the product of purely human fantasy. The phrase the speaker uses to epitomize the grandfather is *adam hama'lah*, a man of distinction; the term is taken from a speech David makes to God in I Chronicles 17:17 acknowledging the honor of having his house chosen for kingship. When the speaker of Preil's poem comes around to taking his own measure in the second stanza, the diminution of dynastic expectations is palpable. Rather than being summed up with a kingly biblical epithet, the speaker uses the most mundane colloquial Hebrew to describe himself as “not exactly some exceptional creature.”

Yet the contrast that had been so elaborately developed between the discipline of the one and the lassitude of the other is suddenly swept aside at the opening of the third stanza when the speaker observes with a kind of indulgent renunciation: “Each man his own manna in his own time.” Compared to the abandoned vulgarity of contemporary culture, the pointed divergences between grandfather and grandson are beside the point. The Hebraic cultural affinity that unites them beneath the differences is a remedy—tranquilizer or stimulant?—whose effectiveness is about to expire. The dour tenor of the image of clowns skating hesitantly on thin ice is unlike anything that has preceded it in the poem. *Muqyon* (clown) is a Greek term brought into Hebrew

by the sages of the Talmud from the world of pagan circus performance, which they utterly despised, and it bears with it none of the antic, childlike qualities associated with the icon of American side shows. From now on the world is given over to fools tracing figure eights over the void. But in its two-line concluding stanza the poem backs away from this chilling prospect and assumes a tone of conjectural indeterminacy. It is all about time, the speaker insists, time before and time after. Although he cannot be sure of what Grandfather would have said about the future, that dawning era of the cynical clowns, the grandson knows, in the spirit of a man foreordained to belatedness, that he would have preferred to have been part of his time rather than theirs. *[He's not necessarily nostalgic for 19th C, but is speaking of quality of grampa's time.]*

At the deepest and most profound level, grandfather and grandson are connected by their commitment to writing in Hebrew in the alien lands of the diaspora. One dimension of this romantic exilic Hebraism, as Yael S. Feldman calls it, is the family romance. In addition to the grandfather, whom Preil never met, there was the more immediate Hebraist family circle of Preil's parents, who valorized Hebrew poetry and encouraged his earliest attempts at verse.⁵ Beyond the family lay the distinguished past of Hebrew literature in Lithuania as whole, where in the middle of the nineteenth century, the first modern Hebrew lyric poetry was composed by Micha Joseph Lebensohn (called Michal) and the first Hebrew novel by Avraham Mapu. In both these figures, Preil sees the coexistence of a dreamy passion with a quotidian rationality, and he takes this tension as the essential patrimony of his Lithuanian lineage. It is the lineage that has shaped him, and it is now his to shape in accordance with his individual temperament and his belated circumstance. Finding this balance in both Michal and Keats, Preil writes that "Out of a storm of longing Michal planted his verses like tranquil gardens."⁶ When it came to wresting beauty from unsympathetic surroundings, Preil observes in another poem addressed to Mapu, that Lithuania is not so very different from America: "I like you am a Lithuanian Jew,/ who strove to bring forth from ordinary soil/ sober trees in which the dream blazes."⁷ If, on the one hand, Preil presents himself as the last lineal descendent of the Lithuanian heritage in Hebrew writing, he also identifies himself with a broader spectrum of Hebrew poets who wrote elsewhere in Europe in the generation immediately preceding his own: David Fogel in Austria and France, Beryl Pomerantz in Poland, and Haim Lensky in the Soviet Union. Fogel and Pomerantz perished in the Holocaust, and Lensky in Stalin's camps. In a 1991 poem titled "Sheloshah

qerovim li" [Three Who Are Close to Me], Preil describes how, while sitting in his room on a stifling late-summer day, "my hand in New York is turned/ in the direction of Fogel, Pomerantz and Lensky"; "Strange," he muses "how they live in my room."⁸ The closeness is an intimacy among peers rather than an influence exerted by precursors. These three poets, each along his own idiosyncratic path, stood apart from the fashions of interwar Hebrew poetry promulgated by the literary center in Palestine, and there, in the darkest reaches of the diaspora "each one of them remained/ with the naked branch of his verse."

America is a different diaspora, to be sure, and Preil chose to remain there rather than attach himself to the center. Yet it would be wrong to take Preil's declared kinship with his Lithuanian forebears and his European fellow poets as a distancing of himself from Israel and the enterprise of Zionism. *[I'd say emotionally he was somewhat distanced (and more involved with Europe and America), even if ideologically he was a card-carrying Hebraist, and therefore Zionist.]* The demurral registered here relates to the "discovery" of Preil in Israel in the 1960s and 1970s and efforts on the part of Natan Zach and others to make him into a forerunner of their innovative poetics. In his indirect and implicit manner, Preil protests this appropriation and writes himself into a different family tree.

Yet this redirecting of attention leaves a crucial question unanswered: What is the source of the stunning novelty of Preil's poetry? For all its romantic and personal appeal, the Lithuanian heritage had little to offer on this score. The conservative poetics of the American Hebrew poets who preceded Preil is well known. Though sympathetic to the dethroning of Shlonsky and Alterman in post-1948 Israeli poetry, Preil had not been a frontline participant in that generational conflict.

The answer comes from a direction that, at least from the point of view of all that has been said so far about the course of American Hebrew poetry, is astonishing: Yiddish literature. From its origins around World War One, American Hebraism had been caustically disdainful of the vulgarity of Yiddish popular culture as displayed in the Second Avenue theaters and in the tabloid press. Toward serious high culture in Yiddish, the attitude was of course more respectful, although the two literary communities, for many reasons, led parallel and divergent lives, and the experimental modernism of the American Yiddish poets was no more congenial to their Hebrew counterparts than the avant-garde "barbarisms" of the poets of the Hebrew Moderna in Tel Aviv. Why then Yiddish? Preil entered the scene of American Hebrew literature relatively late, both in

respect to his own life and in respect to the development of American Hebrew poetry. This was a body of verse that, already in the 1930s, was well beyond the flush of promise and expectation, and it is likely that what Preil found there was disappointing. At the same time, the aggressive modernisms of Hebrew poetry in the Yishuv, based on Russian and German models and embroiled in the politics of national struggle, were not true to his time and place and were too fraught for his temperament.

