

# Ktivat-Adam (*Homograph*): Avot Yeshurun, the Long Poem, and Poetic Historiography

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay explores how the long poem authorizes itself to reshape memory. I develop the notion of “poetic historiography” on the basis of Paul Ricoeur’s *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) and by examining three mutations of Israeli poet Avot Yeshurun’s (1904–1992) long poems. In each of these hybrid forms, “poetry” is subordinated to testimony and to metahistorical communication, but at the same time, the long poem evolves as a mnemonic-poetic tool in which language changes its functions. Throughout, the central question is how and to what effect the “presence of an absent thing stamped with the seal of the anterior,” which Ricoeur regards as the enigma of historiographical transmission, is mediated by the temporal mode of poetry. My aim is twofold: first, to trace the change in Yeshurun’s long poems—from representing history as *Bildung*, through enacting testimony and (post)trauma, to the evolvment of the poetic archive; second, to explore to what ends these forms of memory that are shaped by poetry also forge its future transmission.

THE WORK ON THIS ARTICLE LED ME TO RETHINK the Song of Songs, Kohelet, Keter Malkhut, and even the prayer sequence as antecedents of the long poem.<sup>1</sup> It then also occurred to me that it might not be too far-fetched to read the principles of Jewish historiography in the “alphabet of creation,” an ancient legend from the Zohar.<sup>2</sup> In a modernist mutation of this legend, the Yiddish poet A. Leyeles (1889–1966) invokes the “God of Israel” as the

<sup>1</sup> I am referring to the philosophical treatise-poem “The Crown of Kinship of Solomon” composed by Ibn Gabirol in the eleventh century. Yeshurun alludes to this long poem in his poem “Master of Rest.” Likewise, the collection by this name foregrounds its allusions to the biblical Song of Songs and Kohelet. The High Holiday Mahzor (literally, prayer “cycle”) is often quoted by Yeshurun and serves as one of his repeated models.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Shahn, ed., *The Alphabet of Creation: An Ancient Legend from the Zohar with Drawings by Ben Shahn* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954), cited in Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, eds., *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 75.

creator of a living archive: “He . . . dropped from a mountain two handfuls of letters / scattered them over the road of the earth” and ever since we have sought them, saved them, translated them. “And there is no solution on earth / for the letters, the sayings, the words.”<sup>3</sup> Drawing on the Zohar, the book of the Kabbalah, Leyeles anticipates our own active engagement in an open archive permanently in process. Moreover, in accentuating the dissonance between the origin of the “letters” and their unresolved dispersal on earth, Leyeles alludes to an archi-breakage that also foreshadows modern historiography.<sup>4</sup> From a different, postromantic perspective, the breakage that informs the history of the Western long poem is located in the genre’s severance from epic memory. This severance has been vital for twentieth-century understanding of its own positioning via the classical past. But despite the tacit recognition that the epic has been replaced by the novel, a recognition that is implicit in the weighty critiques of epic memory by formative twentieth-century figures such as Lukács (1914), Benjamin (1936), and Bakhtin (in the 1940s),<sup>5</sup> the (post)modern long poem has nevertheless challenged the novel’s dominance, largely by recording and especially by reshaping forms of cultural memory. In this essay, I inquire as to how this hybrid and controversial form has gained authority in Avot Yeshurun’s work as the genre that carries mnemonic transmission. The polyphonic long poem, having moved beyond the isolated lyric, is shaped by its historiographic task but also forges new forms of complex layered and actualized memory. Exploring the laboratory of Yeshurun’s long poems, including their dynamic transitions between history and poetry, I demonstrate how they offer fresh possibilities for the recording and archiving of involuntary, traumatic, and multidimensional memory.

### **YESHURUN’S LONG POEM: “BLENDING THE EGGS, THE SKIN, THE ONION, AND THE SALT”**

Since the appearance of his volume *The Syrian-African-Rift (Ha-shever ha-Suri-Afriqani)* in 1974, Avot Yeshurun has become synonymous with “breakage” as a master trope that constitutes both his personal history and the inner history of his poetry.<sup>6</sup> By highlighting his verbal idiosyncrasies and his narrative of identity, this emphasis on breakages overlooks the perceptible predominance of the long poem in his work. From his first Hebrew poem, begun in the village of Magdiel in 1932, through his “Pesach al kukhim” (Passover on caves), published in 1952, and up to his last sequence in 1991, Yeshurun’s experiments with the long poem—interweaving random variations

<sup>3</sup> Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, 76–79; also quoted in “Introduction: American Poetry in Yiddish,” in *ibid.*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi addresses this “breakage” in *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 86.

<sup>5</sup> György Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Berlin, 1920; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971); Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (1936; New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 83–109; and M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (1975; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Menakhem Perry, “Sa sa, ha-hefekh ha-hegaeh: shlosa prakim al avot Yeshurun” [Drive, Drive, Counter the Steering Wheel: Three Chapters on Avot Yeshurun] in Lilach Lachman, ed., *Eich Nikra Avot Yeshurun [How does it read—Avot Yeshurun]* Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad (2011):21–46. See also “Patiach” [Introduction], *Siman qri’ah* [Exclamation mark] 3–4 (1974): 7. This view of the poetics of breakage as a master narrative can be traced back to Yeshurun’s well-known prose excerpt included in *The Syrian-African Rift* (1974): “How does a man become Avot Yeshurun? The answer is—from the breakings.” Avot Yeshurun, *Kol shirav II* [Collected poems II], ed. Helit Yeshurun (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997), 124.

and radical selections—span almost an entire century.<sup>7</sup> For Yeshurun, “whatever sticks to you on your path, from the clay, from the mud, from the earth. That is the poem. The poem . . . always remains this mixer that is blending the eggs, the skin, the onion, and the salt.”<sup>8</sup> How can one be committed to a random process that hardly holds the mixture together and at the same time end up with a large-scale poetic composition?

