# From Where Have I Eaten My Poetry?: On Bialik and the Maternal

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The paper examines the image of the maternal in Hayyim Nahman Bialik's poetry and short prose. Contrary to most prior critical evaluations, which have viewed the autobiographical or symbolic mother in Bialik's works as a monolithic representation of misery, helplessness, and self-sacrifice, this paper emphasizes the mother's portrayal as a feared, loathed, and highly ambivalent object of identification vis-à-vis the emergence of the romantic Hebrew male poet. In a reading that spans from Bialik's early lyric poetry to his mature epic "Yatmut" (Orphanhood), the author traces the development of the mother image over the course of the poet's adult life and compares it to maternal images in the works of other romantic poets (William Wordsworth, for example). She also draws parallels between the ambivalent knot through which the poet is bound to his mother, and a similar ambivalent knot that cements the bond between national poet and his "people."

> From the womb to a garbage heap I was thrown,
> Not washed of filth, swaddled in rags;
> A withered breast bared to me by a mother wound in mourning clothes
> And from it I sucked the poison cup.
> Since then an adder nests in my heart
> Courses its position in me and saps my strength...
> Oh, where can I flee to, to escape its fury?
> I cannot live and I cannot rest![1]

This is the account Hayyim Nahman Bialik, by far the dominant voice of early twentieth century Hebrew poetry, gives of his birth and infancy. The stanza is part of a longer lyric poem—*Hirhurei Layla* ("Night Thoughts")—one of a

[1]"Night Thoughts" (1895), in *Songs from Bialik: Selected Poems of Hayim Nahman Bialik*, ed. and trans. from the Hebrew by Atar Hadari (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), p.10.

group of poems that Bialik published in his early twenties and that, in critic Dan Miron's words, "sealed the reputation of the young poet and won him the status of 'national poet.'"[2] The story of birth and infancy depicted by the stanza is told within the context of a speaker who is trying to understand the causes of his present miseries. It is interwoven into what Miron has called the triple-faceted "I" underlying Bialik's poetry—the autobiographical self, the allegorical self (an allegory for the "people" or for "Jewish history"), and the poetic self—a model which was introduced by Bialik into Hebrew poetry and which, as the critic Hannan Hever concludes, marks Bialik specifically as a *national* poet, one who embodies in his poetry both the particular and the universal.

Scholars have argued whether this account is autobiographically accurate, or whether it is strictly allegorical. Miron, appealing to the triple-faceted model of the self, has claimed that it is both. The mother is both the biographical mother, who was poverty-stricken and widowed in Bialik's childhood, but also the *shkhina*: the feminine-maternal presence that represents the female aspect of divinity (according to the *Kabbalah*), or the collective spiritual essence of the nation (known in Hebrew as *knesset Yisrael*). Regardless of whether she is interpreted as biographical, theological, or even as a symbol for the degraded Diasporic condition, the mother has been uniformly read by critics as a monolithic representation of misery, helplessness, and self-sacrifice.[3]

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[2]Dan Miron, *Ha-preda me-ha-ani ha-ani* (Taking Leave of the Impoverished Self) (Tel-Aviv: Ha-universita ha-ptukha, 1980), p. 30.

[3]The mother image in Judaism at large has been discussed in several elaborate works. See for example Avner Falk's psychoanalytic analysis of "Mysticism and Union with the Mother," in *A Psychoanalytic History of the Jews* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996). In *A Psychohistory of Zionism* (New York: Mason/ Charter, 1975), Jay Y. Gonen tackles instances of idealization of the mother in Zionist culture, but only in relation to the repression of sexual love towards her; Gonen does not consider the metaphoric position of the mother vis-à-vis the creation of the Zionist (male) self. In her numerous seminal studies of images of women in the Hebrew Bible and modern Hebrew prose, Esther Fuchs emphasizes, as I do, the multiplicity and multiple meanings of the female image; of particular importance for this paper is her analysis of *negative* images of women in Hebrew literature ("The Beast Within: Women in Amos Oz's Early Fiction," *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 4, No. 3 [1989]: 311–21; "Women as Traitors in Israeli Fiction: Steps Towards Defining the Problem," *Shofar*, Vol. 4, No. 1 [Fall 1985]: 5–16). Yet my project somewhat veers from Fuchs's: rather than investigate the mother image within the context of Jewish or Zionist patriarchy, my paper aims at drawing links between the poet's ambivalence towards the mother as both good and bad object and his ambivalence towards the "people" on behalf of whom he is fashioning his poetic "national" self.

In what follows I argue that alongside her portrayal and interpretation as pitiable and selfless, the mother-image in Bialik's poems is also presented as a feared and murderous "bad object," an Otherness that exceeds the limits of rationalization and that cannot be absorbed into the narrative history of the incipient individual or national self. At best, the mother is a site for ambivalent affect: presented as both a dangerous and strange object *and* as a familiar, pitiable one. Thus, beneath the poet's empathy with the mother's pain lie sado-masochistic interpersonal dynamics that underlie not only his relations with her but with all other objects: "the people," the nation, his poetry, himself. Exposing these dynamics, I believe, will point to the ambivalence around the construction of the autonomous, romantic national male subject that Bialik's poetic corpus supposedly demonstrates, as well as around the construction of an autonomous national identity at large, a cultural endeavor that was led by the late nineteenth-century Zionist thinker Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginzburg) and exemplified in many ways by Bialik's poetry.