Ironically, it was through the modernism of the “introspectivist” Yiddish poets, such as Jacob Glatsein and A. Leyeles, that Preil could meet on his own terms the innovations that had taken place in Anglo-American poetry. This is a story of cultural mediations and transfers that has been lucidly laid out by Yael S. Feldman.⁹ The aesthetic stance of the *In Zikh* poets, announced in their manifestoes of the early 1920s, was based on two principles that were not always easy to reconcile in practice. One the one hand, the poem is a vehicle through which the poet explores the labyrinthine depths of his self. On the other, the poem should focus on the exact description of an object in the world or a metaphor and avoid abstract discourse on the meaning or message of the object. This second principle was an attempt to bring into the staid world of Yiddish poetry the revolutionary freshness associated with Imagism in American poetry, as theorized and practiced by Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, H. D., and others. For the Imagists, the poem was “a movement of discovery or awareness, created by effective metaphor which provides the sharp, intuitive insight that is the essence of life.”¹⁰ Being true to this moment of discovery, moreover, meant abandoning the constraints of fixed rhyme, meter, and stanzaic structure in favor of free verse. It further meant writing *short* poems that would not stretch the poem’s fabric beyond that moment of discovery. It was this dimension of *In Zikh* that attracted Preil rather its psychologically introspective individualism.¹¹ ***[I’m obviously not an expert, but I think Yiddish poetry generally and perhaps In Zikh in particular gave him permission to write his personal poems.]*** Of the many contending modernisms on the international palette of poetry from which a young poet starting out in the 1930s could choose, the disciplined moderation of Imagism, together with its formal freedoms, was the best match for Preil’s temperament. It was through American Yiddish poetry that this aesthetic option became plausible, and this was so not because Preil could not experience Imagism through the medium of English but because Yiddish has demonstrated how a Jewish language could successfully appropriate an American modernism.

The challenge confronting Preil was how to bring this new current into Hebrew. Preil wrote both Yiddish and Hebrew verse at the beginning of his career; it was the Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein who advised the young poet that his gift lay in Hebrew.¹² Moreover, in light of the Hebraist family romance described above, it is not difficult to understand why Preil would have resolved his bilingual dilemma in favor of Hebrew. Yet just because he had committed himself to the vocation of Hebrew poetry did not mean that Hebrew poetry, at least the tradition of *American* Hebrew poetry in which he worked, would automatically be less resistant to the new style he wished to introduce. The norms of American Hebrew poetry, to speak for a moment in large generalities, were based on the late Romantic poetry of the Hebrew Revival (Tehiyah) in Eastern Europe; we have had numerous occasions to demonstrate how the Americans sought to streamline this inheritance while advancing its essential postulates. Although Bialik and Tchernichovsky were the great lions of Revival poetry and venerated as such by most of the Americans, there was a third, younger figure in this pantheon, Zalman Schneour (1887-1959), and it was he who played a key role in Preil's own formation as a poet.¹³ Schneour's was an urban poetry written under the sign of European decadence as a literary sensibility; denied fulfillment of soul's vital needs, the individual in Schneour's verse must make his way in a world perpetually on the verge of chaos and confusion. This was the poetic language most available to Preil when he published the poems that were eventually gathered in his first book *Nof shemesh ukhefor* [Landscape of Sun and Frost] in 1944; the bleak outlook of this poetry, which had been borne of an earlier world war, sadly fitted the somber temper of period in which Preil was entering the world of poetry. All the while, however, Preil had been experimenting in his Yiddish poetry with the imagism of Glatstein and Teller, in which there was no place for the pathos of the despairing poet facing the rupture of civilization. ***[I don't know about Teller, but Glatstein was doing precisely that by late 30s.*** Over the course of the 1940s, Yael Feldman argues, Preil rejects "the rhetorical poetics symbolized by his former model, Zalman Schneour," and instead begins to align himself in the map of Hebrew literature with the "minor, marginal line of Hebrew poets," such as Fogel and Pomeranz.¹⁴

Yet even with this new alignment, Preil's stylistic evolution was not complete. Along with the freedoms conferred by imagism there were renunciations that did not come easily to Preil. The speaker of an imagist poem kept his or her self out of the picture in favor of the object or metaphor at center focus. As a modernism, imagism sought to disturb the resonance or

correspondence between the soul of the world and the soul of the artist that was at the heart of romanticism and, instead, to make the matter of the poem an object that stands in a metonymical relationship to the world. The lyric “I,” in other words, was called upon to abdicate its sovereignty and, relying on the presumption that every act of observation presupposes an observer, to disappear into the poem’s web of implication. This was an act of self-abnegation that Preil declined to perform. His refusal was based not on aggrandizing claims of the self’s prerogatives but on an insistence that truth requires keeping the self in the picture. Although the rapport between the poet and the cosmos no longer exists, the desire for that connection—and the struggles to accept the unfulfillment of that desire—is fundamental to the modern situation. Preil makes no secret of his wish to have been born in the age of Keats and Byron or even—*mutatis mutandis*—of his grandfather, the Lithuanian rabbinical controversialist.¹⁵ But his belatedness is a stubborn fact. He lives in New York City in the middle of the twentieth century, and although he can build an occasional bridge of longing to the world that preceded him, he accepts the necessity of being an inhabitant of a disenchanted world.

The result is a poetic style that is a complex amalgam of romanticism and modernism. A fusion? A synthesis? A dialectic? The precise critical terms are not clear; the “idiolect” of Preil’s poetics, with attention paid to the changes wrought in each decade of his writing, awaits a definitive description. A provisional characterization, in the most general terms, might be formulated in this way: From imagism, Preil appropriated some of the practices of modernism (especially directness of observation and metaphorical precision) and absorbed them into a chastened Romantic framework freed from its metaphysical moorings.

A place to begin to examine this amalgam is “Mitsiyurei Maine” [Sketches of Maine], the longest poem in Preil’s canon, which he wrote in Bangor at the age of 35 in 1946.¹⁶ Both the age and the date are significant. Dante’s entry into the dark forest in the middle of life’s journey in the beginning of the *Inferno*, as Dan Miron has suggested, is not an inappropriate way to think about Preil’s quest in this ambitious poem.¹⁷ The middle of *his* life coincided with the destruction of European Jewry, and the pressure exerted on Preil’s poetry by that catastrophe is acutely reflected in the closing sections of his first book of poetry, *Nof shemesh ukhefor* [Landscape of Sun and Frost, 1944]. The search for cleansing and healing in the aftermath of trauma is clearly enunciated as the ulterior motive for the journey to Maine (1). This quest is undertaken also against the background of the strife in Palestine among the Jews, Arabs and

British. Because Preil's poem opens in the form of an ode addressed to Maine, the speaker feels impelled to justify how a Hebrew ode--in the inevitable footsteps of Judah Halevi's ode to Zion--could be addressed to any geographical entity *other* than the Land of Israel. By adducing the biblical names of the surrounding Maine towns as well as the names on the headstones in the cemeteries, the speaker can point to a common connection to the Hebrew Scriptures and to the aspiration of the settlers to make their New England into a New Canaan. What remains unspoiled from this time of pious origins is the astonishing beauty of the landscape itself. The question posed by the poem is what persists of the curative powers that inhere in this natural realm.