It would be tempting to suggest that for Yeshurun, every poem aspires to be a “long poem” and any poem encapsulates this idea of poetry. But so as not to evacuate meaning from this genre, we may note that in his work the “long poem” appears in a variety of forms: the prose poem, the letter series, the debate poem, the sequence, and the cycle.<sup>9</sup> Displaying nonconformity on almost every level, all these forms gather evidence, evaluate it, and challenge the reader to engage in an ongoing debate or process. Against the long poem, in its diverse high modernist Hebrew mutations that have commonly served as the measure of the male poet’s ambition, Yeshurun positions alternative models and female modes of speech. Each of his extended cycles tackles the large issues but insists on the phalanx of details.<sup>10</sup> Intervening in central texts of the Hebrew literary tradition, Yeshurun abbreviates, but he also in fact extends, interrogates, and rewrites the canon by directing our attention from male literary models to dialogic lifelike performative and femininely marked models (folk ballads, oral poetry, prayer, midrash, letters, notes, journals), partly imported but radically reworked from noncanonical culture. In another sense, his reshaping of the long poem may well hark back to the biblical femininely marked long performative poem of praise called *shira*. Moreover, one might wonder whether Yeshurun’s favorite “cycle” (*machzor*—as he himself called any sequence of poems to which he would give a title and a date) is in fact a “long poem” or, more radically, whether all his book-length collections since his book *Thirty Pages of Avot Yeshurun* (*Shloshim amud shel Avot Yeshurun*, 1961) can perhaps be read as a single, integral long poem. Instead of asking how “long” these are, as Peter Middleton poignantly inquires in accounting for the long poem’s question of length,<sup>11</sup> it would be more fruitful to ask how, in their relative brevity, Yeshurun’s long poems engage us in the processing of the absent past. In other words, even though not measured in meters or page numbers, Yeshurun’s poetic sequences or cycles situate themselves partially within and partially outside a “tradition of poems that ask very big questions in a very long way—historical, metaphysical, religious, and aesthetic questions.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Since Dan Miron’s three formative articles in the fifties in *Zmanim* (1954; 1955; 1955), scholars such as Oppenheimer, Gluzman, and Jacobs have commented on one or two of his long poems but haven’t approached their perceptibility or their role in his corpus. See Yochai Oppenheimer, *Tnu li ledaber kmo she-ani: Shirat Avot Yeshurun* [Let me speak as me: Avot Yeshurun’s poetry] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1997); Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 141–72; and Adrianna Jacobs, “Hebrew Remembers Yiddish: Avot Yeshurun’s Poetics of Translation,” in *Choosing Yiddish: Studies in Yiddish Literature, Culture, and History*, ed. L. Rabinovitch, S. Goren, and H. S. Pressman (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 296–313.

<sup>8</sup> “How Do You Get to a Poem?,” interview with Helit Yeshurun, *Khadarim* [Chambers] 6 (Spring 1987): 151–57.

<sup>9</sup> Menakhem Perry (“Be-shira tsrichim lehishtamesh be-koah”) remarks that the primary unit in Yeshurun’s poetry is not a single poem but the entire sequence. Yeshurun’s sequences and cycles are not to be confused with the lyricized sense that Rosenthal and Gall bestow on the form; see M. L. Rosenthal and Sally Gall, *The Modern Poetic Sequence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Perry, “Be-shira tsrichim lehishtamesh be-koah.”

<sup>11</sup> Peter Middleton, “The Longing of the Long Poem,” *Jacket Magazine* 40 (2010), jacketmagazine.com/40/middleton-long-poem.shtml.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, “When a ‘Long’ Poem Is a ‘Big’ Poem: Self-Authorizing Strategies in Women’s Twentieth-Century ‘Long Poems,’” *LIT* 2 (1990): 15.

I would like to inquire how and to what ends Yeshurun's "long" poems authorize themselves and what kind of action they perform. In Yeshurun's case, this question leads to an exploration of the long poem as a vessel for recording and archiving history.

### THE LONG POEM AND POETIC HISTORIOGRAPHY

"Historiography," according to Paul Ricoeur, designates the literary or scriptural phase that reshapes memory by strategies of distancing and approximation. Ricoeur's treatise *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004) addresses the problematic "re-presentation" of the past. On the one hand, Ricoeur's approach is consistent with Derrida's view of the collecting, conserving, and classifying of the archive.<sup>13</sup> But for Ricoeur, the contact between temporal experience and narrative that makes historiography what it is resides in the enigma of an image (*eikon*) that encapsulates the "presence of an absent thing stamped with the seal of the anterior."<sup>14</sup> Absence is accordingly understood, not as a state, but rather as conditioned by the work of history. Likewise, Ricoeur argues that it is impossible to conceive of memory without the operation of forgetting—the imprint of traces that can be (both physically and psychically) altered, effaced, and destroyed. By focusing on the archive's scriptural features, Ricoeur emphasizes not only its potential manipulation of memory but also "the exchange structure between the one who gives and the one who receives," an emphasis that is vital for the reading-dynamics of the long poem as an archive.<sup>15</sup>