The centrality of the mother's image to Bialik's poetry has for the most part been ignored or simplified by critics. One exception is David Aberbach's monograph on Bialik (1988),[4] in which the author treats the biographical mother at length and goes so far as to discuss the poet's feelings of abandonment, rage, and inner violence. Aberbach's analysis, however, is grounded in biographical data and not at all in textual analysis, thus omitting the larger questions of reader reception and the function of the mother imago for Bialik's readership. Moreover, despite talk of rage and aggression, Aberbach does not abandon the generally accepted notion that Bialik idealized his mother and the maternal spirit.[5] Even the Israeli literary scholar Hamutal Bar Yosef, who has written about decadent images of women in Bialik's poetry, about corpse-like female bodies and about the dread of a castrating sex-hungry temptress, has neglected to note the connection between these and the mother's image. Bar-Yosef speaks of "the idealization of the mother" in Bialik's poetry and goes as far as to liken his poetic mother to the Virgin Mary. "In the reincarnations of the mother's image in Bialik's poetry," she writes, "the loyalty to the mother, which represents the spirit of Judaism, is interwoven in the Christian motif of the holy mother and mother-worship that is characteristic of Russian culture."[6] This view of the mother as saint is perhaps applicable to a poem like

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[4]David Aberbach, *Bialik* (London: Peter Halban Publishers, 1988).

[5]Aberbach, *Bialik*, p. 75.

[6]Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Decadent Trends in Hebrew Literature: Bialik, Berdychevsky, Brenner* (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University Press, 1997 [Heb]), p. 185.

*Imi Zichrona Livracha* ("My Mother, May She Rest in Peace"), but a stanza like the one that I quote above can support such a reading only ironically. The speaker describes a sharp and painful motion: being thrust from the protective womb into a heap of garbage, being swaddled in rags, and being underfed. Traditionally, this poetic situation has been read as related to poverty (which Bialik so excelled at describing), to the mother's widowhood, which exacerbated this poverty, and even to the Diasporic condition at large. Miron, for example, claims that whether read as biographical or allegorical, the mother in this passage "represents a lowly, degraded existence whose abundance was eclipsed . . . a cosmic deviation caused by the Diaspora."[7] In this analysis, the allegorical dimension occludes or even erases the fact of the mother's inadequacy and the poet's intense experience of maternal rejection. Also, underlying this view of the mother as a metaphor for lack is the idealization of her as a potentially good, potentially abundant object that was eclipsed by external circumstances: *because* she is poor, *because* she is widowed, *because* she is in the Diaspora and not in the "land of milk and honey," where mother's milk is supposedly abundant, because *she is* the wretched Diaspora, she herself is deficient. There is no direct acknowledgment of the sheer negativity of the poet's portrayal of his mother.

As if to temper his harsh words, the poetic speaker uses the passive voice, which does not attribute agency and blame directly to the mother: "I was taken" . . . "A breast was bared to me." Yet despite these mitigating efforts, the poet's perception of the mother as negligent and even as violent and murderous is nevertheless suggested: the infant is "thrown" (a more precise literal translation would be "thrust") from the womb into a heap of garbage; a "withered" breast—grotesque and empty—is "bared" to him. Read in tandem with the poisonous substance that it delivers into the poet's body, this stanza depicts a powerful fantasy: that of murder by the mother. Within the logic of this fantasy, the mother's mourning clothes are worn not for the deceased husband but for the baby/poet himself.

Regardless of biographical accuracy (for how would the poet remember his own birth and infancy?) we know that similar accounts appear in other Bialik works and that they therefore reflect either how Bialik *perceived* his infancy, or at the very least how he wanted to present it to his readers. His complaint, by no means an unusual one, is always the same: the breast did not give enough milk, I was undernourished and/or ill nourished, and that is why I am

[7]Miron, *Taking Leave of the Impoverished Self*, p. 60.

who I am. Bialik story's story "Saphiach" ["The Aftergrowth"] (1924), portrays a similar scene:

> Thirty days after my birth I was doomed for exile: I was tossed into the bosom of a foreign wet nurse in a neighboring town. The nurse, I beg your pardon, had shriveled breasts, and when I would scream for milk she would give me my thumb to suck on... When I was brought back from there, my legs were crooked, my belly swollen, and my eyes bulging like two glass balls. Besides, I used to eat plaster off the walls, munch on coal and suck my thumb ...

When he is older, the narrator further recounts:

> My mother remembered me, but always too late. "Oh, the baby hasn't eaten yet ... the baby hasn't washed yet ... where's the baby?" And the baby, that is I, Shmulik, would meanwhile be sitting in a hidden place, under the bed or in the alcove under the stove, sitting and playing with myself. The neighboring women, when I came near them, would point a finger to their temples, signaling that my brain isn't right and would whisper and spit on the ground. Meanwhile, when my mother walked in, they would suddenly hush.[8]

Here too mother's/nurse's milk is depicted as scarce, insufficient and damaging to the narrator. When the mother does nourish, her food is ungratifying, given too late, and even potentially lethal. As the word *saphiach* ("that which grows of itself") suggests, the basis of the poet's self is in self-nourishment—one's own thumb in place of breast milk—almost in autogenesis. Bialik presents this as the basis of his poetic spirit as well, the master-poet of modern Hebrew letters born out of the defunct mother. It is important to remember that Bialik, both in his writing and in his person, had considerable symbolic importance for the burgeoning Jewish national community, both in Eastern Europe and in Palestine. As Hever writes, "Bialik appears in the historiographic narrative [of Hebrew literature] as the poet who in his poetry constructed the autonomous individual subject ... [He] is the ultimate extraction of the concrete universal, the one who represents for the new Zionist Jewish person a concrete entity, flesh and blood, phrased in the universal terms of the new Zionist utopia."[9]

The question of the poet's origin and making was of utmost importance to the Zionist narrative that would emerge out of Bialik's early poetry, and

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[8]H. N. Bialik, "*Saphiach*" [Aftergrowth] (1924). http://benyehuda.org/bialik/safiax.html.