Preil's ambitious Maine poem is a central event in the American Hebrew canon because it asks two large questions: When it comes to the inheritance of modern Hebrew poetry--the poetic practice of Bialik, Tchernichovsky and Schneour-- can the beauty of the American landscape sustain or reinvigorate the Romantic premise? And, is it in the power of that natural beauty to provide sustenance for the soul of the modern Jew? The poem's answers to these questions are both positive and negative in ways that are illuminating but not easily simplified. It turns out that the purity, intensity and beauty of the natural world embodied by Maine do in fact authorize a deep correspondence between human language and the physical universe. Yet at the same time this unity proves unavailable to the poem's speaker, a Jew and Hebrew poet coming into middle life at the middle point of a violent century. The vision of Maine that Preil conjures up to serve as the test case for these questions is a construction that is decidedly natural rather than human. The denizens of Maine who occasionally appear in the poem are merely chthonic outcroppings of the landscape who enact the cycles of sleeping, waking and eating in concert with the seasons. This is also a dehistorized construction. This is not the Maine contested by the French, British and Native Americans, nor the anti-slave state that poured bodies and money into the Union struggle, nor the state dominated by logging interests and rural poverty. Untrammelled and largely untrod, the Maine of the poem remains an emblem of what nature in America can be.

The line of organization most evident in the poem is that of the anatomy, a systematic inventory of the diverse features of the landscape that make up Preil's Maine. The sea, the islands, the shore, the rivers, the coastal towns, the rain, the snow, the seasons--each one is summoned up and brought into play. The poem's title "Mitsiyurei Maine," literally "*From the*

Sketches of Maine," implies selectivity; yet the poem in fact aspires to a comprehensive embrace of its subject. Each of the elements in this totality is examined and revealed as a site of vital energies and ceaseless conflict. The figurative language that Preil uses to capture these dramas is unashamedly saturated by the pathetic fallacy. The "blushing flower wounds the rock" (3), "silence entered the veins of each tree like sap" (4), the wooded off-shore islands "wave their hazy locks" (3), "the moon sinks like a bird from above and sits in the crown of a tree" (9). Each of these discrete instances of animism is drawn into larger vignettes of the back-and-forth struggle within nature. Poem 2, for example, focuses on the roses that sprout up among the granite rocks on the shore. These "little tongue of flame," vivid against the grey stone, resemble "toy goblets" that are turned into torrents of color and eruptions of "joy and intoxication" by the afternoon light. Yet as the day declines, the sea extinguishes these tiny bonfires and their sparks as it "shuts its great weary eye." The poem ends in a truce: "The roses and the sea divided the day between them and concluded a treaty/ signed in a proud delicate hue and compliant fire."

In its elemental purity, Maine is put forward as a test case for the very possibility of a rapport between the cosmos and man. At the center of "Mitsiyurei Maine," in Poems 11 and 12, that possibility is affirmed, but yet only in ways that take back as much as they give. Poem 11 opens with the description of a singular experience: "Tonight the curtain of stars has been lowered upon the highway." The cold glitter of the aristocratic stars is answered by warm points of light from the windows in the village below and the headlights of the cars. The "forest of stars" descends low upon the groves of pine and buqtsiot/elms and for a moment becomes their neighbor. The scene switches from night to day in Poem 12, which describes a lake in the clouds that reflects a lake on the earth below.¹⁸ Both lakes achieve an ecstasy of solitude, but, free of noisy fishermen and boats, it is only the heavenly lake that can preserve its introspective serenity. *Its* tranquil anglers nap on the shore while, without them, their nets magically yield a catch of pure silver.

These unitary moments, so plangently evoked in the intensity of imaginary experience, are qualified by the stubborn fact that the human subject is left on the outside. The effulgence of the starry curtain is so great that the passerby has to shield his eyes as he would if he were staring into the sun. Yet in vain he searches the vastness of the illuminated heavens for some small window that would beckon to him or for a single star that would reflect in own likeness. Moreover, when it comes to the picture of the lake in the clouds, it is already assumed that in the

rapport between the heavenly and the earthly there is room for the human subject only as an observer but not as a participant. Now, being vouchsafed the privilege of witnessing such moments might seem joy enough if the exclusion did not represent something more fateful: a significant station in a fundamental counter-movement in “Mitsiyurei Maine” that eventually pushes poem’s speaker in state of tragic renunciation [*need to fix second clause*].

The counter-movement is only implicit at the beginning of the poem and gathers momentum after its midpoint. Already in Poem 4, the cold, sapphire brilliance of Lake Sabasticook is distilled as a silence that, as noted above, enters of the veins of each tree like sap. What of the observer? “But I am alone on the shore: a teaming [*teeming*] city invaded by armies of silence.” Although we first assume that the silence of this beautiful locale is the apotheosis of tranquility, this turns out to be so only for the birds and the trees that organically belong to this scene. But the human observer does not belong; he is vulnerable like a defenseless city. Like a growth that is benign in one species but hazardous when it crosses over into another, the silence that flows into *his* veins has a potentially baleful effect on a man who must eventually return to the city to live among other men.

Silence turns into solitude as Preil’s Maine poem turns toward fall and winter in its second half. Snow, “heaven’s envoy of solitude,” becomes the consummate embodiment of fleeting silence in Poem 13.

שִׁירְךָ, הַשֶּׁלֶג, שִׁיר הַחֲלוּף הַלָּבָן, אוֹלִי קְבוּצַּת וְנֶאֱמָן
 מֵאֵי שָׁחַם בָּיִם קְדוּר־יֵין;
 הֵן גִּלְמוּד אֶתָּה מֵהֶם –
 וְאֲנִי עוֹד מִמֶּה עֲרִירִי.

Your song, snow, is the song of white transience,
 Perhaps more fixed and faithful/ than the granite
 islands in the wine-dark sea;/ you are indeed
 lonelier than they--/But I am even more barren
 than you.