How do those processes of mental re-presentation and/or effacement of the image occur in poetry as a temporal medium?<sup>16</sup> Within this broad field, the inquiry into which dates back to classical antiquity, to Lessing, and to modern phenomenology and cognition, my concern here is with the poetic mechanism that enables Yeshurun to employ distancing and approximation in evoking the absent image and/or voice around which his long poems revolve. Of special interest is not only how this image or voice is materialized in the long poem but how the long poem proves its validity to history. My understanding of this mechanism calls for an active reader who narrativizes the poem's gaps (in the spacing of lines, stanzas, and words, no less than in its situation and world) so as to reconstruct history.<sup>17</sup> One could argue that the long poem's length, the dynamics between its sections, and the time span of its re-presented world radicalize an operation that pertains to the reading of poetry as such. But the point I wish to make is not only that Yeshurun's long poems present forms of recollection that criticize Israeli ruling historiography but also that Yeshurun's poetics of the long poem turns this genre into an archive of historiographical forms. Moreover, because of the crossing over between poetry and history, the borderline between the poet's historiography and the act of reading one's history (i.e., our own history as readers) is often blurred. The questions that underline Ricoeur's inquiry ("of what are

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>14</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xvi.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>16</sup> Meir Sternberg addresses this question in "Ordering the Unordered: Time, Space, and Descriptive Coherence," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 60–88. I discuss some of its bearing on the long poem in Lilach Lachman, "Keat's *Hyperion*: Time, Space, and the Long Poem," *Poetics Today* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 89–127.

<sup>17</sup> Rachel DuPlessis proposes the deployment and combining of segments and spacing as the "dominant" of poetry "Manifests," in *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 51. See also Brian McHale, "Beginning to Think about Narrative in Poetry," *Narrative* 17, no. 1 (January 2009): 11–27.

the memories,” “whose memory” is it, and “how” is memory verified and transmitted?) will aid me in exploring the re-presentation of the past and its changing roles in Yeshurun’s long poems. Ricoeur’s historiographical phases are to be understood, not as chronological stages, but rather as methodological moments, interwoven with one another.

### **A KADDISH (MOURNING) BALLAD: TESTIMONY**

Avot Yeshurun’s first poem in Hebrew, “The Ballad of Miriam Magdalene and Her White Son” (written between 1932 and 1937), testifies to his initial attempts both to approximate memory and to distance himself by shaping it into written history. This Kaddish ballad, which he began to write when he was a worker in the orchards of Magdiel, anticipates the death of his mother. Published in 1937, the poem includes twenty-one rhymed stanzas, some of which are futuristically broken; in 1961, the poem appeared with seven additional stanzas in Yeshurun’s book *Re’em*. Between the two versions, a series of events occurred that imprinted themselves upon his life and poetry: the destruction of European Jewry; the loss of his family; the War of Independence; the founding of the State of Israel; his change of name; and his becoming a father.

Retrospectively, this ballad, in its many drafts, reads as a laboratory of Yeshurun’s experiments in Hebrew and is a testament to a sense of loss too extreme to be adequately accommodated in consciousness or language. How can one write when the connections between one’s mother tongue and one’s body have been severed? (“I forbade myself to talk and to speak and to think in Yiddish; nevertheless, I didn’t have sufficient Hebrew,” Yeshurun said.)<sup>18</sup> Attempting to approach this double loss (of both mother and mother tongue), Yeshurun deploys the ballad to enact the son’s separation from his mother and to generate his separated self as poet. Despite the fact that the rhymed ballad and its title lead us to expect a narrative line, and although the biblical and geographical allusions evoke an implicit history, its *Bildung* potential is shattered, as this long poem exhibits a radical incoherence that risks abandoning comprehension altogether.

The attempt to construct the narrated situation as “history” engages us actively in multiple competing perspectives. The text leaps from a folktale of a goat giving birth, to the ancient New Testament past, to the more recent abandonment of the mother in Europe, and to the present moment of recollection as the narrator confronts the topography of Eretz Israel. Moreover, the futuristic opening up of the metered stanza and the deployment of its dialogic resources turn the folklike ballad into a modernist poem that alludes to various genres and diverse perspectives: the mother who sacrifices herself; the son who sacrifices his mother; the son’s abandonment and the mother’s giving birth; the goat’s giving birth and the Sermon on the Mount; a puppy and the Descent from the Cross. What we encounter are allegorical readings in the landscape, a new covenant with the mother, and guilt.

As much as this cross-examination of perspectives problematizes the past, the poem’s strategies of distancing and approximation justify both its length and its transitions. Such is, for instance, the shift from the tangible reality of the landscape to the mother’s body, assessing that which has, up to then, been excluded for the poet, both in speech and in Hebrew. In this sense, the mountain, the shore, the cave, the fields, the kid, and even the birth and the fire are all forms of “beginning” that both efface the traces of the “others” (i.e., of both the mother and the Jewish exile) and at the same time sustain and transmit them. Accordingly, the mother and son exchange

<sup>18</sup> Eda Zoritte, *Shirat ha-pereh ha-atzil: Biographia shel Avot Yeshurun* [The song of the noble savage: A biography of Avot Yeshurun] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 86.

roles, confront one another, collapse, begin again, and remain inseparable, right up to the mother's sacrifice at the poem's conclusion. Such is the ambiguity of a dramatized struggle between forgetting and recollection.