[9]Hannan Hever, "The Beginning of Poetry in Eretz Israel," in Eliyana R. Adler & Sheila E. Jelen, eds., *Jewish Literature and History: An Interdisciplinary Conversation* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2008), pp. 153–176, 160.

that would later be crystallized in Palestine. The Zionist idea, as Hever writes, "demanded a greater involvement in history" and "an active willingness to perform a deed," and for this purpose "it demanded the existence of an individual with an interiority and internal tensions who constructed himself through an ongoing conflict with reality."[10] The poet's struggle for individuation and growth vis-à-vis the inadequate mother is thus depicted as the initial stage of this struggle, which aims at the creation of the autonomous adult self. But the portrayal of such an individual served in fact a *dual* purpose for the national project: it not only created an image of a citizen-ideal who would be able to face the reality of constant conflict and dissatisfaction that the colonization of the land would bring, but it also—simultaneously—framed the political, external conflict surrounding nationalization and conquest of the land as internal, psychological tensions and thus masked the violence of the national project behind the guise of a romantic ideology.

How are the necessary interiority and psychological depth constructed in Bialik's poetry? First and foremost, through Bialik's many allusions to his own interiority and depth: his "empty soul," his "hollow heart," his "rumbling," empty stomach, images of an interiority that seeks to be filled. The basic assumption underlying the poet's narrative is that his poor and insufficient nourishment has left him with a core emptiness, one that *could* be filled with the food of national belonging and culture. This paradigm also underlies the work of Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginzburg), one of early Zionism's most influential thinkers and Bialik's most direct influence. For Ahad Ha'am, who devoted a great deal of time to arguing and writing about the content that should fill the burgeoning Jewish national interiority, the individual body serves as a metaphor for the body politic. In "Etza tova" (Good Advice), he particularly stresses the digestive system, whose proper functioning is equated with national health:

> As in an individual man, so it is in an entire nation, that the individual form, the "I", does not always reach a complete inner uniformity. In individuals we sometimes see an integrated "I", a strong and solid form that encompasses the entire spiritual life and does not permit any "stranger" to be naturalized inside it as a free entity; rather all that enters it—thoughts, emotions, ambitions, etc.—it "digests," separates and combines, until they become "one flesh" with the rest, and that which is difficult to digest it discharges outwards.[11]

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[10]Hever, "The Beginning of Poetry in Eretz Israel," p. 160.

[11]Ahad Ha'am, "Etza Tova" (Good Advice), in *Kol Kitvei Ahad Ha'am* (Collected Works) (Tel-Aviv: Dvir, 1961), p. 132. My translation – M.D.

"A strong and solid form" is thus needed so that the "stranger" may be properly digested and/or expelled rather than take over the weak self. Proper nutrition, digestion, and expulsion are the attributes of such a strong frame but are also, presumably, a pre-condition for its creation. Bialik's formation narrative, which highlights bad nutrition and a weak frame ("my legs were crooked, my belly swollen, and my eyes bulging like two glass balls") is in this sense a cautionary tale that inversely complements Ahad Ha'am's idealization. "Night Thoughts," moreover, not only depicts the poet's unhealthy origins but emphasizes the particular damage done by the mother's deficient milk: it is a substance that can neither be integrated into the self nor expelled, propelling the poet into a condition in which he "cannot live and cannot rest."

In the 1901 poem "Shirati" ("My Poetry"), written almost a decade after "Night Thoughts" and during Bialik's most productive period, the mother is contemplated within a larger interrogation of the speaker's poetic origins. Before broaching the topic of the mother, in the first couple of stanzas the speaker considers the traditional poetic inheritance of the Hebrew male poet. He begins with an address to the general (male) reader: "Hateda minayin nachalti et shirati" (Do you know from whence I have inherited my poetry)? Several sources are considered, yet the question of poetic inheritance is quickly shifted to and presented as inseparable from the theme of food and feeding. The poet, it seems, asks not only "minayin nachalti et shirati," but because of a play of meaning inherent in word and sound also asks "minayin *a*chalti et shirati"—"from whence have I *eaten* my poetry"?

> In my father's house a lonely singer lived,
> modest, unobtrusive, diffident,
> a dweller in dark holes and murky grooves.
> He knew one melody, familiar, fixed.
> And when my heart grew dumb, and my tongue clove
> to the roof of my mouth in misery
> and stifled weeping welled up in my throat
> that tune re-echoed through my empty soul—
> the chirp of cricket—bard of poverty.
> My father's want profaned the Sabbath feast.
> His table carried neither wine nor bread;
> a few thin ragged candles stuck in earth
> were all that took the place of his pawned lamps;
> and seven children hungry, half-asleep,
> intoned a welcome to the Sabbath angel.[12]

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[12]Hayyim Hahman Bialik, *Hashirim* (Poems), ed. Avner Holtzman (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2004), p. 189. My translation – M.D.

