

Aharon Shabtai's Path to the Long Poem

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ABSTRACT: What is the function of length in contemporary poetry and how can readers habituated to the short lyric poem tradition read—indeed, “interpret”—long sequences that seem recalcitrant to analysis? This essay tackles these questions by exploring Aharon Shabtai's long-poem poetics. Following various stages in his writing, I focus on his turn to the long poem in the 1970s, historicizing his rejection of the lyrical “I,” which gradually led him to write book-long sequences of numbered fragments. Length becomes an emblem of extended temporality, allowing Shabtai to develop a poetics of contradictions whereby each statement is undercut by a subsequent one. For him, the long poem is an antipoetic text whose semantic stability is always-already betrayed.

He speaks the way his brother wrote: in long, winding, endlessly digressive sentences, as if trying to say it all in one sentence. What was supposed to be an interview becomes a long, uninterrupted monologue lasting into the small hours of the night. The subject of the monologue is the “home” [bayit], and for Shabtai, home is everything.¹

1

AHARON SHABTAI BEGAN WRITING AT THE TAIL END OF THE 1950S. From then until now, a span of nearly sixty years, Shabtai has produced an exceedingly broad and diverse poetic corpus, and he stands today as one of the most well-known poets in Israel. Shabtai has indeed won several prestigious prizes for his work, yet most of his reputation stems from his exceptional achievements as a translator. His translations from ancient Greek include all the classic plays of Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus, and Aristophanes; Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; and selections of classical Greek poetry (including Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*). Even though Shabtai has been described occasionally as a singularly outstanding poet, his poetry received scant critical attention. He became more prominent only after the publication

¹ Neri Livne, “Achi Yaakov” [My brother Yaakov], *Kol ha-ir* [The whole city], June 28, 1985.

of *Ahava* (Love) in 1987, where, following the breakdown of his first marriage, he discarded his early “objectivist” style in favor of an overtly confessional mode.² During the 1970s and 1980s, however, Shabtai remained on the outskirts of Israeli poetry. Not coincidentally, these were the years in which he developed his long-poem poetics. While his debut book, *Teachers’ Lounge* (1966), consists of short lyric poems, his following book, *Kibbutz* (1973), marked his evolving fascination with the long poem. From 1973 to 1986 Shabtai published eight books in which he rejected the short lyric poem, resisting the historical process that Virginia Jackson termed “lyricization.”³ In pointing to the triumph of the short lyric poem over other poetic genres, a process that resulted in the “diminution of the varieties of poetry,” Jackson draws on Mark Jeffreys’s observation that “[l]yric became the dominant form of poetry only as poetry’s authority was reduced to the margins of culture.”⁴ While Shabtai’s turn to the long poem may be viewed as an attempt to ward off poetry’s cultural devaluation, his long poems remained largely unread. During the 1970s and 1980s, when he dedicated himself fully to the exploration of the long poem, Shabtai was probably the most important unread poet in Israel.

In what follows, I will focus on Shabtai’s shift from the short lyric poem, which characterized his first volume of poetry, to the long poem, which became his poetic trademark from the 1970s onward. The shift transpired in the late 1960s when he was writing *Kibbutz* (which came out only in 1973). Although it was largely ignored, Shabtai assigns great importance to this book, in which he claims to have found his poetic voice. The long poem, he asserts, facilitates self-expression and authenticity. I would like to suggest, however, that the true force behind Shabtai’s interest in the long poem lies in the three-way correlation between architecture, familial relationships, and poetic form. These concepts are encapsulated and dramatized by the multivalent Hebrew word בית (*bayit*), which denotes “home,” “house,” and “stanza.” The figure of the poem as house dates back to medieval Hebrew poetics, which extended the metaphor by naming the first half of the line “the door” and the second half “the lock.”⁵ Although the figure became worn out, modern Hebrew poets have made various attempts to resuscitate it.⁶ Yet Shabtai offers the most elaborate meditation on בית (house-home-stanza), turning it into the prism through which he explores the very meaning of writing.

2

The emergence of Nathan Zach and Yehuda Amichai, the leading poets of Likrat, in the early 1950s (both published their first books in 1955) signaled the beginning of a new era in Hebrew poetry. They championed a “poetics of self-restraint,” which was marked, among other things, by

² In his 1985 essay on Yona Wallach, Shabtai characterized her as a mystic who performs self-*sparagmos* (rending, tearing apart) in her poems. He describes his own poetry in antithetical terms as rabbinical in tone. However, *Ahava* can be described as a book in which Shabtai himself performed a Dionysian *sparagmos* of the self. See Aharon Shabtai, “Al Yona Wallach” (On Yona Wallach), *Khadarim* [Rooms] 5 (1985): 15.

³ Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 8.

⁴ Mark Jeffreys, “Ideologies of Lyric: A Problem of Genre in Contemporary Anglophone Poetics,” *PMLA* 110, no. 2 (March 1995): 200.

⁵ Vered Karti Shemtov, “Dwelling in the Stanzas of the Text: The Concept of ‘Bayit’ in Hebrew Poetry,” *Sh’ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas* 42, no. 691 (2012): 7–8.

⁶ Vered Karti Shemtov, “Poetry and Dwelling: From Martin Heidegger to the Songbook of the Tent Revolution in Israel,” *Prooftexts* 35, nos. 2–3 (2017).

a tendency toward “short lyric forms.”⁷ Shabtai's first book, *Teachers' Lounge* (1966), conformed to the minimalist norms of Zach's and Amichai's poetry.

Although Shabtai would later renounce his early style, I would like to pay close attention to a short poem in *Teachers' Lounge* in which he analyzes his relationship with his parents, articulating, however indirectly, a family dynamics that would be expounded in future writings. In the first poem of a cycle titled “Exodus from Egypt,” Shabtai describes his childhood in Tel Aviv while evoking the biblical story of the birth of Moses:

כְּשֶׁנִּלְדָּתִי נִשְׁמָעָה אֲזַעֲקָה וְהוֹרִידוּ אוֹתִי
 לְמִקְלֵט עֲטוּף בְּצֶמֶר
 וּבַפֶּחַד הַצְּפִינוּ אוֹתִי בְּתֵבָה
 קְטַנָּה עַל גְּלָגְלִים, בֵּין רִגְלֵי
 אֲנָשִׁים וְשִׁלְחָנוֹת, בְּמִרְתֵּת, סְמוּד לְשָׂרְשֵׁי
 עֲצִים וּנְהָרוֹת, קְנֵקֵתִי טַחֵב
 וְחֶלֶב, נְנַעֲתִי לְלֹא פֶחַד בְּמִקְוֹם
 מִמְּנוּ בְּאֵתִי.

When I was born a siren sounded and they carried me down
 to a shelter wrapped in wool
 and fearful they hid me away in an ark,
 small and on wheels, tucked amidst the legs
 of people and tables, in the cellar, beside roots
 of trees and rivers, I nursed on must
 and milk, fearlessly touching the place
 whence I came.⁸

The writing of this poem may have been triggered by a childhood memory, a mediated one, to be sure, as Shabtai could only have heard about it from his parents. On September 9, 1940, a squadron of the Italian air force appeared in the sky over Tel Aviv. In this bombing, which was part of the Italian air force assault on British-controlled territories in the Middle East, 137 people were killed. Historian Tom Segev recounts that such air-raid sirens sounded in Tel Aviv throughout 1939 and 1940.⁹ Shabtai, who was born in 1939, is probably referring to one of these incidents that hurried the family to the shelter in the apartment building's basement. While Shabtai may be pointing to an actual historical event, he mythologizes it through the allusion to Exodus 2, which narrates the birth of Moses. The word “ark” evokes the story of Noah's ark as well as the Moses story, both revolving around the danger of extinction. The birth of Moses takes place shortly after Pharaoh's decree to cast into the Nile every son born to the Hebrews:

And the woman conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he *was* a goodly *child*,
 she hid him three months. And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of

⁷ Natan Zach, “Le-akliman ha-signoni shel shenot ha-kamishim ve-ha-shishim be-shiratenu” [The stylistic climate of the fifties and sixties in our poetry], *Ha-arets* [The land], July 29, 1966.

⁸ Aharon Shabtai, *Chadar ha-morim* [Teachers' lounge] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1966), 16. English translation by Michael Yaari.

⁹ Tom Segev, *Yemei ha-kalanyot: Erets Israel bi-tkufat ha-mandat* (Palestine under the British) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1999), 364.

bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch, and put the child therein; and she laid *it* in the flags by the river's brink. (Exodus 2:2–3)

Shabtai's use of the word "ark" (תבה), in and of itself, would suffice to underscore the intertextual reference to the Moses story, but he intensifies the text's allusive texture by also using the word "hid" (הצפינו), which is also drawn from the biblical story. Shabtai's biblical allusions in this poem follow the example of Nathan Zach's and Yehuda Amichai's poetics. A conspicuous tenet of Zach's and Amichai's poetry is their use of iconoclastic allusion to sacred texts.¹⁰ Amichai, for example, while depicting a couple's lovemaking, invokes "the six-winged seraphim of Isaiah's vision in the temple as well as Ezekiel's divine chariot as images of the two lovers' exuberant gyrations."¹¹ And Zach has a speaker model his address to an abandoned girlfriend on Jesus's words "*talita kumi*," which resurrected a little girl who was believed to be dead (Mark 5:32). Zach and Amichai employ radical allusions in order to advance ambiguity, paradox, and irony.