This reshaping of memory also dramatizes the conflict between its personal and collective overtones. Especially telling is Yeshurun's subversion of the mythological covenant between blood, man, and earth that defined the Hebrew pioneers' ethos, which he replaces with a physical-psychic schism from the mother: "I am made of flesh not of Zionism," he said in 1975.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, against most of his generation's conception of the land as empty, Yeshurun shapes a historical memory that undoes the "Beginning" myth: "Hebrew culture, which positioned itself in the land, cannot but remind itself (and the coming generations) that the field wasn't empty. None of the cultures that passed upon this land have effaced the traces of their precedents. Even 'no soul shalt live' they haven't effaced."<sup>20</sup>

The turn that underlines Ricoeur's inquiries—from the content of the memory to its attribution ("whose memory" it is) and verification—can account for the transfer from the evangelist poet to the emotive voice of the mother herself, an absent witness, who verifies the story in her bodily speech. The mother's speech reveals itself as vital to a poetic history in which the "other" mother (*ima* in Hebrew) is no longer a repressed maid (*ama* in Hebrew) who serves the identity narrative but *Miriam ha-magdalit*—a complex consciousness who transmits this story. The elaboration from the narrative of *ama migdalit* (the poem's first title) to "The Ballad of Miriam Magdalene and Her White Son" that is encapsulated in the poem's various drafts and in the changes of its title indicates the gradual formation of this sensibility. Against the poem's early versions that focused on the birth of "the maid" from the local landscape (*Ama Migdalit*, for "Magdiel is Magdalena," as he would write years later), the poem's final title, "The Ballad of Miriam Magdalene and Her White Son," attributes the poetic speech both to the son and to the mother and alludes to an alternative history of which they are both the scribes.

Yeshurun, accordingly, replaces the common address to Mary in the traditional "Stabat Mater" with ten stanzas of direct speech from Magdalena—the mother of infliction. While adopting Hebrew as a new language, he begins to dissolve the symbolic structure that is attributed in traditional Hebrew to the father and replaces it with aspects signifying the feminine, prephallic modus that he associates with the mother tongue.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, no less than in the reshaping of memory to an alternative local history, Yeshurun forges the long poem as a written vehicle to transmit the mother's bodily traces and oral speech fragments (both in the images and in their imprint on the landscape). Unlike high Hebrew (saturated with allusions to the Old and New Testaments, which include Aramaic), the mother's physical-psychic speech not only brings the repressed into Hebrew but concurrently seeks a modern form of Hebrew lament that evokes an unrealized burial act.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, the operation of this long poem can be read

<sup>19</sup> Shin Shifra, "El ha-Yahadut al geshet shel milim ivriyot" [Toward Judaism over a bridge of Hebrew words], *Davar*, April 1, 1975.

<sup>20</sup> From a letter written to the Hebrew writer Matti Megged (1923–2003) in 1969. See Avot Yeshurun, *Kol shirav I* [Collected poems I] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), notes to pp. 14–16.

<sup>21</sup> I refer to Julia Kristeva's well-known distinction between the "symbolic" and the "semiotic." See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 21–30.

<sup>22</sup> In *The Politics of Canonicity*, 142–43, Michael Gluzman refers to Yeshurun's rejection of the Israeli taboo regarding Yiddish as a cultural and political "return of the repressed."

as “the act of the sepulcher,” an act that is viewed by Ricoeur as the scriptural equivalent of the social entombment.<sup>23</sup>

### “THE SYRIAN-AFRICAN RIFT”: WITNESSING AND THE RADICALIZATION OF POETIC TRANSMISSION

The re-presentation of the past acquires a radical turn in Yeshurun’s “Ha-shever ha-Suri-Afriqani,” which opens his collection *The Syrian-African Rift* (1974). This pivotal cycle, which consists of six poems written in free verse, was composed during and shortly after the Yom Kippur War of 1973.<sup>24</sup> Replacing models of recovery proposed by the Zionist ethos (by means of a messianic vision and/or a Canaanite ideology), Yeshurun confronts us with a geopolitical event, the inquiry into which compels us to rethink our past. In contrast to the fictional reframing of testimonies (the mother’s and the son’s) within the earlier elongated ballad, the present cycle is transmitted as an act of witnessing that moves from re-presentation of testimony and articulation of loss toward a conception of language as symptom. As distinct from the cognitive emphasis in my reconstruction of the narrative gaps in the early ballad (what and whose memories?), here the accent falls on pragmatic memory: that is, how is memory performed?<sup>25</sup> The main question in Yeshurun’s long poem has now become how to reframe the witnessing of a past event into a history of earlier traumas. Even though the sequence was written as a response to the Yom Kippur War (October 1973), it encapsulates a response to a broad historical process and to cleavages in the Zionist dream. The anxiety of bereavement, together with the guilt of repressing the Shoah, leads to the outpouring of an actualized “Poem on the Guilt.” At first glance, all of the cycle’s six poems appear to be reports by a witness brooding over the events of Yom Kippur. But in contrast to the expected building up of this perspective, Yeshurun foregrounds the fragments that unsettle the authority of the ruling narrative. The fragmented account, the partial overlapping and contradictions in the narration, are presented as part of a “rift” or “breakage” that undermines the national redeeming narrative.<sup>26</sup>

If as readers of his early ballad we could still assign to memory the function of being the birthplace of history, here memory presents itself sharply as the poet-historian’s object of study. Beginning diagnostically, Yeshurun draws a parallel between prehistoric geological displacements and his own shock upon awakening from a medical procedure. The cycle’s layered time frame foregrounds the fact that Yeshurun’s cycle lends itself to those differences and oppositions that are at the heart of history. However, the opening poem ends with a shift to personal speech that dissolves the clear-cut border between history and its written transmission: “And here I am. Yom Kippur.” Verified both by the bodily symptom (i.e., the poet’s surgery) and by the holy

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 365.

<sup>24</sup> Officially dated as finished about three months after the Yom Kippur War (signed January 1974), the sequence was published in *Ma’ariv* soon after and reprinted a few months later in the avant-garde quarterly *Siman qri’ah* 3–4 (1974); it then appeared in Yeshurun’s collection *Ha-shever ha-Suri-Afriqani* [The Syrian-African rift] (Tel Aviv: Siman Qri’ah, 1974).