The poem begins with a description of this unhappy meal—a mock Sabbath celebration—and continues to a time when there will be no meal at all: "The basket held no bread, the bin no yeast, no coal to warm them, no groats in the pot." It is in these dire times that the cricket's "dreary, arid song" is most intrusive. The cricket, Miron explains, stands for the boring liturgical poet whose poetry is as monotonous and devoid of melody as a cricket's song.[13] In his extensive analysis of "Shirati," Miron shows how both this liturgical poem sung during prayer and the sacrificial/ celebratory songs sung around the Sabbath and holiday table are rejected by Bialik not only as poetic sources but simply as *deadly boring*—"barren as death"—and un-nourishing. They are as bland and as spoiled as the sour slice of bread that is the family's Sabbath meal. Bialik thus considers, and rejects, the rightful inheritance of the male Hebrew poet as the origin of his poetry; he also rejects, as the passage reveals, the inheritance (*nakhala*) of the father, whose "table carried neither wine nor bread." To the extent that the father leaves an inheritance, Bialik portrays it as inconsequential; in the subsequent stanza, which begins tersely and impersonally with the line "My mother was widowed, her sons orphaned," the father and his legacy disappear completely.

Bialik examines his mother as the source of another kind of voice: his *anacha* (sigh). As opposed to the stanzas devoted to the father, which are highly figurative, in the stanzas in which he treats the mother-image the poet offers us a detailed description of her appearance and utterances, even quoting her directly. The mother, we are told, "would carry off to the market her blood and marrow," "return[ing] in the evening," "hardly alive," and "retreating like a hounded dog." Her laboring body is "frail," "thin" and "flaccid." "From his crib" in "his dark room," the child-poet tracks her movements, listening to the mother's cries, sighs, complaints, and desperate prayers. The poet's feelings toward the mother, though not directly conveyed, are projected onto the household objects: "with *rage* and *pity* every corner hushed"; "the candle's flame would startle with dread,/As if nodding to her: I am sorry for you, wretched woman!/A pity for a mother's heart rotting in fury,/For the warmth of your breath vaporized in a curse."

In Jacques Lacan's developmental theory, individuation is made possible through the mother's gaze, which in turn provides a buttress for the self in its formative, infantile stage, mirroring the infant's fragile self-image back to him as integral and whole. In William Wordsworth's romantic narrative of origin,

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[13]Miron, *Taking Leave of the Impoverished Self*, p. 124.

*The Prelude* (1805), such a dynamic underlies the famous "Blessed Babe" passage. There, the mother's gaze infuses the infant with a passion that will later become the source of his poetic vision:

> Blest the babe
> Nursed in his mother's arms, the babe who sleeps
> Upon the mother's breast, who, when his soul
> Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul,
> Doth gather passion from his mother's eye.[14]

Following Jean Laplanche, Harold Bloom has argued that in the "Blessed Babe" passage the mother is positioned as prop for the accumulation of the poet's desire (rather than herself being an object of desire in the Freudian sense).[15] Though she is not its origin, she provides a buttress for the symbolic order of poetic language. Contrary to this image, Bialik's self-interpretation posits the mother, whose is metonymically represented by the disjointed bed, as precisely incapable of providing any kind of buttress for the poet's being and entrance into langauge. She is hardly a source of food, nor does she support the poet's language; to the extent that she may give sustenance, it is of the poisonous kind. The "good substance"—her blood and marrow—has been sold in the marketplace, while the hungry poet is left to feed on her tear and sigh alone. This baby, the poet's past self, does not sleep "upon his mother's breast"; he does not in fact sleep at all. Rather, he lies watching the mother's agitated movements and listening to her sighs and curses.

The mother's gaze at her infant is a staple in Western art, for example in Leonardo de Vinci's *Madonna with the Carnation* and *Virgin and Child with St. Anne*. In these paintings, the mother's face and torso are turned towards the male infant, who remains the real focus of the pictorial space and narrative interest. The maternal figure, as Julia Kristeva notes, looks with naïve tenderness at the child, completely absorbed in his figure.[16] As in the Wordsworthian passage, the infant is looked at by the mother and "gather[s] passion" from her gazing eye—passion which he can then collect into his own poetic eye and project onto other objects (most prominently, for Wordsworth, onto

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[14]Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, II, 239–43.

[15]See Cathy Caruth, "Past Recognition: Narrative Origins in Wordsworth and Freud," *MLN*, Vol. 100, No. 5 (1985): 935.

[16]These images are evoked by Julia Kristeva in *Desire in Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 245. See also Barbara Schapiro, *The Romantic Mother* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

nature). For Bialik, this picture is reversed: while the mother does not see or acknowledge the child's presence, *it is the child-poet who sees the mother*, lying in his crib (not on or near the mother) and "[watching] *her* frail body through the opening."