In the opening poem of "Exodus from Egypt," Shabtai effectively embraces Zach's and Amichai's intertextual practices. By inserting a charged biblical word into his depiction of a childhood episode, the poem betrays its own simplicity. While the text's language is almost transparent, the biblical allusion lends it the kind of textual density that is emblematic of Statehood Generation poetry. This stylistic duality is reflected in the poem's double point of view. While the allusion underscores the poet's linguistic acumen, the poem foregrounds a child's perspective, for the agentless verbs—"carried down," "hid"—suggest that the infant cannot yet identify the adults tending to his needs.

The building's architecture—a theme to which Shabtai will return thirty years later—is sketched out very briefly, especially through the opposition between the *heimlich* apartment and the *unheimlich* basement. Shabtai himself referred to these Freudian terms in an unpublished essay-cum-manifesto titled "Aharon." While the apartment encloses the parents' fear, the basement, an underworld of sorts, emerges as a site of blissful harmony. The basement signifies the child's sense of return: the words "milk" and "rivers" are drawn from the evoked biblical story and the concluding words, "the place whence I came," seem to refer to the Nile as well as to the maternal womb.

While the poem ends with the child's sense of bliss, the allusion directs our attention to a whole set of conflicts at play in the nuclear family. The difference between the fearful parents and their fearless son is reinforced by the evoked story of Moses, who was raised in Pharaoh's palace by the Egyptian king's daughter. Moses is removed from his parents' home, first to the ark and then to Pharaoh's palace, thereby growing up with an ambivalent sense of belonging. These resonances of the biblical story are pertinent to Shabtai's own sense of detachment from his parents. In an essay on one of his contemporaries, the Israeli poet Yona Wallach, he writes: "Yona simultaneously created a father and destroyed a father (this was the essence of her experience). My story, by way of contrast, was to create my parents through the sphere of growing up (work, education). The parents that she reconstructed were demons. . . . The parents I created were more connected to the ethos and poetics of experience."¹² If the agentless verbs "carried down" and "hid" seem to imply that the infant cannot yet identify his parents, Shabtai's words in this essay

¹⁰ Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 117.

¹¹ Robert Alter, introduction to *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2015), xviii.

¹² Shabtai, "Al Yona Wallach," 15.

suggest yet another possibility: that the speaker in the poem from “Exodus from Egypt” ignores, indeed denies, the parental roles of his father and mother.

If the allusion to the story of Moses invokes the theme of adoption, it may be worthwhile to recall how Freud explains the child’s fantasy of being an adopted child. In “Family Romances” he writes that “[the child’s] sense that his own affection is not being reciprocated . . . finds a vent in the idea, often consciously recollected later from early childhood, of being a step child or an adopted child.”¹³ While Moses’s sense of unbelonging is triggered by his adoption, Shabtai’s unhomey sense of self may stem from sibling rivalry. This rivalry is unraveled in the poem through the drama of the proper name: that is, in the switching of the names “Aharon” and “Moses,” which signifies the younger brother’s desire for the birthright. In the aforementioned unpublished essay “Aharon,” Shabtai writes:

My writing, from the very first moment I attained some kind of awareness, dealt with the writing of “Aharon,” because the purpose of writing is to deal with the proper name, to touch the materials of belief and fate. Through “Aharon” I wrote the apartment . . . and through the apartment I wrote “Aharon.” . . . In most parts of the apartment, I was called “Aharon,” but in my grandmother’s room [I was called] “Aren” [the Yiddish pronunciation of “Aharon”]. For me, that room was a kind of city of refuge—especially refuge from “Aharon.”¹⁴

“Aharon” was written in the early 1980s. The drama it unveils of seeking “refuge from ‘Aharon’” finds expression in the early poem through the biblical allusion, for the speaker—presumably Aharon—compares himself to Moses. Yet in the Bible, Aharon is Moses’s elder brother. Sibling rivalry thus emerges through this intricate allusion, foreshadowing Aharon Shabtai’s later pronouncements of bitter jealousy toward his elder and more famous brother, Yaakov Shabtai, a celebrated author whose novels *Past Continuous* (1977) and *Past Perfect* (published posthumously in 1984) are viewed as masterpieces.