<sup>25</sup> Note that these two conceptions stand in opposition, and their vexed relation, as elaborated in trauma theories, is the means whereby a writing of trauma sets the limit of representation. See, e.g., Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), which draws attention to this vexed relationship.

<sup>26</sup> Yerushalmi, *Zakhor*, 101.

sanction of Yom Kippur (which is the poet-narrator's own day of birth), the reference to the here and the absolute now of lived experience acquires an altogether newly intensified weight.

Re-membered past is consequently conceived in terms of not one but several time lines. Yom Kippurim (literally, "day of atonements," plural) can be linked to several frames that operate simultaneously, each introducing its own language register and its own level of reality. The frames unfold through displacements in memory rather than through chronological links. The Jewish Day of Atonement in a Tel Aviv synagogue overlaps with an early memory of this day in Yeshurun's childhood synagogue; and the fateful event of the poet's own birthday intersects with the shattering of the shtetl and the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. The montage that switches from the historical-journalistic to the experiential and diagnostic-"clinical" propels the reader to rethink the concept of "atonement," while also investigating a complex and fragmented reality. The moment in which Yeshurun experiences the outbreak of war as a literal awakening from a surgery amplifies into the moment from which one contemplates the traumatic event retrospectively. As the frames of vision are enlarged, the viewpoints interchange kaleidoscopically and the reader is drawn into the maelstrom.

The present ("this day") is set against the past ("they were the big ones when we were small"), and "I"-"here" collides with "they"-"there." The breakage repeatedly produces the shock of awakening: "Hinneni kaan, Yom Ha-kippurim" (Here I am, Yom Kippur). The Hebrew word *hinneni* (here I am) captures the shock of awakening into one's own self-presence. Bracketed with the colloquial and almost redundant *kaan* (literally, "here I am, here"), *hinneni* not only triggers the shift from the weighty biblical associations of a response to God's calling one's name (Gen. 22:11; 1 Sam. 3:8) and the here and now but also underlines Yeshurun's personal master transgression: I am "here," but you/they/she are left behind—"there."

Precisely because of its "absence," the object of memory cannot be recovered. That is why Ricoeur's resort to the "image" at the core of memory work seems problematic, especially when applied to the temporal medium of poetry. Rather than focusing on the image itself, we might explore its re-presentation and its processing in the long poem's composition. Yeshurun uses quotation montage (akin to montage in film or in art) to achieve this.<sup>27</sup> The many different quoting strategies in his cycle enable constant shifts: from one narrative voice to another, from one time-and-place continuum to another, and from one language to another. Such shifts occur not only within the poem's bound unit but also in the transitions between one section and another. Yeshurun deploys the long poem's flexibility, as well as its length, as a laboratory to effect these memory leaps, thereby critiquing and enlarging both the image and the reconstructed past. Unlike the focus on the stanzaic block in the early ballad, here the enjambments that are coupled with light, irregular stressing throw the focus onto the line, onto the phrase, and onto their spacing. This approximated prose rhythm invites a new attention to memory's unarticulated areas.

The switch from the large historical cycles built up in the opening poems to the intimate address to the mother in the fourth poem also redirects our attention to these areas of memory:

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<sup>27</sup> Lilach Lachman, "Avot Yeshurun and the Question of Avant-Garde," *Poetics Today* 21, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 61–93.

**Poem on the Guilt**<sup>28</sup>

Bless mother circle your hand around my head on the night  
 Of this day. I would have what would I have done  
 To Yom Kippur. Shtetls crash and you inside for the center  
 Of the earth your soul and the body you longed (for) and never did arrive.

Your father came in a dream to you.  
 Opened the glass cupboard. Broke you a glass. A child passed away from you  
 And you asked why. Your father didn't reply went out you meant to atone  
 And lay on the floor and lay on the child longing to death.

Framed by its title and contextual allusions to Yom Kippur,<sup>29</sup> the tune of the well-known Day of Atonement liturgy accompanies "Poem on the Guilt." But what is the nature of the guilt, and whose guilt is it? Yeshurun distances us from the experience that is impossible to sequence or even authenticate by shifting our attention to its contrived reshaping. We are, accordingly, left to make our own sense of the cluster of sources, which range from the Arvit prayer to the Pietà, from the biblical paternal blessing to Rachel's lamentation, from Solomon's judgment to the miracle of reviving the Shunammite's son.

The memory associated with the (mother's) guilt is partially clarified by Yeshurun's autobiographical gloss, but the story deepens rather than resolves the poem's enigmatic core.<sup>30</sup> From the gloss one can infer that the child was the poet's younger brother and Yeshurun witnessed the event himself. But the opacity about what happens, when, where, and to whom—let alone how and why—remains and is even intensified by the temporal vertigo of the poem's language and the elusive indeterminacy of the pronoun in the last phrase: "*va-metah migaaguim*."<sup>31</sup> If *metah* is actualized in the second person, the temporal discrepancy within the final series of verbs is shocking. The preceding description seems to follow a chronological logic: the father "came," "opened," "broke," "a child passed away," (the mother) "lay on the floor...lay on the child." The series of connectives (*ve*, "and") reinforces our expectation that this event chain will either continue or come to a satisfying end. However, as the subject changes (from "father" to "a child" and then to "you"), the actional, along with the perspectival, design grows opaque, and the potential readings multiply. Either the speaker is consistent in his use of the past tense but switches (the implicit) person from second to third, so that *va-metah migaaguim* refers to "she"; or he adheres to the second-person address, and then *metah* should be interpreted as a participle describing a state in the present. Whichever reading we choose (and I would argue that they all coexist), such

<sup>28</sup> Translation by Lilach Lachman and Meir Sternberg.

<sup>29</sup> See lines 1–4, 7. The allusion can be translated as "and the soul Yours ["to You," i.e., to God] and the body your deed."