The difference between Wordsworth's image of motherhood and Bialik's is crucial. For the Wordsworthian mother exists only to the extent that she sees the infant. It is he who makes her exist. Her role is purely functional: to reflect the infant's image back to him and uphold the symbolic order that will be achieved by the male poet's entrance into language. She exists in order to be trespassed and substituted by subsequent objects: "Once Leonardo turns to his symbolic power," Kristeva writes, "he eclipses maternal imprint."[17] In sharp contrast, Bialik portrays a symbolic economy devoid of paternal power (in his recurrent themes of widowhood and orphanhood) and a maternal power whose imprint cannot be eclipsed. For if in Wordsworth's account the mother is silent, here the mother's rage, fury, and desperation reverberate towards the poet-speaker through the walls and the candles and the bed; as he lies awake in his crib, the sound of her futile prayers and her sighs "come to him" for a "long time," and the sight of her frail body haunts him. Finally, the mother's sigh is described as entering the speaker's body directly, without any possibility of resistance:

> And my heart tells me and I know,
> That a tear from her eye had dripped into the dough.
> And as she will allot the warm morning slab to her children
> From the pastry of her dough, from the bread of her tear—
> I will swallow her sigh, it will enter into my frame.[18]

The mother's sign, as opposed to the cricket's boring song, cannot be tuned out or expelled. It is passively internalized by the speaker, leaving "a scorpion's bite on [his] heart." Unlike the earlier "Night Thoughts," in this more mature poem it is not only the poisonous substance that contaminates the poet but also *his own* identification with the mother's misery. The poet internalizes the mother to the extent that he need not see or hear her anymore to know that she is crying. And this mental internalization precedes and prefigures the oral internalization of the mother's tear-laden bread. In swallowing the mother's bread, which was attained through the sacrificial labor that has deadened her to him, the speaker recognizes with the resignation of the condemned that he

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[17]Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, p. 245.

[18]"Beyom Stav" (On an Autumn Day) (written before 1897) (my translation – M.D.), in Bialik, *Shirim*, pp. 24–25.

is taking in that which will kill his poetry's communicative potential: the non-linguistic, destructive sigh.

Indeed the child, fully cognizant as we have seen of the mother and her cruel fate, is depicted as identifying with her to the extent that it harms him. Miron and others have stressed that the speaker chooses to identify with the suffering mother instead of with God and his power. Yet this identification, as we have seen, is presented not as voluntary but as forced upon the child through the mother's intruding presence (the internalization of her nourishing/ killing tear-laden bread, which he must eat to survive). By swallowing the mother's tears and making them his own, the speaker becomes one entity with the mother, taking on the burden of her pain and muteness. This may be a result of the speaker's guilt; he is after all the cause of mother's hardship: feeding him has been her life's torture. But no matter what propels this identification and internalization, the child must eat for his survival and self-preservation and thus must take in all that is contained in this food: the mother's tears, her sighs, and also her shame and anger, her vaporized curse. For what the poet internalizes through the mother's bread is not just her weakness but also her darkness and wrath.

Miron has linked the poet's involuntary internalization of the mother's sigh with God's insertion of the language of prophecy directly into the prophet's mouth.[19] The intertwining of food and words figures often in the Jewish and later Christian traditions, as well as in romantic poetry. Yet God's words are like honey in the prophet's mouth, while the mother inserts her salty tears ("fire drilling teary splinters") into the poet's mouth. And she does not insert language at all, but a primordial tear and a sigh. Whereas, in the tradition that spans from Leonardo to Wordsworth, the mother is the passive enabler of symbolic coherence and integrity, here she is the destroyer of linguistic order.

It should be noted that the image of a loving and nurturing mother appears in "Aftergrowth" *symbolically*, as a simile for the poet's self-experience in nature. Indeed, there Bialik counters the harsh descriptions of the autobiographical mother discussed above with a loving portrayal of "mother-nature":

> There was no speech and no words—only a vision. Such utterance as there was came without words or even sounds. It was a mystic utterance, especially created, from which all sound had evaporated, yet which still remained. Nor did I hear it with my ears, but it entered my soul through another medium. *In the same*

[19]Miron, *Taking Leave of the Impoverished Self*, pp. 375–76.

> *way a mother's tenderness and loving gaze penetrate the soul of her baby, asleep in the cradle, when she stands over him anxious and excited—and he knows nothing.*[20]

In "Aftergrowth" and also in "Ha-Zohar" ("The Splendor"), a poem which was originally written as an extension of "My Poetry," the poet describes how later in childhood he will seek and find self-coherence in nature. Yet the image of the nurturing mother as a simile for nurturing nature remains tainted by the prior depiction of the autobiographical mother as anti-nature. This mother will remain the foreign substance, a poison whose course inside the internal organs or the depth of unconsciousness, as Ahad Ha'am fears, cannot be controlled. It is from the effects of this poisonous, destructive substance that the poet will find shelter in nature, a purely "good object" described at length in "The Splendor," until this object too will come to be perceived as hostile and destructive and lose its benevolent qualities.

The problem with digesting the wrong stuff, as "My Poetry" demonstrates, is that it will set off a process over which the individual, but also, as per Ahad Ha'am, the nation lacking in "strong and solid form," will have little control:

> It is a general rule in the psychic wisdom of our day that like all the internal organs, man's spirit will perform the majority of its work without the consciousness of its owner. Like food that had passed through the pharynx, everything that enters the heart, whether consciously or unconsciously, leaves our control to the domain of the internal forces, which operate in deep spheres according to their own special laws, without us feeling them and their actions.[21]

The fear of the self's destruction by an attack from without and the loss of control over one's self-identity is central to both Ahad Ha'am and Bialik, particularly in relation to the loss of Jewish identity in the Diaspora.