‘*Ariri*’ in the last line, which I have translated as “barren,” connotes sterility. It marks an even further stage in the progressive divergence between the reality of Maine and the fate of the poem’s speaker. While he descends deeper into loneliness as the frigid winter blankets the

countryside, the denizens of Maine enjoy the earthy pleasures of the season as if they were permanently fixed in a Currier & Ives etching. They drink deep drafts of cider, eat hot potatoes in their jackets, and partake of the profoundest sleep. Children are immersed in their play on the village green just as were their brothers before them in the days of President McKinley (Poems 16 and 17). For a moment, the speaker is brought back to his own childhood. Discovering the frilly trunks and branches etched on the window by the frost early one morning, he is suddenly back in his Lithuanian village, which “dozes upon its starry winters.” It is as if, again just for a moment, “like a somnambulist I passed from one cycle of childhood to another.”

Surprisingly, the recollection of his Lithuanian childhood does not lead in the direction of the recent murder of European Jewry. That calamity is registered in the opening of “Mitsiyurei Maine” and taken for granted as one of the reasons for undertaking the journey to Maine. But Preil does not adduce it in the poem as the source of the ineluctable exclusion of the speaker from the sphere of nature. The exclusion is ontological rather than historical. The encounter with Maine has resulted in a double negation. Not only can he not partake in the pageant of nature and its constant renewal, but the deathlike cold of winter has entered his soul for good. While the merry-go-round of the seasons continues to revolve enchantingly for others, it has deposited him forever in a place where the days grow ever shorter and darker.

Again, surprisingly, there is no revolt against this fate. To the contrary, it is if, rather than visiting upon him a cruel decree, the encounter with Maine had confirmed a deep truth that been latent all along. That truth comes in the form of an identity that has been forged in this new knowledge, and a name is given to it opening lines of Poem 18, which sing with a celebratory resignation:

[א] סָתוּ הַקָּדִים אֶפֶר בְּרוּשִׁים מוֹל גִּבֵּעַ חֲלוֹנִי,
הַרְבֵּה הַשְׁקִיעַ בְּנוֹהַר גּוֹיִי־צֵל שֶׁל מַתְכָּת,
וְלִי, הָאָדָם הַמְּקָרִי, נֶעַ מְכַשֵּׁף בְּמַעֲגָלָיו,
דְּמוּת סָתוּ בְּרֹאשִׁיתוֹ, בּוֹעֵר וְאֵינוֹ אֵכֵל.

Autumn has brought an early mask of cypresses
against the hill of my window,/it has greatly deepened
the metallic shadows on the river./ As for me, accidental

man, I move bewitched in its circuits,/ a figure
of autumn at its outset, burning but not being
consumed.

Ha'adam hamiqri, accidental man, is man who observes and travels through but does not belong. **[Absolutely -- and often, the indoors/internal man looking through the glass at the outside world in which he participates in only a limited way; see comments on *Ganei Emet*.]** He is a man who will always be fixed in the fall, the time of almost death, no matter what the season is for the rest of the world. The revelatory quality of this self-knowledge, which is indicated by the allusion to the burning bush of the Moses story, is qualified a few lines later when the speaker describes himself as a "glowing human ember" [*adam-ud mehavhev*] making crowns for the Queen of the Autumn. He is on fire, but make no mistake: This is the sustained smoldering that precedes extinction. **[He is not an "ud mutzal m'esh".]**

The contours of a self-portrait emerge more clearly in the homage to the poet Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1939) in the penultimate poem. The speaker travels by train through the winter countryside to poet's home in Gardiner, Maine in order to commune with a kindred spirit who becomes a kind of *genius loci*. The author of "Edwin Cory" and other poetic profiles of desperation and silent nobility, Robinson endured a life of family tragedies and personal renunciation in order to hew to his vocation. Preil expresses his admiration by floridly conjuring him up as a "poet with a hard heart who set out to conquer the winters in the seasons of thought/-and arrived in a land of song full of spring brooks" (Poem 21). With the black winter visible through the train windows on his return ride in the evening, something important becomes clear: "I, the elder of all the winters that came before him or me," the speaker avers, "have become the voice of springs that sang in him and resonate in me." Those springs only exist in poetry and can be gotten to only through poetry. The price that must be paid for this achievement in art is being permanently stationed in winter in life. The movement of the many sections of "Mitsiyurei Maine" is toward the clarification of this stark choice. Like Robinson, the Maine poet who spent most of his life in New York City, the speaker of Preil's poem has steeled himself to make this renunciation. He had come to Maine to seek renewal and repurification against the background of the recent European horrors. This was an errand that failed. What he learned instead was that although the ever-changing natural beauty of Maine will always remain enchanting, it belongs to an order of reality he can never be part of.

The order of reality to which he now belongs is clearly, if enigmatically, proclaimed in the concluding poem (22) of "Mitsiyurei Maine": "I will belong to the conquered city of the Minister of Death." This is stated as a fact of life without the melodrama that would seem to be inscribed on the face of these ominous words. It is an image that has been prepared for since Poem 4, in which the speaker feels the stillness of Lake Sebasticook permeating him: "I am alone on the shore: a teaming [*teeming*] city invaded by the armies of silence." As the seasons turn, the speaker is severed from the cycle of nature and permanently installed in the ontological zone of winter. By Poem 19, the invasion of his being is nearly completed: "The lands of my noon have been conquered by the armies of twilight,/ and my path already leads to that land of night/ whose boundaries will never be reddened by the approach of dawn."¹⁹ Yet instead of this capitulation being accompanied by agitation and anxiety, the concluding tone of Preil's Maine poem is proud and even buoyant.

How are conquest and submission transformed into noble resignation? "Mitsiyurei Maine" should be read as a decisive moment in the search of Preil's poetic persona for self-definition and vocation. The point of departure is an impasse that combines, on the one hand, the polluting pressures upon the soul of the extinction of European Jewry, and, on the other, the dilemma of choosing between modernism and romanticism as an artistic direction. "Maine" is the ultimate construction of the American pastoral, and toward it the speaker turns out of a combination of hopefulness and bad faith. The more his painterly eye—these are sketches [*tsiyurim*], after all—registers the stern but vital energies of these northern climes, the more the speaker is forced to recognize the finality of his alienation from them. He is cut off from the cyclical renewal they bestow upon others both because he is a Jew for whom there can be no flight from Jewish history and because he is a modern man for whom there is similarly no escape from the city as the new ground of being. The question has now been decided, and the paradox of triumphal resignation at the poem's conclusion can be understood as the result of this definitive clarification and the poetic mission that flows from it (about which, more directly). He knows the outcome to be true, and he accepts his destiny.