<sup>30</sup> "One day my mother gave birth to a child. Out of fatigue she lay on the child and the child was stifled. The child was taken from her and laid in a corner. She ran like a beast, like a trapped tiger but was prevented from approaching him. Then, for long months she lay in this place where the child had been laid until his burial" (Yeshurun, *Kol shirav II*, notes to p. 15).

<sup>31</sup> Translated by Harold Schimmel in Avoth Yeshurun, *The Syrian-African Rift and Other Poems* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1980), as "died of longing" and by me as "longing to death," but the phrase could also be translated as "longed to death" or "dying of longing."

disruption calls attention to the two-directional movement between the quoted reality (dream, past, mother's consciousness) and the moment when it is either interiorized or communicated to the reader—the moment of entry into the historiographical operation.

The breakages disclose a series of parallels: between the mother's death, her son's mourning, and the mother's bereavement; between the echo of the son's rhetorical question ("what would I have done") and the account of the mother's unanswered question ("you asked why"); between the direct mentioning of the "body" in relation to the mother's longing and the indirect mentioning of the mother's body and of her dead son's body. This partial analogy is amplified to a parallel between diverse worlds: the implicit situation of Yom Kippurim is juxtaposed with an altogether different spatiotemporal frame ("shtetls crash"); the memory parallels a quoted dream; the present Yom Kippur is akin to another atonement ("you meant to atone"); the son's sense of sin resembles the memory of the mother's sin; and so forth. In all these instances, whatever had occurred as breakage in the past reoccurs repeatedly in a new frame or intersection.

In the process of recollection, the partial information that is revealed does not close the narrative gaps but rather propels a delay that exposes additional effects of the initial breakage. Such breakages are integrated in the poem's intertextual network. For example, the allusion to the mother who "lay on the child" (her son) and replaced him with the living son in Solomon's judgment positions Yeshurun's personal guilt in a historical context; but our text replaces the mother's perspective with that of the son. The allusion to the revival of the Shunammite's son presents Yeshurun's day of birth as an amalgamation of miracle and guilt. But the poem's last line doubly negates the possibility of the miracle: the son hasn't been revived by the mother, and the mother hasn't been revived by the son.

We saw how Yeshurun deployed the cycle's counterpoints to problematize the processing of memory in his early ballad; here, concurrently, the poem has also become a repository of psychic and bodily symptoms and has acquired the status of a semidocument. Endangering the very possibility of coherency, Yeshurun paradoxically radicalizes poetic transmission. Unlike the predominant stanza unit in the early ballad, here the dissonant musical phrase is perceptible. Its access to syntactic elisions is notable. The poetic and spoken idiom are juxtaposed: the formal (*niftar*, "passed away") with the colloquial (*metah*, "died"); biblical or liturgical allusions with idiomatic speech. *Metah migaaguim* (based on the slang idiom "to die for something," i.e., to crave it) encapsulates the tensions between the personal and the collective aspects of memory that organize Yeshurun's long poem. It is an erotic metaphor indicating the impossibility of re-presenting the mother's love and death, but also an idiom that makes the leap from the one mother's longing to the longing of all mothers, particularly in the context of the Yom Kippur War. This amplification is further supported in the allusion to Rachel's lament in the poem's last line, an allusion that also rules the sixth poem in the cycle.

The Arvit prayer is evoked along traditional lines, both as a plea and as an attempt to repair, but because it is located within an altogether different time frame, in which it acquires a new performative role, Yeshurun's cycle comes into direct conflict with the sacred texts that it activates. Conversely, the breakages enacted here propel diverse modes of performances that occur within Yeshurun's long poem. Such devices are only partially rooted in the processing of memory. They are genres or modes (such as dance, prayer, and lament) that are ritually invoked, both as an atonement or burial act and as forms that enable the future transmission of an oral tradition.

### “THE HOUSE”: THE LONG POEM AS ARCHIVE

The (dis)continuities of passage from memory to a history writing are radicalized in Yeshurun's late sequences and collections.<sup>32</sup> I would like to take a last look at these dynamics of absence and presence by considering his long poem “The House.” This nineteen-stanza poem is framed by the poet's self-location, presumably on the terrace of his own house (in Tel Aviv) at Berdichevsky 8, while literally observing “Berdichevsky 4,” a construction site across the street.<sup>33</sup> Despite this materialized literality, the “house” can be viewed as the master *eikon* of Yeshurun's entire work, the absent image that according to Ricoeur lies at the core of history writing. Yeshurun's self-positioning outside his own home, but also across from “berdichevsky house / four,” conditions the situation of recollecting the traces of an anterior “house.” His decision to frame his composition by the act of literally contemplating the house as a mirror image either of his own home or of another, third house provides the exteriority needed for transposing memory from one zone in the psyche to another. In applying Ricoeur's idea of reshaping the image to poetry, we must therefore rethink the subject's relation to the absent image. Derrida's insistence on the exteriority that preconditions the archive is helpful here.<sup>34</sup> But regarding the medium of poetry, we might inquire more specifically how the image is affected by the presence of the subject's bodily and psychic receptors, and how such conditioning is materialized and transmitted in poetic narrative. Unlike my former examples, in this last one, where the role of forgetting is heightened, the pressing question that is posed is not what memories or whose memories but from what perspective?—particularly how, and if at all, memories might be transmitted.