In the Bible, the relationship between Moses and his brother Aharon is also overwrought, swaying between closeness and rivalry. In the opening poem of “Exodus from Egypt,” Aharon imagines himself as an only child, foregrounding the oedipal triangle. The sense of bliss with which the poem ends may stem from this imagined singularity.¹⁵

3

The oedipal drama that was only tacitly explored in the “Exodus from Egypt” poem becomes a major subject in Shabtai’s subsequent books. Analyzing it at length may have been the impetus for Shabtai’s turn to the long poem. As we shall see, Shabtai rapidly disavowed his early style and rejected the short lyric poem. In the late 1960s he turned to the long poem, a move that came to fruition with the publication of *Kibbutz* (1973), the book in which he “found his own voice.”¹⁶ In more ways than one, it was a reaction against the prevailing norms of Hebrew poetry in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, “Family Romances,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 9, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1966), 235–42.

¹⁴ Aharon Shabtai, “Aharon,” from the poet’s personal archive.

¹⁵ In this context it may be interesting to recall that in his unfinished novel *Past Perfect* (סוף דבר), which was published posthumously in 1984, Yaakov Shabtai’s protagonist, Meir, utters the words “this is the place” (זה המקום) at the height of sexual intercourse.

¹⁶ Shabtai said so in a public talk at Tel Aviv University on January 25, 2017.

Kibbutz displays Shabtai's long-poem poetics. The language is prosaic, virtually antipoetic. Roman Jakobson famously asserted that poetry is based on metaphor while prose (especially realist fiction) is formed through metonymy. *Kibbutz* seems to avoid metaphor in its attempt to circumvent the lyrical, instead underscoring spatial contiguity. Shabtai uses punctuation sparingly throughout the fifty-four-page poem, favoring an unstoppable flow. This sense of flow is enhanced by his use of the present tense, which creates a sense of open-endedness. Unlike the early poem from "Exodus from Egypt," which depicts a specific and well-defined past event, *Kibbutz* attempts to portray a developing, ongoing occurrence.

Unlike a short lyric poem, which promotes experiential and situational unity, *Kibbutz*'s structure seems arbitrary and wobbly. Karl Shapiro once complained that T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is lacking in unity. Any part of it "can be switched with any other part without changing the sense of the poem."¹⁷ A similar critique can be directed at *Kibbutz*, whose concatenation seems rather arbitrary. But in the face of such arbitrariness, one could argue that the modern long poem, Shabtai's *Kibbutz* included, challenges our established reading practices, problematizing our deepest assumptions about poetic unity. This is part of a section in *Kibbutz* titled "Dining Hall":

I love that machine that peels
potatoes

and the machine that slices bread

the two boilers with
handwheels

the storage room for boxes

I love the kitchen
in its entirety

even the counter—

a tractor approaches and lowers a pig into a tub

many times I gathered packing materials

I love the comfort
of egg cartons

a broken egg in one of the thirty
papier-mâché container's dimples

the tin box with cake crumbs

I'm not at all revolted by garbage

¹⁷ Karl Shapiro, *In Defense of Ignorance* (New York: Random House, 1960), 55.

I love the concept of “eating”
 and “eating together”
 in the house called “dining hall”
 in the morning a cook and a few released soldiers
 responsible for rehabilitating the serving and cooking arrangements
 a [kibbutz] member in the alcove tending
 the boiler
 I remember such a morning: I was sent to the carpenter’s
 for sawdust which I scattered by the entrance
 by sackcloth
 a girl who’d gone to nurse turned me on
 the dining room is built on a hill
 into which are dug shelters which serve as emergency storage
 on the rear flank—
 piping, irrigation,
 crates on shelves of iron rods
 I love every material
 the metal that makes a platter,
 the metal that makes a fork, the metal that makes a strainer
 the wood is used to make a big spoon
 a knife handle,
 a bowl, a rolling pin, the side of a sieve, a whisk handle
 I love gas
 I love electricity
 I love cooking salt
 the kibbutz eats salad¹⁸

¹⁸ Aharon Shabtai, *Kibbutz* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1973), 22–24. Translated by Michael Yaari.