Preil's Maine poem belongs to a grouping of longer poems on American themes in the 1954 Collection *Ner mul kokhavim* [Candles against Stars].²⁰ In "Beit-qevarot ameriqani" [An American Cemetery], happening upon a long-forgotten rural cemetery provides an occasion for meditations on America as a land of "variegation and mystery" and on the absence of Jews from

the collective story told by the gravestones.²¹ “Zeir-shirim qatan leAviyah” [A Small Wreath of Poems for Abijah, pp. 183-85] carries a note stating that the poem cycle was written in a house in Putnam Valley, New York (in the Hudson Highlands) built in 1824 by Abijah Lee, a pious Christian and lover of the Bible. This complex poem considers the profound historical role of the Hebrew Scriptures in forming American character and consciousness. “Tiyulim” [Trips, pp. 186-94] is the title of a peculiar long composition, half of which describes the thoughts of the young Washington Irving as he stroll through his father’s plum orchards along Battery Park at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and half of which describes conversations about the metaphysical meaning of the game of chess between the poet’s two grandfathers as they walk in the woods of Lithuania. In contrast to Silkiner, Efros and Lisitzky, it is worth noting, Preil showed little interest in one of the distinguished topics in American Hebrew poetry: American Indians.²² After the grouping of American poems in *Ner mul kokhavim*, Preil rarely returned to the landscapes and the people of rural America. For reasons implicit in the Maine poem, his poetry had to turn elsewhere, and the city, which had been a preoccupation of his verse from the outset, was the place it returned to.

Among the critical clarifications Preil brings back to the city from Maine is the notion of the *adam miqri*, the accidental man, which combines within it a poetic persona, a stance toward the world, and a conception of the mission of poetry. Rather than making an essential or general statement about poets and poetry, this position presents itself before the reader as a proprietary description of Gabriel Preil as poet who, with the publication of *Mapat ‘erev* [Map of Evening] in the 1960s, enters the major, middle phase of his career.²³ As poet, then, Preil comes before us a man who has renounced expectations for a fertile rapport with world and accepted the loneliness and isolation of his existence. In the metropolis, he moves among others whose lives have been worn down by the metallic alienation of urban life. **[Maybe, but his alienation is more existential and historical; he’s not concerned with social or urban condition per se and, of course, he’s at home in the city, in his way.]** His difference from them is constituted by his awareness of his situation and by his resolve to use his poetic gifts to ameliorate this fallen reality. Developing the insights of Eliezer Freidland, a younger contemporary poet and critic of Preil’s, Dan Miron has gone so far as to see Preil’s poetry as undertaking a mission to repair the brokenness of the world.²⁴ This is a kind of poetic activism that makes poetry writing and poems themselves into acts of *tiqqun*, restoration and reconciliation. There is no swagger to this

ambition, nor an expectation of some great transformation. To the contrary, each poem is aware of its own fragility and the temporariness of its staying power in the face of the corrosive forces arrayed against it. Nevertheless, Preil's verse remains engaged in an ongoing commitment to poetry as the everyday work of healing. The particular instances of brokenness that present themselves before the poet as candidates for treatment come precisely from his status as an accidental man. His status as an efficacious and disinterested observer of the life of the city has been purchased by renouncing the expectation of vital, emotional participation. As the solitary poet sits in his apartment, drinks coffee in a café, and walks the streets of the city, he encounters, by observation or thought, slices of the city's life that become the occasions for poetic intervention. Taking Preil's poems as discreet instances without grasping the larger vocation of his poetry, these solitary occupations can readily seem like vacant indolence or the expression of a narcissistic preoccupation with the daily rituals of life or the self-indulgence of poetic fancy. But understood within the context of the poetry's ameliorative calling, the waiting and the walking betoken something very different: a stance of moral *disponibilit  *, an existential availability for what may come his way.

Yet we should not hasten to view Preil as some urban Albert Schweitzer selflessly sacrificing himself for broken humanity. Even if writing a poem lifts the lot of others, it remains an act of self-realization and even self-transcendence for the poet. And the true and correct deployment of language in that act surely yields pleasure as well as purpose. As Preil enters the major phase of his career, his poetry displays greater confidence in balancing opposing poetic intentions and effects, or at least in negotiating their difference. Although the long contest between Romanticism and Imagism for his creative allegiance is never definitively decided, his poems are forged through an on-going mediation between the two. This can be observed in the typically two-part structure of many of Preil's poems. The first part is a picture or an observation of the urban landscape, the weather or some feature of life in the city that suggests disuse, unfulfillment or alienation or discloses seemingly disparate oppositions.²⁵ The second part of the poem attempts to effect a temporary measure of reconciliation or restoration. The resources of Imagism—precision, concreteness and defamiliarizing metaphors—are most drawn upon to do the work of description in the poem's initial premise. When it comes to the subsequent reparative or transformative move, as will be evident in the poem analyzed below, it

is the resources of the Romantic imagination, or even the persistence of that desire, that are most often mobilized.²⁶

The work of redemption is never completed, at least in this world. Although Preil's ameliorative ambitions remain steadfast in his later poetry, the focus of attention shifts from place to time. In titling the first comprehensive collection of his verse *Mitokh zeman venof* [Of Time and Place, 1973], Preil understood that these were the two fundamental terms that define his poetic world. In the poetry published before this collection, especially in the poems devoted to New England and New York, the emphasis is placed on repairing the ruptures of place. Later on the balance shifts to time. The poet is burdened by the gap between the belated time he is living in the present and the past, which, as we have seen in the case of his grandfather, is often the nineteenth-century Hebraism of his native Lithuania. Gabriel Preil is the latest and greatest Hebrew bloom on American soil, and precisely because his poems seem so slight but accomplish so much they will preoccupy us and nurture us for some time to come.