It is common to think of the poem or the text as a house,<sup>35</sup> and also vice versa—buildings are often thought of (in postmodern architecture) as textual (de)constructed fabrics.<sup>36</sup> Within this architectural analogue, especially relevant for the long poem and traceable back to the epic, is the role of the house as a storage place of memory. In Hebrew, the *beit gnizah* (“storage house” or “archive chest”; pl., *beit gnazim*) is where documents and disused sacred books and ritual articles are stored. As noted by Derrida, the word “archive” derives from the Greek *arkheion*, which means “house.”<sup>37</sup> Elaborating on Derrida's discussion of this etymological link, Marie-Pierre Ulloa notes the dual principle of domiciliation and authority contained in the archive.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> *Kapella kolot* [A capella of voices] (Tel Aviv: Siman Qri'ah, 1977); *Homograph* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985); *Ha-bayit* [The house] (Tel Aviv: Siman Qri'ah, 1989); *Adon Menuhah* [Mr. Rest] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1990); and Yeshurun's last sequence, “Aey sham sham hu” [Somewhere there, there (it) is], in *Ein li 'akhshav* [I have no now] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Yeshurun glosses this scene in an interview with Nissim Kalderon, documented in Amir Harel's film *Avot Yeshurun* (1990).

<sup>34</sup> “There is no archive . . . without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside” (Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11).

<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger discusses Holderlin's “Poetically Man Dwells” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 213–29. For the cultural resonance of this analogy in Jewish tradition and Hebrew literature, see Vered Karti Shemtov, “Poetry and Dwelling: From Martin Heidegger to the Songbook of the Tent Revolution in Israel,” *Prooftexts* 35, nos. 2–3 (2017).

<sup>36</sup> Expounding on postmodernist architecture as a model for the contemporary long poem, Brian McHale presents the notion of architecture as language and building as text. See *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 6–17.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*.

<sup>38</sup> Marie-Pierre Ulloa, “Lost in Fire, Lost in Letters: Archives of the Algerian War,” *Dibur* 3 (Fall 2016).

In Yeshurun's "Ha-bayit," the poet, close to his death, is at the point of losing his grip on both aspects of his home-archive.<sup>39</sup>

But like the archive itself, his "house" has been established to combat the threat of effacement. The danger of forgetting that lurked disturbingly in the background of Yeshurun's work ever since World War II and even before is intensified in his last two collections, written as he approached death. In this poem, the menace of oblivion is activated as a frontal attack on the reliability of memory.

The "house's" history, as it is unfolded in the poem's first section, includes a series of violent acts that evoke earlier, untold aggressions: departures, divorce, invasion, removal, desecration, and even amputation. As Yeshurun's readers, we are aware that Yeshurun's past has already been marked by a series of effacements that preceded the evacuation caused by the bulldozer and the builders of Berdichevsky 4.

The accumulated (de)construction of the house involves contextual activations of the multiple meanings of the word *bayit* in Hebrew (a literal house, a home, the temple, the national project, and the poetic stanza). This operation contains the germ of an entire Jewish-Israeli history: from the uprooting and the emigration of its tenants, through the staging of past-shadows that accompany the national building project, up to the incorporation of Yiddish speech relics and Arab names of Palestinian villages that have both been deleted from our acknowledged history. Especially striking is the culmination of this chronicle of deletions in a regressive moment in which nothing is left but the "arche," a presymbolic anal memory, another trace of one's home, verging on oblivion: "window-sill / settled on / the wall as one sits / on the pot" (line 10).

Hence, the renovation project, documented in the poem's following sections, is presented by means of a double code: a violent annihilation of the past that is accompanied by the very shattering of "the house" into a wreck; but concurrently, a no less radical exposure of its value-bearing traces occurs. Yeshurun's deployment of the poetic continuum to narrativize "absence" is striking. Switching from the "smashing of the cornice" (poem 1), through the "piles of rubble" (poem 2) and "cement-mixer mechanisms" (poem 2, stanzas 9–12), to "the forming silence of the rooms" (poem 4), "banging the supports and posts" (poem 6), and so on, he is pitting poetic segment against segment so that they mutually reinforce one another, intensifying the fact that "the house at the time / of its building appears / all the time / increasingly destroyed" (18). Countering the teleology of a well-known Zionist song ("anu banu artza livnot ve-le-hibanot ba"; "we've come to the land to build and to be built"), the house "refuses" renovation and therefore cannot be preserved.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, in this transition from one frame, as well as section, to another, as blocks of texts are compulsively reframed and orchestrated, the image of the house itself falls under erasure. Moreover, taking the poem as an allegory of its own composition, "The House" offers a disclaimer of knowledge regarding the very idea of *Bildung* implicated in its own history. Not only does the project of "rewriting" "The House" read as a critique of previous houses, but it also appears to pull the building (as well as the "long poem") apart to leave a void at its center.

How can what has been eradicated survive? As the destruction scene is first disclosed, we—along with Yeshurun, who documents the dismantling and bodily deterioration of the

<sup>39</sup> In "The Deleted Archive: Revisiting Alice Munro, Amnon Shamosh, Annie Ernaux, and Yehoshua Kenaz," *Dibur* 3 (Fall 2016), Michal Ben-Naftali explores literary engagement with elderly people's loss of grip on their archive.

<sup>40</sup> I refer to Yeshurun's own words relating to his insight about the (de)constructed house (Harel, *Avot Yeshurun*).

house—may be under the impression that the house is robbed of any power that would allow its authorial preservation. Precisely because the house is personified, its ostensible dehumanization is shattering: “the house / remains like a skeleton / of bones, w/out internal organs” (1).

However, as we continue to witness the recurring attempts at recovery, the house, itself a metonymic trace of memory, changes its status and is increasingly marked as an entire archive-entity that is itself constructed of ruins: physical relics, visual voids, blank spaces. In other words, this materialized narrative of destruction consists of untold absences: “gaps that were / once doors / holes that were / once windows” and “cavities” (40). Omissions and elisions are materialized both in the bodily hollowing out of the house as a literal construct and in the orchestrated silences of its renovation. These are performed both in the world of the poem, as part of its reconstruction, and in its language, by means of syntax, lineation, and sound patterns.