The poem focuses on communal life in the kibbutz, laying emphasis on material objects—“a knife handle, a bowl, a rolling pin, the side of a sieve, a whisk handle.” Although the word “I” abounds in the poem, the text foregrounds objects, buildings, and concepts. Moreover, despite the ubiquitous presence of the “I,” the poem centers on life in the kibbutz, a community advancing egalitarian and socialist values. But in the early 1970s, when Shabtai was writing *Kibbutz*, Israeli culture had grown weary of collectivist ideology, as evident in the individualist tone of Hebrew poetry of the 1960s. In valorizing kibbutz life, Shabtai was writing against the grain, offering a poetics of ethical engagement that was meant to be “an assertion of a positive,” to use Ezra Pound’s words.¹⁹

Shabtai, a classicist who had written his dissertation on the concepts of home and family in Aeschylus, has offered several explanations for breaking away from his early style, acknowledging the desire to extricate himself from Nathan Zach’s influence. “For the Greeks,” he argues, “Eris (Discord or Strife) was an important goddess—she sparked the Trojan War, and at the beginning of *Works and Days*, Hesiod mentions that she was responsible for creative competition as well as for injustice and wickedness. My argumentative streak was strong, and that was what allowed me to become a poet.”²⁰ Shabtai then expands on his discord with Zach:

Zach’s influence was enormous and I created a counterstyle in order to come out to the world. At the time, I was enchanted by [Zach’s] *Other Poems*, and upon its publication, I wrote a review for *Ha-arets* in which I compared it to Kafka. Today, I have no trouble loving these poems. He belongs to a group of Jewish poets like Paul Celan and Edmond Jabès, who carry on the legacy of symbolism and who embody an exilic state. . . . After the War of Independence there was naturally a sense here of anticlimax, a kind of normative attitude of revulsion toward the pioneer and Zionist ethos, once it had actually been realized. And Zach set the tone with his poetry. He set himself in a sort of indulgent pose as the refined connoisseur and imposed an ironic and sentimental attitude toward reality. I saw that as evasion. That attitude of longing, the impressionistic and enchanted style, approaches reality with demands that, from the very outset, it cannot hope to meet—and all this while, to tell the truth, you live and make use of all the good that reality offers when approached correctly, that is, as part of an ethical and purposeful relationship, not out of arrogance. The chair presents itself for sitting, the policeman writes a report, the young girl is ready for love, the state does what the state is capable of doing, et cetera. . . . I wanted to get rid of the whining and the spell of sentimentality and arrive instead at the true story, composed of objects and action. Instead of an attitude that seemed to me fussy and passive, I suggested in *Kibbutz* a mode of responsibility and engagement.²¹

While this self-characterization is rich in nuance, it does not explain Shabtai’s turn to the long poem. Nevertheless, in the same interview, Shabtai mentions two sources of influence that may have directed him toward the long poem: Hesiod’s *Works and Days* and Robert Lowell’s *Life Studies*. On the former he reminisces:

In my first year [at the Hebrew University] I audited Paolo Vivante’s class on the archaic poem. It was winter, the first-floor windows at Lauterman Hall rattled in the wind and rain, and he read in English, with great feeling, from Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, which struck me more than

¹⁹ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 324.

²⁰ Helit Yeshurun, “Le-khol ahavah yesh ha-tahat shelah—re’ayon im Aharon Shabtai” [Every love has its ass], *Khadarim* 10 (1993): 219.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 221.

any other work and opened before me a realm of powers, gods, works, elements, time . . . in the mythic mode; wisdom is a force, like cleverness or cunning, but these abilities are not exclusive; they come alongside chaos, randomness, necessity, fate. The poem instructs the farmer what he must do in each season of the year in order to persist and survive in the Iron Age, in the world that received fire and handicraft from Prometheus, and sorrow, sickness, desire, and cunning from Pandora. It teaches how to fashion a hat in winter so as not to die of cold. The whole thing astounded me: suddenly I heard music that wasn't decadent, and that encounter established my relationship with the lyrical "I"'s tattered stuff.²²

Although Shabtai originally read Hesiod for Vivante's class, he must have known how important Greek poetry has been for the American long poem. Hesiod was crucial for Charles Olson, whose concept of the historic archaic is based on Homer, Hesiod, and Herodotus, who operate "outside the 'universe of discourse' created by Plato and other Greek writers in the fifth century BCE, when the 'generalizing time' of Western humanism begins."²³ In a similar vein, Michael Bernstein connects Pound's endeavor in *The Cantos* to classical didactic poetry. In his view, Pound aimed to record not just "the moments of insight attained by a solitary and unique consciousness, but rather (in terms of Eric A. Haverlock's description of Homer) 'a sort of encyclopedia of ethics, politics, history, and technology which the effective citizen was required to learn as the core of his educational equipment.'"²⁴

The idea that the modern long poem is an encyclopedia of sorts is pertinent to Shabtai's writing, and it also explains his fascination with Hesiod's eclectic, encyclopedic, long poem. In Shabtai's view, it is a sack full of advice, rules, and maxims instructing one how to lead a diligent and decent life.