גַּי אֶמֶת וּלְבָה לְבָנָה

הַחוּץ כָּאֵלּוּ לָמַד חֲכָמַת הַיִּיאֻמָּטְרִיָּה הָעֶרֶב
וְקִבֵּעַ מִשְׁלֵשׁ-אֲוֵרוֹת דֶּק, מִפֶּנֶן, קָטְבוֹ אֲבֵן-אָדָם,
הַקֹּרֵעַ זְוִיּוֹת בְּמִרְאֹת-מַיִם מְלֻמָּטָה, הַמְּחַיֵּג מִרְאֹת-שָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל.
בִּינִיָּהן מְכוּנִיּוֹת – קִנֵּי לְבָה לְבָנָה, שׁוֹטְפֹת וְאִינָה קוֹפָאֵת.
וּמַעֲבָרִים שָׁנִים צוּבָאִים חֲלוּנוֹת, תּוֹפְסִים רְבוּעֵי אֶפֶל מְפָנִס.
אֵךְ בְּחֹדְרֵי, עַל הַשִּׁלְחָן, הָאוֹתִיּוֹת שֶׁבְּסִפֵּר עֲבָרֵי קֶדְמוֹן
נוֹצְצוֹת חֲרִישִׁית:

הֵן זֶה מִכְבָּר הַגִּיעוּ לְתַכְנוֹן גִּשְׁרִים רַבִּים
וְתַהוֹמוֹת הַסֶּפֶק הָיוּ לְגַי הָאֶמֶת.

Gardens of Truth and White Lava

It is as if the outside has learned the science of geometry this evening / and set up a delicate, pearl-like triangle of light with a carnelian point/ that rips angles in the watery reflections below and rotates heavenly reflections downward from above ***[Alternatively: that rips angles in the watery views below and encompasses [or "encircles"] heavenly views above].*** Between them, automobiles—lines of white lava flowing incessantly./ On both sides are arrayed banks of windows that seize rectangles of lamp-lit darkness./ But in my room on the table, the letters in an ancient Hebrew book sparkle silently:/ Yes, for a long time now they have succeeded in planning ***[designing]*** many bridges,/ and abysses of doubt have turned into gardens of truth.

"Ganei emet velabah levanah" is the third of seven short poems comprising "Tsiyurim miNew York" [New York Sketches], which appeared in Preil's third collection *Mapat 'erev* [May of Evening, 1960, pp. 124-27]. The title makes a gesture in the direction of "Mitsiyurei Maine" [Sketches of Maine], discussed above, which appeared in the second collection. The formulation of the titles, close but not exact, underscores the passage from country to city between these two volumes, as well as the acute revision of the ratio between Romanticism and Imagism in Preil's verse.

The poem divides into two unequal parts. Lines 1-5 describe the play of lights in a nighttime urban scene as glimpsed from an apartment window. Lines 6-8 describe the effects of the Hebrew letters in a book lying open on a table in the apartment. The rendering of the nighttime scene in the first part reflects the Imagist aspiration to convey an objective and precise word-picture of a discreet and definable aspect of the external world through a carefully deployed and sustained metaphor. The key term is geometry. The cityscape of boulevards, buildings, street lights, and illuminated signs is transposed into the figural abstractions of a Cubist painting, thereby undergoing a thorough process of defamiliarization. The static, banal and familiar components of the city at night are dissolved into geometric light forms that are thrown into a dynamic, even violent relationship to one another. The delicate, luminous triangle

in line 2, which is already so abstracted that we cannot truly know the specific sources of the city lights that comprise it, tears and blunts the sharply defined angles by virtue of their reflection in the pooling water on the streets and sidewalks. It further sets the reflections in the nighttime sky spinning. In the space between these lower and upper planes, the blur of the cars' headlights—finally an easily identifiable object—becomes lines of white lava whose molten, unstoppable streaming is beautiful in its distant abstract flow at the same time as it is vaguely threatening. On either side, finally, the windows of the buildings gather for war (*tsov'aim*) and seize the rectangles of lamp-lit darkness.

The ominous tone of this picture, with its swirl of aggressive forces, is counterbalanced by the frame in which it is set and by a series of peculiar word choices. The whole scene, to begin with, is founded upon an “as if” (*ke'ilu*) premise that invites the reader to undertake a thought experiment that reimagines the nocturnal scene transmogrified. Preil could have simply taken the word *ke'ilu* out of the line and been left with an *implied* metaphor (“The outside learned. . .”) that conformed more neatly to Imagist protocols. The violence of the scene is thereby qualified by virtue of being placed in a heuristic frame of reference that exists at a remove from reality. Moreover, there is an antic quality to the metaphor itself: a personified “outside” has taken up the study of geometry and, although having begun that very evening, proceeds directly to transpose all the elements of the city vista according to this new wisdom. Can we also not see something of a joke in the opposition between the seething tensions of the night scene and science of geometry with its ideal forms and implied rationality?

At the semantic level, playful and exotic echoes further serve to mitigate the hostile potential of the night scene. *Mufnan* in line 2 is—so far as I have been able to ascertain—a neologism coined by Preil from the word for pearl/pearls in Hebrew: *peninah/peninim*.²⁷ [*Suspension bridge's lit cables as a necklace is a cliché that he transforms here.*] Employing a similar technique of deriving an adjective from a noun by using one of the passive verb conjugations (*muf'al* and *pu'al*), Preil takes *panas* (line 5), street light, and turns it into *mefunas*, lamp-lit, also, presumably, his invention. It is not difficult to parse the meaning of these new coinages, but the competent Hebrew reader must still pause for a moment to take them in. This is also the case with *mehayeg* in line 3, which in modern Hebrew means to dial a telephone number; it was formed from the stem *hug*, to circle, to describe the action of rotating the phone's dial. Preil takes this very ordinary but bounded term and applies it strangely to the reflection in

the nighttime sky. Although all these are instances of the kind of license common in modernist Hebrew poetry, its use here creates a kind of poetry effect that makes us aware of the poet's linguistic resourcefulness and the constructed nature of poem's language. *Even-odem* at the end of line 2 is not an invented word but a rare and exotic one. It is a red semi-precious stone that is one of the twelve gems that made up the breastplate of the high priest (Exodus 28:17 and 39:1); the gems would light up in special combinations to communicate God's directives in times of national crisis.²⁸ Again, if Preil had simply wanted to indicate the color red, he had numerous options that did not evoke the ancient cult and its modes of divination. An ancient or otherworldly ambience is also hinted at by the use in line 2 of *mar'ot*, which can mean either mirror or visions; although the main sense in this context—which is impressionistic in any case—is connected to the phenomenon of reflection, hints of visionary experience are present as well.