In this manner, the very process of destruction paradoxically becomes an exhortation not to forget. Further, the more the house is destroyed and surrenders to materialized deterioration, its (or its observer’s) involuntary memories, physical scars, and relics of love surface as animated action that is attributed to a witnessing subject.

### **THE GENDERING OF THE LONG POEM: “B/C THE HOUSE / IT’S A WOMAN”**

How does the eradicated archive, like Yeshurun’s version of the “long poem” itself, earn its privileged status? I would suggest that three aspects define Yeshurun’s reshaping of memory into writing: (1) its openness to the *umheimlich* and its inclusion of the absent feminized witness; (2) the transformation of ontological modes of destruction into a semiotic poetic code; and (3) the correspondence that emerges between the stanza and the home. In conclusion, I shall briefly discuss these aspects as legacies of Yeshurun’s treatment of the long poem.

Even though the written archive, as Ricoeur points out, renounces the appropriation of language by a subject that is supposed to “control” history, Yeshurun (unlike Pound or Eliot, for example) doesn’t abandon the human subject’s presence in his archive. In keeping with Yeshurun’s rejection of the modernist idea of abstracted musical composition, his “house” becomes a repository of human memory and serves as a witness to the aging poet’s decline. Strikingly, this witness-house incorporates the notion of difference: “a frail circumcised / organ erects / wretched w/ a hole in the belly,” but then “now the nightshirt / till the chin. / b/c the house / it’s a woman.” In fact, the house is repeatedly feminized by comparisons to a woman (e.g., poem 4, lines 12–13; poem 10, lines 17–20; poem 16); by a gendered marking of its parts (poem 6) and of its music and language (poems 4, 6, 19); by an allusion to the voice of the feminine beloved (poem 5); and by a feminized address (poem 15).

The archive includes (ontological) modes of destruction that are transformed into a (semiotic) poetic code, while the semiotic, in turn, acquires an ontological status. In this regard, it is worth noting the shifts from the literal senses of the house and its metonymic attributes (“the cornice,” “façade,” “door,” etc.) to the semiotic notion of the house as a both a text and a language. Note the titles (“skeletal sounds”; “silence of”; “acoustics”; “home tongue”) that seem to answer the challenge of archival organization. In this respect, the poem’s first stanza encapsulates the hovering between a literally materialized building that is located in a specific street and a text that metonymically bears the trace of the book and the history it contains; the book’s author is the Ukrainian-born Micha Josef Berdyczewski (1865–1921), one of the great Hebrew modernists, after

whom Berdichevsky Street is named, and so the house is materially imprinted with these traces of modern Jewish history. The so-called textualization of the “house” and concurrent realization of the “book” culminate in the reflexive reference to the home as a “book” in poem 19: “hands in the book / hid a prayer / to god that disclosed / to them the ancients.” This tension between the ontological and the textual is reinforced by the juxtaposition between “hands” and “book” in line 21 and, in the same stanza, by the perceptible enjambment between lines 5 and 6. The reversible dynamics are eerie and cause the status of Yeshurun’s archive to hover between being and nonbeing. This liminal status that gains authority might be responsible for the activation of the uncanny in us readers, at a moment of recognition: “the house looks out / still eye-holed / from Dvoyrale’s / door spilt // earth floor / outside & the doors / sway in agony / open as extended // hands.” The relation between a place and a construction of a text that defines historiography is disclosed in the dynamic interchange that Yeshurun forms between the “house”/“home” (in Hebrew, *bayit*) as an absent-image of dwelling and the materialized and “bare” poetic stanza (in Hebrew, also *bayit*). His quatrains are distinctively different from the ballad stanza I began with. Here, they consist of minimal visual and auditory units and propel the (de)construction of the house as a semiautonomous mechanism—“The house required of itself”—but at the same time, its emptying of presence allows its opening up to shadows of the past and its exposure to hushed acoustics. The materialized new stanza unit (*bayit*) iconically re-presents the enigmatic *eikon* of the absent “home” but at the same time becomes both the skeleton and the building block of Yeshurun’s long poem.

Following Ricoeur, the framing of oral testimonies in the written text discloses the formative moment of the archive; the latter presents itself, accordingly, as both a physical and a social place that shelters the destiny of trace. Yeshurun’s long poems provide various equivalents of the relationships between a place and a construction of the text as a repository of traces. This relationship is indicated both in his reshaping of the long poem on the model of a prayer cycle and in the materialized spaces evoked by the titles of his long poems: “Passover on Caves,” *Thirty Pages of Avot Yeshurun*, *Chapel Voices*, and *The House*. His forms of archive—“drawers,” “letters,” “caves,” “collection,” and “capella”—are all metonyms of the house in which the poet-historian can deposit the remains of the living who will return to dust. The burial gesture that is common to his major long poems recalls “the act of sepulcher” that Ricoeur, following de Certeau, describes as the ground of the transfiguration of history into writing.<sup>41</sup> In Yeshurun, these archival forms are increasingly imprinted with traces of the mother and the mother tongue, traces that have been “translated” into Hebrew by means of multiple codes and languages. His long poems are femininely marked not only by abbreviating and by alluding to texts that evoke the mother’s unheard voice but also by foregrounding semiotic, bodily gestures and “arche” syllables that constitute the poetic stanza (*bayit*), which is associated with the mother, and that enable the future transmission of her memory. A

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<sup>41</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 365–66; and Michel de Certeau, “The Place of the Dead and the Place of the Reader,” in *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 99–102.