Another book that shaped Shabtai's path to the long poem was Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*:

My first insight as a poet came under the influence of the personal poetry that flourished in America in the 1950s, especially Robert Lowell's. He wrote a book called *Life Studies*, in which he wrote about his life. . . . I was also influenced by French poets, Paul Eluard, for example, poets who wrote very personally indeed. Suddenly I understood that my own life could serve as material for poetry, something that had not been seen as entirely acceptable [in Israeli poetry of the 1950s and 1960s]. . . . I wanted to write something akin to confessional poetry, that is, to arrive at . . . let's call it authenticity.²⁵

Although Shabtai lauds Lowell's turn to autobiography, I would like to suggest that what inspired him in *Life Studies* was its break from the short lyric poem. Lowell's book includes short poems, but its second part, "91 Revere Street," is a thirty-page prose section, which undercuts the symbol-studded and ambiguity-laden style that informed Lowell's early poetry. "91 Revere Street" is indeed confessional, replete with autobiographical detail, but it is also an experiment in form.

²² Shabtai, "Al Yona Wallach," 17.

²³ Gary Grieve-Carlson, "At the Boundary of a Mighty World: Charles Olson and Hesiod," *Mosaic* 47, no. 4 (2014): 139.

²⁴ Michael Andre Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modernist Verse Epic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 23.

²⁵ Michael Gluzman and Dror Mishani, "Re'ayon im Aharon Shabtai" [Interview with Aharon Shabtai], Tel Aviv University, November 5, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1WSO3vN>. Minor stylistic changes were made in transcribing the interview.

Lowell's "91 Revere Street" appealed to Shabtai because it disrupted the lyric uniformity of *Life Studies*, inserting the prosaic into a book of short poems.²⁶

But if Shabtai was indeed following Hesiod's and Lowell's long texts, he may have recognized that in both *Works and Days* and "91 Revere Street" the implicit impetus for length is the unfolding of a family drama. In Hesiod it is a bitter feud between two brothers that serves as the frame narrative; in Lowell, it is the fall of Lowell's father that is the crux of the entire narrative. Length in Shabtai, as we shall see, is an essential condition for self-analysis, for the revelation that writing entails.

Although *Kibbutz* seems to circumvent the oedipal underpinnings of "Exodus from Egypt," it actually elaborates—however indirectly—on Shabtai's troubled relationship with his family. Despite the book's generalizing title and its markedly impersonal tone, *Kibbutz* is as biographical as some of Shabtai's other texts. At the age of fourteen Shabtai decided to leave his parents' home in Tel Aviv and to join Kibbutz Merhavva in the Jezreel Valley, where his brother, Yaakov Shabtai, was already living. Although Shabtai grew up in a socialist Zionist milieu in Tel Aviv, the decision to move out of his parents' apartment and into a kibbutz was by no means ordinary. In mid-1950s Israel, the kibbutzim (plural of "kibbutz") often integrated "children from outside" who belonged to a disadvantaged stratum of society. But that was not Shabtai's case; his decision to join the kibbutz can be understood—in hindsight—as a first attempt to adopt alternative parents.

As a socialist commune, the kibbutz offered a markedly different lifestyle, underscoring communal ownership of the means of production. Communalism affected all aspects of life, including child-rearing. In the kibbutz children lived not with their parents but in a "children's house" supervised by the educational staff. Consequently, the nuclear family lost some of its importance, although parents met their children in the afternoons. The kibbutz posited an alternative to the family by extending its borders. Although family and home still existed, they merged into the extended, communal boundaries of the kibbutz.

Apparently struck by this new order of things, Shabtai never focuses in *Kibbutz* on his own room, the private space given to every kibbutz member. Instead, he focuses strictly on communal spaces such as the dining hall, depicting objects, working habits, and spatial settings. Shabtai does not mention his own family in *Kibbutz*, but it appears that the extension of family and home is the impetus for the expansive poetics of the book. In *Kibbutz*, Shabtai examines the meaning of "home" (בַּיִת, *bayit*) in a communal setting, a home whose boundaries are pushed to the furthest edges by the logic of the commune. Such an extension, a radical change in one's sense of belonging, generates a radical change of poetic form.

4

Shabtai's expansive poetics took another turn in 1976 upon the publication of *Domestic Poem*, which marked the beginning of a poetic project that persisted over a decade and resulted in seven books of poetry in which he continued to develop his long-poem poetics²⁷ and in which he devel-

²⁶ Another quality of *Life Studies* that may have appealed to Shabtai is its use of catalogs, undercutting the text's unity. See Lawrence Kramer, "Freud and the Skunks: Genre and Language in *Life Studies*," in Robert Lowell: *Essays on Poetry*, ed. Steven Axelrod and Helen Deese (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 94.