Such fear of destruction of the self from the outside has been labeled by Melanie Klein as "paranoid anxiety," as opposed to the fear of destruction of one's objects of love by the self, which she termed "depressive anxiety." Both states, according to Klein, are linked to the child's early aggressive fantasies. In the first case, the child's wish to destroy the mother leads to a fear of deadly retaliation; in the second, the same wish leads to concern for the mother's safety. "This concern," Klein writes, "is an expression of genuine love and regret which develops along with a deep gratitude for the goodness the child has received from the mother."[22]

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[20]Bialik, "Aftergrowth." My translation and emphasis – M.D.

[21]"The Tongue and its Grammar," in Ahad Ha'am, *Collected Works*, p. 98.

[22]Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 119–50.

Bialik's poetry, as we have seen, demonstrates both a paranoid *and* a depressive anxiety around the mother's image. More precisely, we can trace a development from an explicitly paranoid position to a more depressive one in the transition from earlier to later works. The poem "Beyom Stav" ("In an Autumn Day") for example, dating back to Bialik's early twenties, presents a mother who is a pliant and persistent ghost-like presence, penetrating and suffocating the speaker's physical and mental space at all times, day and night: "In a lunar night, when it's dark above/ my floor is seeded with light—/ then she appears like a dream, like a shadow,/ and before me idly advances":

> "How I pity you, miserable child!"—and silently
> two boiling, fire drilling teary splinters fall upon my mouth.
> She did not cry, did not raise her voice—muted like Rachel
> she stood, as if her vast pity was rolling upon me.
> And a gloomy gaze, disclosing only widowhood, bitterness, bereavement,
> and the grace of a pitying mother she sent, and it touched my heart—
> and *I will never forget her look*, and *everywhere*
> *I will see her sad face, which not even for a moment will relax its grip.*[23]

Though this early poem presents a more conventional portrait of a mother bestowing grace upon her child, and though here the mother does gaze at her child with pity, her gaze does not soothe but leaves a deadly imprint on that child's frame. The mother's grip cannot be shaken off, and her tears—"two boiling, fire drilling teary splinters"—fall directly upon the speaker's (swallowing) mouth, leaving, presumably, an internal burn. As in "My Poetry," the paranoid position is somewhat alleviated by a depressive position, in which the speaker moves from being poisoned or burned by the mother to an identification with and concern for her.

Such identification with the mother also colors "Almanut" ("Widowhood"), an explicitly autobiographical poem published very near the poet's death at age sixty-one. In this poem, part of a longer autobiographical sequence in which the poet revisits his childhood, he narrates in quasi-epic form the mother's fall into widowhood and her subsequent decision to send him off, at age seven, to be raised by a severe and unloving grandfather. The story is told at great length, and often with considerable compassion. And yet, the paranoid position of "Night Thoughts" is never truly abandoned. The identification with the mother leads not to the Kleinian "reparation," but to a sado-

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[23]My translation and emphasis – M.D. Original taken from Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Collected Poems 1899–1934* [Hebrew], ed. Dan Miron et al., Vols. 1 & 2 (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1983, 1990), pp. 85–87.

masochistic knot in which mother and child are each perceived as both victim and perpetrator. This knot, it seems, is felt by the poet no less powerfully at sixty than at twenty:

> Indeed those days are long gone, yet still their terror
> Is new to me always, and like the crucified at the cross
> In nails I clung to the image of your desolate widowhood,
> My mother: poor, stormy, unconsoled and unpitied![24]

At sixty as at twenty, the poet professes to be crucified to his (now long dead) mother. And though the poem is titled "widowhood," and frames the mother's stormy, angry, depressed nature within the context of poverty and the condition of widowhood, the speaker makes it clear that it is the mother, and not "those days" whose terror "is new to [him] always." In the most vivid, shocking and powerful descriptions of his mother until that point in his poetry, Bialik alternates between images of her as a weak and a terrifying being: she is at once "abhorred" (*teshukatz*), "God's image corrupted," "a domestic hind turned gluttonous jackal," "a stunned pigeon," "a grieving bear," "trembling like a leaf," "bare and empty," "irritation [boiling] her blood," "a worm," "a broken bottle that has no use," and so on. The women with whom she associates at the marketplace are "human worms like her," "wandering sacks of rotting bones, "women bitter and hardened," "disfigured and horrid looking," "devoid of grace and kindness, their female and maternal image blotted out," and more.

And yet, as the poet presents his most traumatic moment: his banishment at age seven from the maternal home, he once again rises to the mother's defense: "You who are blessed by God . . . / who are satiated with daily bread . . . / . . . when hearing a rumor/ of a widow living in your neighborhood who one day/ crushing her mother's pity like a raven, / sent her nestling away from her nest/ and cast him into a bosom not her own, I swear you . . . / if you despise or reproach her. / God will be witness, and her facial expression will testify/ how many sleepless nights preceded that day./ Who among you knows a mother's hidden afflictions?"[25] Addressing an imagined judge—perhaps his sixty-year-old self—the poet continues to mount a defense for his mother in the case of his own victimization: he elicits a list of household objects that will testify to the authenticity of her distress, and if "the language [of these objects] is foreign to you," he addresses the reader, he cites the case of Hagar and Ishmael:

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[24]"Almanut," my translation. Original taken from Bialik, *Collected Poems*, p. 419.

[25]"Almanut," p. 419.