To summarize: The main thrust of the first part of the poem is to heighten the alienating power of the nighttime cityscape by defamiliarizing it, “making it new” and revealing the contending forces latent within it. It will be the job of the second part of the poem to ameliorate this picture by offering an antidote to its harshness. Yet already in the first part we see signs of this redemptive ambition at work in a series of devices that serve to leaven the bleakness of the scene. The personification of the outdoors as a wayward student, the very premise of this section, wittingly perpetrates the pathetic fallacy so basic to the Romantic code.

With the words, “But in my room” (*akh behedri*) in line 6, the shift to the second part of the poem is emphatically made. The “I” embedded in the possessive pronoun is the first sign of a human presence in the poem. Its sudden appearance deepens our awareness, retrospectively, of the fact that humanness of any sort, discounting the purely figurative trope of the geometry student, is utterly absent from the nighttime scene in the poem's first part. The difference between the two parts is also the difference between outside and inside. The room with a table and a book on it constitute a private, human space that is entirely ordinary and unheroic; it is a space that is domesticated in reference to the world outside, but it is hardly domestic. It is only a room and not a house or home, yet it nonetheless has the power to stand as a bulwark against the non-human forces in the night streets beyond the window.

Line 6 is the longest in the poem, and it moves our attention from the room to the table and finally to the letters of the open book. The room is not just a habitation but a redoubt of literacy. The sparkling of the letters answers the phantasmagoric lights of the street scene

outside. The violent profusion of light and darkness beyond the window contrasts with the restrained constancy of the light emitted by the twinkling letters, which resemble stars that have been relocated indoors. The fact that this is a silent twinkling reminds us that this is a poem based wholly on the sense of sight and one in which the auditory plays no role. The colon at the end of line 6 prepares us for a summary insight. This statement is prefaced by the emphatic interjection *hen* [Yes! or Indeed!], as if what is to follow needs to be reiterated or defended for the sake of others or for the sake of the speaker's own reassurance. This insight comes in the form of a gnomic utterance comprised of two short lines: For a long time now, we are told, these Hebrew letters have succeeded in planning many bridges, and, as a result of this bridge-making activity, the "abysses of doubt have turned into the gardens of truth."

In a poem sequence about New York, bridges cannot be an arbitrary symbol. The George Washington Bridge is the title and subject of the poem that follows next in "Tsiyurim miNew York." Bridges represent the triumph of practical human ingenuity over the disabilities of nature; they overcome separation and enable the flow of people and goods. The *planning* of bridges betokens an activist and optimistic stance toward the possibility of overcoming gigantic obstacles. This is a process of long usage, the poem implies in a tone of familiarity and reliability, as if to make a contrast with the newly constructed urban world outside the window. The agent of all this planning and endeavoring, after all, is the Hebrew letters in the ancient book. Another poet might have infused these letters with the sentimentalized aura of Jewish tradition; but Preil neutralizes this prospect by presenting the letters to us in the guise of pragmatic engineers. The stress on their being *Hebrew* letters, moreover, sounds a subtle echo of the Hebraist insistence on the endurance of culture rather than religion.

Even though the letters may be presented as a sort of industrious corps of Hebrew engineers, their achievements are nothing less than stupendous, in the same way that the marvel of the completed Brooklyn Bridge in its time transcended the solving of the technical challenges posed by its building. Abysses of Despair have been turned into gardens of Truth. Nothing less! The addition of the definite article (*hasafeq, ha'emet*) makes these terms into allegorical figures that would usually seem out of place in the discourse of Preil's verse. *Tehom* [abyss] carries an unsettling sense of primordial chaos because of its use in Genesis 1 to represent the state of the universe before Creation. Doubt is the disease of modernity that reverses the work of Creation by questioning the possibility of divine purpose in the world. The abysses of Despair

are allied to the nighttime cityscape beyond the window, where the constructed buildings, avenues and street lights have devolved into a violent and alienating confusion of shapes and lights. This is a fallen world that all of us know, each in his or her own way. But what of gardens of Truth? It has been commonly observed of Dante's *Divine Comedy* that it is far easier for the reader to understand the depiction of Hell than to fathom the mysteries of Paradise. A garden is an enclave of domesticated nature, all the more so when it is a city garden like Central Park, which is the title of the sixth poem in "Tsiyurim miNew York," although a trace of the Edenic garden is never absent. "Gardens of Truth" sounds like a pastoral version of the sweet dream of reason or a figure in an allegorical drama by the Enligh ~~[fix]~~ Moses Hayyim Luzzatto. It points to a notional reality about which we can only dream. *[It's also a bounded, often geometric, space, like the angles ripped in the water or the encompassed sky.]*

The transformation, even the transubstantiation, of what is into what should be is precisely the point of the poem's conclusion. Despite its brevity, the poem multiplies oppositions: indoors v. outdoors, light v. darkness, angles v. curves, playfulness v. danger, writing v. nature. As it produces oppositions, it works to mediate, contain or resolve them. This is Preil's own version of the redemptive work of poetry, his own attachment to the Romantic code in a Hebraic key. For does not he, its most belated offspring, belong to the gap-spanning tradition of Hebrew letters? The bridges the letters have planned have indeed come into being, but that world of truth exists only in the poem, and when the poet next walks the streets of the city or gazes out his window and takes in the unredeemed world before him, he will have to start all over again. *[I liked this discussion a lot, -- I like the way you conclude and basically follow you on tenor and sense of poem, but continue to think the poem clearly contrasts the observed violent "outside" bridge views and the bookish bridges and gardens "observed" indoors. Typically, the poetic speaker is separated from the violent "outside" action only by a thin sheet of glass -- and perhaps not even by that, since the martial "rectangles of lamp-lit darkness" include his window, which admits/reflects these clashing values. I don't know about optimism of bridge planning; to me, the planning or designing underscores the purely ideational nature of these bridges, unlike the material (though Preilized) bridge outside. Further, these bridges aren't described, they're poetically asserted, without support or anchor. The succeeding metaphor intensifies the action, but further blurs (or moves away from) the image of the bridges. A bridge may span depths, but the depths of doubt have been magically transformed*

in some unstated way. The doubt isn't necessarily theological doubt, so much as the poet's own doubtful regard of the external world. In one sense, he's speaking in his concise way of the achievement of the Torah, or more broadly, the Jewish tradition, but the transpersonal, commanding Torah is also appropriated as a proxy for his personal Hebrew poetry, which magically achieves (at least provisionally) conviction and truth. (Typical P!) The metaphor of the garden is also, inevitably, a metaphor for the Fall.]