²⁷ In 2012 he collected them into a single book. See Aharon Shabtai, *Sheva poemot* [Seven poems] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2012).

oped a new poetics of serialization, to use Shahar Bram's apt terms.²⁸ In *Domestic Poem* Shabtai found the poetic form that became his trademark: a book-long sequence of numbered fragments. But rather than looking at *Domestic Poem*, I would like to focus, by way of conclusion, on a 1997 memoir entitled "15 Frug Street," in which Shabtai returns to his parents' apartment, which he mentioned briefly in "Exodus from Egypt." This memoir, a clear gesture to Lowell's "91 Revere Street," sheds light on the function of length in Shabtai's later work. If in *Kibbutz* length represented the expansive home and extended family of the collective community, in his later works it functions differently, embodying a poetics of contradictions that foregrounds semantic instability.

In "15 Frug Street" Shabtai remarks:

I loved the apartment's front door so much, "our" door, the door that showed no favoritism, yet silently agreed to forgive what pettiness it saw and safeguard our secrets, our "Shabtai family" ideal. It was more important than all other doors, like a period among commas. I'd reach it with such a sense of relief, panting, open it, and run to the toilet just in the nick of time. It carried out its senior, fateful role without donning any special mantle, simply keeping watch from behind a glassed-over slit. I loved its simple handle the same way I loved my mother's heavy palms, which I used to take hold of when I was angry and mumble, "peasant, peasant!" Its one symbol of prestige was the deadbolt lock. My grandmother, as the most esteemed member of the household (like the Greek goddess of the hearth, Hestia), was in charge of the door. In the morning she would cock the safety on the lock. In the evening I would hear the perfect click as the catch was released. And before sleep, I would hear from my bed the sound of the handle being checked. That was the formal sign announcing the coming of the night's dominion. An ascending and descending chord, like the two notes that express the death of Egmont in Beethoven's famous overture.²⁹

The apartment carries heterogeneous and conflicting meanings, and as in "Exodus from Egypt" it is thoroughly mythologized: the grandmother is likened to the Greek goddess Hestia, and the nightly sound of the door's catch is compared to the opening sounds of Beethoven's "Egmont Overture." In this particular passage, the apartment as a whole is eroticized through the reference to the Song of Songs: "I rose up to open to my beloved; and my hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers with sweet smelling myrrh, upon the handles of the lock" (5:5). The lock of the front door and the absence of a lock in the bathroom (a subject Shabtai will dwell on) carry erotic meaning.

But Shabtai soon turns to another door in the apartment. The bathroom is depicted as a shrine, and its door—a mirror image of the front door—is given detailed attention:

No one came into the bathroom, in which you were left alone with your naked body and all the things meant to make it smooth, to purify it, or to penetrate its crevices: the soap and the products in the cabinet, like the droppers for nose drops, the enemas, the tweezers, the Okava and Gillette razor blades, on whose packaging was a picture of a mustachioed man, like Theodore Roosevelt at the pinnacle of his manliness. The sense of being left alone was made even more decisive by the fact that language could enter only partially; you could talk about cleanliness, but the implicit expanse of the body and limbs sprawled beyond the bounds of

²⁸ Shahar Bram, "Al kron ha-retsef ve-hashlachotav ba-Poema ha-Beitit shel Aharon Shabtai" [On serialization and its consequences in Aharon Shabtai's *Domestic Poem*], *Dapim le-mechkar be-sifrut* [Dapim: Literary research] 13 (2001–2): 135–64.

²⁹ Aharon Shabtai, "Frug 15," *Ha-arets*, April 18, 1998. Reprinted in *Ha-arets*, October 2, 2016.

words and realization. The sense of being alone was emphasized and transformed into a prerogative, a defiant stance, any time I was threatened by an incursion into this oasis. Then the place would become a refuge. Legs trembling, I would sit on the edge of the tub, pull out the door of the cubby in the wall that held dirty laundry and opened vertically, and use it to block the bathroom door; only a space of ten centimeters was left to permit threatening hands which waved helplessly at the belt.

But no one was supposed to come to the bathroom. . . . And no language dared to draw near. This was, in the fullest sense of the world, a shrine to the individual. With space enough for one person, one seat, one toilet tank, and one window. The first step was to humbly and submissively sit on the toilet. . . . This was the inverse of the “logos” of the righteous and celebratory sitting in the kitchen. Food and its scent were inverted and exited a different orifice, and that was like an allegory for the way we consume in our lives, digesting and destroying all that we come across, as well as ourselves. Yet digestion was also accepted and perceived as a kind of victory and purification. And so, the second step of the ceremony was to stand up, bow your head toward the stool, and accept forgiveness as you straightened and pulled up your pants. Then the hand would pull the chain, and the tank affixed to the ceiling would play a celebratory chorale of thanksgiving. And then came the step of light and illumination, since this event would mostly take place in the afternoon. You would stand up straight with your back to the door and the apartment, with your face looking west toward the window. And then it would become clear that the modest dimensions of this individual shrine, in fact, turned it into a window onto its own special heavens, which were also your future as deserted and deserter.³⁰