Ask the Egyptian mother, wanderer of the desert,
what was on her heart when she cast her thirsty child
beneath one of the bushes, to be eaten by the burning heat—and you may
speculate like I do,
what my mother saw and what approached her soul
on that hurried bitter evening prefatory to the day of parting,
that made her embrace me thus, perplexed and bewildered,
and why she pressed me against her heart so, laughing at me and crying,
and what she asked of my eyes when she peered inside them,
as if digging in their depth to solicit there her verdict.[26]

The poet, then, is simultaneously the prosecutor, victim, defender and judge. And yet he does not, or perhaps cannot, acknowledge any of these subject positions separately from the others.

If Bialik indeed was the first romantic Hebrew poet and the exemplary particular-universal subject at the center of the emergent Jewish national community at the turn of the twentieth century, why did he put his tortured and torturous relationship to his mother on display? And can this relationship be generalized to encompass the exemplary subject's relationship to other objects around him? If so, I believe it can teach us something about his relationship to "the nation" or "the people" at large. In Bialik's case, it can shed light, for example, on his ambivalent and at times cruel treatment of the Kishinev Pogrom victims in his famous epic *Be'ir ha'hariga* ("In the City Of Killing"), a formative poem of the Zionist movement. In this poem, which Bialik wrote in response to the Kishinev Pogrom of 1903, the speaker reprimands the pogrom victims ("beggars of the world") for their weakness and passivity during and after the violent attacks, likening them to "mice," "tics" and dying "dogs."[27] Yet simultaneously in this poem, God bids the poet to suppress his anger and revulsion ("Gnash your teeth and dissolve") and instead to "bow like an ox tied to the altar," priming himself for future self-sacrifice on the victims' behalf.[28] The poet of "In the City of Killing" is both over-identified and under-identified with the "people," relaying their story to the rest of the world while humiliating them (in what Miron, following Abramovich, has called "a poetic pogrom"), despising them and fearing their destiny while at the same time readying himself to avenge their travesty and die for their cause.

It is this sado-masochistic model of identification, I believe, that Bialik offered as a model for the newly burgeoning national community, a model that

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[26] "Almanut," p. 420.

[27] Bialik, *Songs from Bialik*, p. 3.

[28] Bialik, *Songs from Bialik*, p. 5.

was enthusiastically embraced by his readers. For despite its ethical dubiousness, "In the City of Killing" was and remains one of Bialik's most popular poems, accurately hitting as well as marking the emotional register of the incipient national community.

In a brilliant recent rereading of "In the City of Killing," Miron argues that we should read Bialik's problematic moral position towards the Kishinev victims as a post-traumatic defense against the extreme and graphic violence with which he was met at Kishinev (Bialik traveled to Kishinev and stayed there for a few months before concocting the poem). The gory sights and stories of blood, rape, and shattered body parts, Miron claims, resulted in a numbing and dissociation which in turn led the poet to both aggression and guilt.[29] Yet as Freud had argued, an event is traumatic particularly to the extent that it fulfils an *a priori*, unarticulated, unconscious fantasy, and this fantasy, as I have shown, can be traced in Bialik's poetry to early wishes of retaliation against the mother. In this regard, "The City of Killings" offers an eerie re-telling of Wordsworth's "Blessed Babe" passage: the image of a baby sucking from his dead mother's breast, or "The case of a baby found by the side of his stabbed mother/ still dozing with her cold nipple in his sucking mouth." What the strange contentment of this baby seems to evoke (he is not, after all, screaming for milk but "still" blissfully "dozing" atop the dead mother's body) is not only the startling gap between life and death, an infant's moment of ignorant bliss to be followed by a lifetime of orphanhood, but an uncannily idyllic vision of motherhood. Only when she is imagined as dead and fetishized, can the mother in Bialik's poetry live up to her ideal of abundant nurturing. Where the autobiographical mother refuses her milk, the dead, abstracted mother, represented by a mere synecdoche—the breast—feeds even after death.

Ambivalence colors every child's relationship to his mother. Yet not every expression of this ambivalence coincides with the expression of the desire for national renewal. Bialik's poetry was not unique in this respect; stories of other major Zionist literary figures of the same period—most notably Hayyim Yosef Brenner—are riddled with hostility toward the ambivalent mother imago. Virtually nowhere in early Zionist literature is there a loving, active, lasting relationship. Never does it exist between children and parents. The parent-child relationship is guilty as such, and every move toward new relationships (for example, towards Zionism) ends in guilt as well. Does the transition from

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[29] "Me-ir ha-hariga ve-hal'a" ("From the 'City of Slaughter' Onward), in Dan Miron, ed., *Be-ir Hahariga-Bikur Meuchar* (In the City of Slaughter—a Visit at Twilight: Bialik's Poem a Century After) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005), pp. 71–154.

a minority to a majority identity also grant, among other freedoms, the liberty to express hatred and aggression towards the mother? Undoubtedly, especially as it could be argued alongside a Freudian model, its central aim of constituting an autonomous male subject-citizen demanded a participation in the "universal" abjection of the mother. Indeed, though the mother's abjection is linked in later Bialik poems to her particularly shtetl-rooted poverty and misery, and though the poet's guilt—and there is plenty of it in the later poems—is mostly for failing to alleviate her poverty ("I saw and my eyes did not rot"[30]), we have also seen that the poet locates his rage against maternal lack and maternal wound (in "Aftergrowth" and "Night Thoughts") back in infancy, much in advance of his mother's actual widowhood and his own subsequent banishment from her home.