¹ A useful source of biographical information is Yael S. Feldman, *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1986), notes to Ch. IV. I am also grateful to Shalom Leaf for reminiscences of Preil in his parents' home.

² Feldman, p. 53.

³ G. Kressel, *Leksikon hasifrut ha'ivrit badorot ha'aharonim* [Lexicon of Hebrew Literature in Recent Times] (Merhaviah: Sifriat Poalim, 1967), Vol. 2, pp. 664-5; see this entry for publication information about books authored by Joshua Joseph Preil.

⁴ See Feldman's translation of this poem, pp. 43-44. The poem is also translated and commented on by Ezra Spicehandler in Stanley Burnshaw, T. Carmi, Susan Glassman, Ariel Hirschfeld, and Ezra Spicehandler, *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 201-3.

⁵ *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1986), p. 52.

⁶ "Besiman hash'a'ah haqetsarah" [Under the Sign of the Short Hour] in *Mitokh zeman venof*, p. 110-11.

⁷ "Shurot leAvraham Mapu" [Lines for Abraham Mapu] in *Mitokh zeman venof*, p. 149-50.

⁸ *Asfan setavim*, p. 207.

⁹ Feldman, Ch. 5.

¹⁰ Stanley K. Coffman describing the thought of T. E. Hulme in Alex Poreminger (ed.), *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 378.

¹¹ Feldman makes a convincing case that it was the poet Y. L. (Judd) Teller, whom Preil had known since childhood, whose Yiddish minimalism had the greatest impact on Preil. See Feldman, pp. 61-70. For Preil's poem titled "Yehudah Leib Teller," see *Asfan setavim*, pp. 72-3.

¹² For poems in which Glatstein figures, see "Hartsa'ah" [Lecture] and "Elul: Nisayon avtobiografi" [Ellul: Autobiographical Experiment] in *Asfan setavim: shirim 1972-1993* [Collector of Autumn; Collected Poetry 1972-1992] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1993), pp. 42-44. Preil's important essay on Glatstein is "Al Ya'akov Glatstein: bimelot lo shishim Shanah" [For Jacob Glatstein's Sixtieth Birthday], *Hadoar* (Nov. 9, 1956), p. 28.

¹³ Feldman, pp. 89-97. See the Preil poem that makes reference to Schneour's poetics, "Ein zeh ha'ed hamerafref" [Not the Hovering Mist] in *Bitzaron*, vol. 40 (1949), p. 19. Preil's essay on Schneour is "Leyovelo shel Zalman Schneour [For Zalman Schneour's Jubilee], *Niv*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (November, 1937), pp. 4-5. It should be noted that Schneour spent most of the 1940s in New York. He was extremely prolific, and after Bialik and Tchernichovsky had fallen silent and died, Schneour's voluminous production remained the chief representative of the sensibility of his generation.

¹⁴ Feldman, p. 146.

¹⁵ The romantic option is still alive in his mother's time. See "Bazeman hazeh, bamaqom hazeh" [In this Time, in this Place] and "Shir sho'el qatan" [A Little Interrogatory Poem], *Asfan setavim: shirim*, pp. 53, 97. In each case, romanticism is paired with a modifier that denotes strangeness or vagueness (*romantiqah temuhah, romantiqah setumah*).

¹⁶ *Mitokh zeman venof*, pp. 164-77. The poem originally appeared in *Ner mul kokhavim*. References parentheses will be to the twenty-two numbered sections that comprise the poem.

¹⁷ See Dan Miron's essay "Bein haner lakokhavim" [Between the Candle and the Stars], in *Asfan setavim: shirim 1972-1993*, p. 327.

¹⁸ Miron explicates the rich intertextual allusions to poems of Bialik and Tchernichovsky. "Bein haner lakokhavim," pp. 330-33.

¹⁹ For the Hebrew reader, it is difficult not to think of the image of the conquered city in conjunction with Natan Alterman's famous poem cycle *Simhat 'ani'im* [Joy of the Poor], which appeared in Palestine in 1941,

²⁰ Preil's first collect *Nof shemesh ukhefor* [Landscape of Sun and Frost, 1944] also contained several poems in this vein that were carried over into the selection included in *Mitokh zeman venof*. See "Nansy linqoln holemet" [Nancy Lincoln Dreams, p. 217], "Mishirei Vermont" [Vermont Poems, pp. 225-227], and "LeNew Hampshire—'igerret qetanah" [A Little Letter to New Hampshire, p. 227].

²¹ Pp. 178-82. The poem is noted at its end: "Woodstock, 1945." Since each of the New English states, plus New York, has a Woodstock, it is not easy to indentify the locale. Note also that the stated date of composition precedes the Maine poem by a year, even though the latter is placed directly before it in the collection.

²² In "'Igerret qetanah miNew York" [A Little Letter from New York, *Asfan setavim*, p. 75], a poem from the late 1970s dedicated to Efros, expresses skepticism about the relevance of this achievement: "Yet now what was written here/ about Indians, for example,/ turns into a nearly historical artifact, spent and suspect/ I myself am an Indian gaping in a darkening mirror."

²³ Tel Aviv, Devir, 1960.

²⁴ Freidland's essay, "Shirat ha'ani bekhivshono shel hazeman" [The Poetry of the Self and the Mysteries of Time] appeared in response to the publication of *Mapat 'erev*. It can be found in *Bitzaron*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Tishrei-Heshvan 1961), pp. 42-47. Dan Miron, "Bein haner lakokhavim," pp. 326-48.

²⁵ On the ways in which Preil's poems handle series of binary oppositions, see the important essays by Menachem Perry, "Eineha mimul—'al shiro shel Gavriel Preil 'Pereidah' ve'al aspeqt ahad shel shirato" [On the Gabriel Preil Poem 'Parting' and One Aspect of his Poetry], *Siman qeri'ah* 1 (Sept., 1972), pp. 255-63; and "Ha'onah hame'uzenet: 'al mivneh ha'omeq shel shirei Preil" [The Balanced Season: On the Deep Structure of Preil's Poems], *Siman qeri'ah* 9 (July, 1979), pp. 453-461.

²⁶ This structure can have many variations; it can even be wholly inverted, such when the poem begins with a totality that later deconstructed. See Miron, pp. 341-48.

²⁷ The revised Even Shoshan dictionary has the stem (*p.n.n.*) in the hif'il but not the huf'al.

²⁸ *Odem* is variously translated as sardius or sard (King James and RSV) and carnelian in the New JPS.