The bathroom is an enclosed space within the apartment and it function as the apartment’s “negative.” While the family as a whole inhabits the apartment, the toilet is the shrine of the individual. Yet the privacy of this space is threatened and should be secured by using the cubby door to block the larger door of the bathroom. While the depiction of the door to the apartment imbues it with grandeur, the bathroom door marks an entrance to the domain of silence. This depiction of his parents’ apartment is structured through binary oppositions: inside/outside, main door/bathroom door, food/excrement, speech/silence, collective/individual. The apartment thus becomes replete with opposite meanings.

As this memoir demonstrates, Shabtai has developed a poetics of contradictions that owes much to poststructuralist perceptions of language. Shabtai audited Claude Lévi-Strauss’s lectures at the Collège de France during his doctoral studies at the Sorbonne from 1966 to 1968 and immersed himself in semiology, as is evident from his unpublished essay “Aharon.” But he attributes his understanding of language’s instability to Greek tragedy’s worldview. In his introduction to *Agamemnon*, which he translated into Hebrew, Shabtai explains the inherent duality of values in Greek tragedy:

Tragedy’s nucleus lies at the beginning of the archaic period when it became clear that ethical values are always contradictory: bravery, eros, the desire for wealth and power—on the one hand, these are all positive forces; but on the other hand, under certain circumstances, they can take on negative and destructive aspects. Then, the active aspect (“praxis”) of the ethical value exposes a passive aspect (“pathos”), which is related to exaggeration, violence, and chance. The

³⁰ Ibid.

mysterious, contradictory vacillation in the meaning of values finds expression in the concepts of fate (predestination, necessity, chance).³¹

This fascinating observation on the duality of values in Greek tragedy offers an insight into Shabtai's understanding of meaning at large. In "15 Frug Street" each door has its mirror image; every speech is countered by counterspeech. The vacillation of meaning requires length, and the long poem allows Shabtai to develop a poetics of contradictions in which the logic of each statement is undercut by a subsequent statement or observation. Shabtai is drawn to the long poem because only through repetitive and continuous writing can he reveal the drama of signification. Length becomes an emblem of extended temporality, which allows Shabtai to structurally explore the relationship between apparent oppositions such as *heimlich* and *unheimlich* whose meaning changes over and over again as the poem progresses.

The poetics of contradiction that Shabtai has developed can be viewed as resulting from what he describes as his "argumentative streak." But if initially he understood "Eris" (discord) as a force driving him to compete with others, in his later writing "Eris" becomes an intrinsic precept of the text. Self-rebuttal becomes essential for Shabtai, as he often understands a new book as a radical reaction against his previous book. Explaining how he had come to write *Shit, Death*, Shabtai observed: "This is a black book, written after I had written a white book. In *Domestic Poem*, I wrote, 'We are man and wife, undivoriceable,' and of course this too was just the opposite, and so this book [*Shit, Death*] was written—to convey the opposite. Because that's what's necessary for mental hygiene, for living. This is a vitalist book. Because it's impossible to live without descending to Hades in order to integrate [opposites]."³² In notes for a class he had taught on modernist poetry, Shabtai wrote on a Pierre Reverdy poem: "the poem is a package of words, words whose meaning and unity are like life and the world, which lack walls. They say that the field ends here, then they say—there. Isn't the sorrow happy, isn't the red blue? And in Reverdy's poem, isn't life actually death?"

In resisting brevity, which typically characterizes the lyric poem, Shabtai provided a new model of writing. Length allowed Shabtai to negate the poem's status as *objet d'art*. He explained time and again that the poem is "not an object," describing it as something broken from the outset: "For me, the perfection of the poem exists only to be thwarted. When I write, I don't relate to poems. I refrain from objectifying them—that is, to embellish them, to package them, to wrap them up, to allow someone to own them."³³ Length allowed Shabtai to produce an antipoetic text, whose semantic stability is always-already betrayed: "No statement in a poem is locked in prison—not even a word. A contradictory statement or word can follow. In fact, they must."³⁴ A

³¹ Aharon Shabtai, introduction to Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Aharon Shabtai (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1990), 8.

³² Zali Gurevitch, "Sicha im Aharon Shabtai" [A conversation with Aharon Shabtai], *Akhshav* [Now] 45 (1981): 61.

³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.