Why have even Bialik's sharpest critics ignored, or simplified, the complexity of the mother-image in Bialik's poetry? Perhaps because the denial of the actual (as opposed to the symbolic) maternal position is an integral part of a national ideology of autonomy and self-creation. Indeed, Bialik's poetic corpus had itself been designated as self creating, as *the* origin of modern Hebrew poetry; in this scenario, the mother, her poverty and misery, and her language (not only moans and groans but also Yiddish) belong to a foreign realm (representing already in Bialik's fin-de-siècle poetry, as we have seen, a foreign substance) that Bialik wishes to shed.[31] Yet as we also have seen throughout Bialik's very poetry—from "My Poetry" to "Widowhood"—the poet also tells us that the mother's legacy can never be fully abjected or surpassed, that he *is* his

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[30]"Almanut," lines 17–18.

[31]Interestingly, it is perhaps the more linguistically and culturally removed American literary scholar David Aberbach who has made the most far-reaching claims about the mother's centrality to Bialik's work. Aberbach even attributes Bialik's *shtika*—his poetic silence beginning in 1912—to the death of the poet's mother which occurred during this period:

> This loss, which is passed over in complete silence in [Bialik's] writings, may well have been one of the key events of his inner life. His mother had moved to Odessa and lived with the poet and his wife during her last three years. Her gloomy presence was remarked upon by a number of Bialik's friends: Ravnitzky described her lying on a couch for days, groaning in misery. The increased pessimism of Bialik's poetry during the years up to 1911 might well have been affected by his mother's dying. It may be that he connected her death with her separation from him when he was a child, and the anxiety, anger and depression which he felt after losing her the first time may have been revived by her death. . . . They might have stifled his creativity (Aberbach, *Bialik*, pp. 88–89).

mother, that she erupts "from *all* [his] poems," that he is "crucified" to the cross of her body.[32] If we expected a national poet who offers the tale of his own life as a model for a newly imagined citizenship to tell the story of emergence from dependence to subjecthood and autonomy, Bialik defies our expectations. If, according to the Freudian developmental narrative, the post-Oedipal child is one who is in the process of assuming a position within the cultural order as a whole, Bialik documents his inability to get there: the mother does not nourish and is not an object of desire; the father, weak and mostly absent, is not an object of authority[33]; the child, unable to overcome his early deprivation, cannot achieve a transition into adulthood. This was, in many ways, the typical narrative of early Zionist formation narratives.[34]

Such impasse, it should nonetheless be noted, is not unique to Zionist works. As minority and post-colonial writers have shown, the chains of identification and desire assumed in the Freudian model often do not line up as neatly when associated with a minority, colonial, or poor, non middle-class subject.[35] Yet perhaps it is the act of *voicing* maternal lack, and thus creating an expectation of a better, "healthier," more normalized familial reality that marks Bialik's transition from minority to majority literature. After all, the cry both for and against the mother puts Bialik in the company of some of the major poets of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Plath . . .

Yet as I have suggested, in the case of the Zionist poet, the cycle of aggression, identification and guilt that marks his relations to the mother also marks and makes an example of his relation to the "people" and the nation at large. For if for Freud, the resolution of the Oedipal complex marks the beginning of morality, conscience, law and all forms of social authority, the poet, "crucified" to the mother, seems to reject these as the basis of national consciousness and the glue between imagined citizens. Where Bialik's ideological father, Ahad Ha'am, explicitly calls for the creation of an autonomous Jewish

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[32] "Almanut," line 15.

[33] Bialik's father died when he was seven, and though he treats his figure in a number of poems, including the last autobiographical sequence, I do not think his image is cathected with nearly as much emotion as the mother's.

[34] For example, H. Y. Brenner's *Bakhoref* (In Winter, 1903) or Micah Berdycewski's *Machanayim* (Between Two Camps, 1899).

[35] See for example Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1963) or Barbara Johnson's reading of Nela Larson's *Quicksand* in *The Feminist Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

nation with individuated Jewish citizens and bases relations between citizens on an ethic of morality, Bialik (and Brenner as well) depict another reality: a self that can never reach autonomy and individuation and who is tied to others in a sado-masochistic knot. These others are embodied first and foremost in the figure of the mother, who later will be substituted by the "people": the imagined citizens with whom Bialik and other early Zionist writers will create national bonds.[36]

In her reading of Proust's works, Julia Kristeva (1996) depicts the sado-masochistic dynamics of belonging that underlie Proust's ambivalent relations towards his (maternal) Jewish origins and which, according to her, ultimately propel him beyond the bounds of any given ethnic, sexual, or class-based identity.[37] Such dynamics have typically been attributed to minority Jewish writers who are writing for majority audiences (Proust, Kafka . . .). Yet perhaps the national model, at least in the Jewish case, should not be viewed as offering contrasting, linear, straightforward dynamics of identification between fellow citizens. Perhaps it is such dynamics that precisely cement bonds between imagined citizens as well. In early Zionist culture, such sado-masochistic patterns of interaction color national affiliations, and they persist in Eretz Yisrael and later in the State of Israel long past the nation-building period.

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[36]For a detailed interrogation of these dynamics see "Kishinev and the Making of a Jewish Tragedy," in Mikhal Dekel, *The Universal Jew: Modernity, Masculinity and the Making of a Jewish National Subject* (Northwestern University Press, 2010), pp. 139–168.

[37]Julia Kristeva, *Time & Sense: Proust and the Experience of Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).