

Zelda's Poetics of Poverty

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ABSTRACT: We explore the intersection of the poetic and the theological in Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky's poetry and suggest that the two join to offer a political and economic critique of secularism and the capitalistic "society of the spectacle." We claim that Zelda's theological-poetic moment relates also to semiotics and to the relations between poetry, economy, and use. We show how Zelda's poetry rephrases, from this theological-poetic articulation, a position of signification and meaning that confronts the axioms of Western metaphysics and presents a poetics of poverty and a political stance of free use.

Zelda's poems desire a moment of union and reconciliation between the signifier and the signified. Her poetry is not only a theological attempt to bring about a mystical union of things and words, signified and signifier, poetry and theology, but also an attempt to open up the option of use, poor and simple and thus free. Poverty, for Zelda, is not an aesthetic disposition but a political stance, a unified symbol working against the raging images of the glory of capitalist images.

“EVERY TIME THAT SOMETHING IS PRODUCED, that is, brought from concealment and nonbeing into the light of presence, there is poiesis, production, poetry,” writes Giorgio Agamben, arguing that poiesis, in its original meaning, is the revelation of something that is concealed in matter. Thus, poetry is always a refinement.¹ We employ this insight to read Zelda's poetry and to understand her declaration that “all that is needed

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 37.

is the scent of Mount Carmel, a loving eye, and the gray clothes fall off the king's daughter" (דִּי בְּנִשְׁיבַת-בְּשָׂמִים מִן הַכְּרִמָּל, בְּשֵׁן אוֹהֶבֶת—וְהַבְּגָדִים הַאֲפֹרִים נוֹשְׂרִים מִבַּת-הַמֶּלֶךְ).² These words characterize Zelda's poetry as summoning the revelation of beauty and grace concealed beneath a gray existence. The revelation is induced by the traces of fragrance that reach the poet in the wind. Her poetry is an encounter between theology and poetics, achieving revelation—of the poem or of God—from within the gray economy of poverty and bareness.

Zelda Schneursor Mishkovsky was born in Russia (1914) to a distinguished family of the Chabad dynasty. At the age of twelve she arrived in Palestine and in 1967 published her first book of poetry, *Penai* (Free time). Although her poetry has been characterized as "religious,"³ its theological aspects have been discussed primarily from a thematic perspective, remaining essentially separate from the poetic analysis. We wish to define the poetics that Zelda proposes more precisely, showing how inseparable it is from the poet's theological stance and the way in which the relations between poetics and theology in her work formulate an economic and political position. The reading we will propose will examine the ways in which Zelda's poems lead the reader toward the discovery of God, and what means they employ to this end. Following in Zelda's footsteps, we will consider the unity of physical and spiritual worlds, of form and content, theology and poetics: we will argue that the theological-poetic stance proposed by Zelda refers not only to the fields of poetry, theology, and the relation between them, but also to a semiotic relationship with reality itself. In other words, Zelda's poetry proposes, on the basis of a theological-poetic nexus, a signifying idiom that counters the fundamental positions of Western metaphysics, specifically the capitalist society of the spectacle.

Our essay is informed by the work of Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's critique of secularism illuminates the ways in which concepts seen as secular are in fact theological concepts that have been deprived of their sacrosanct character. Agamben argues that modern politics and culture are secularized remnants of theological forms. His critique is concerned with what he calls the "religion of capitalism."⁴ He proposes—following Guy Debord's work—that capitalism and neoliberalism function as religion "in disguise," in which the profane and the sacred cannot be told apart, and concepts such as truth, value, and right have lost their meaning.

Agamben identifies a rift at the foundation of Western thought—between signifier and signified, poetry and philosophy, and the aesthetic and the theological—and seeks ways of rethinking it. This project of restoration, based on a critique of secularism, is reflected, we argue, in Zelda's theological, poetic, and economic position, which proposes a poetic economy that is poor and therefore accessible to all. We turn to Agamben not only for his political thought: our work

² Zelda, *Tsipor ahuzat kesem* [An enchanted bird] (Jerusalem: Keter, 2014), 16. This work was published thirty years after Zelda's death. It contains writings and letters that the poet asked to be made public only twenty years after her death.

³ Hamutal Bar-Yosef, *Al shirat Zelda* [On Zelda's poetry] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006), 136; Zvi Mark, "Emuna ve-shira be-shirat Zelda: Revadim mistiyim ba-tfisa ha-ars po'etit shel Zelda ve-shorsheihem hasidiyim" [Faith and poetry in Zelda's poetry: Mystical strata in Zelda's ars-poetic conception and their roots], in *Al ha-emuna* [On faith], ed. Moshe Halbertal, David Kurzweil, and Avi Sagi (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005), 534.

⁴ "The political secularization of the theological concepts (the transcendence of God as a paradigm of sovereign power) does nothing but displace the heavenly monarchy onto an earthly monarchy, leaving its power intact." Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2007), 77.

is mostly interested in his noteworthy—though somewhat less known—philosophical work on poetry and language.⁵

We wish to emphasize the restorative and consoling function of the linguistic symbol:⁶ thus, while Leah Goldberg has emphasized the centrality of the abyss in Symbolist writing,⁷ for Zelda “Each rose is an island / Of the promised peace / The eternal peace” (כל שושנה היא אי \ של השלום המבטח, \ השלום הנצחי).⁸ In other words, for Zelda, the rose, the poem, and the symbol become a formative moment of wholeness, union, and reconciliation. The act of modernist Symbolist creation, for Goldberg, is poised on the edge of an abyss, while for Zelda, it contains the possibility of a leap into the ocean, with the aim of reaching God. It thus seems that Zelda appropriates Symbolist tools but sheds their husk and “Judaizes” their melody.⁹ Furthermore, she formulates a poetic language in which absence, shabbiness, simplicity, and poverty can be revealed as sources of creativity.

For example, in the poem “The Lily of Sharon” (Havatselet ha-sharon) the poetic-theological drama ends in a revelation in sand and dust. The poem’s plot has three stages. In the first stage, God is unseen; in the second, signs and clues of God’s presence are found; in the final stage, God is revealed. The revelation turns the poem on its head, and in rereading it one understands that the hints of God’s presence (and a religious reading) were there all along, concealed beneath the words’ double meanings. The ability of Hebrew to shift between the profane meaning and the biblical, Kabbalistic, and Hassidic ones underpins a reading process that simulates a theological exercise in which clues and sparks are collected.¹⁰ Through inversion, Zelda’s poem illustrates the possibility of being in the world in utter blindness, alongside the possibility of seeing God

⁵ See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: The Place of Negativity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). It is important to emphasize that for Agamben the poetic discussion is always political, and the political one always concerns poetry.

⁶ Hamutal Tsamir discusses the intersection of 1940s Symbolism with Kabbalistic and Hassidic symbolism. See Hamutal Tsamir, *Be-shem ha-nof: Le’umiyut, migdar ve-subyektiviyut ba-shirah ha-yisre’elit bi-shnot ha-hamishim ve-ha-shishim* [In the name of the land: Nationalism, subjectivity, and gender in Israeli poetry of the Statehood Generation] (Jerusalem: Keter; Be’er Sheva: Heksherim, 2006), 193. Our reading aligns with Tsamir’s with respect to the fusion of theology and poetics, though Tsamir criticizes Zelda’s poetry and argues that it supports nationalism, whereas we shall argue that an economic reading reveals the poet’s more critical stance.

⁷ “This is a Dionysian art devoid of catharsis: not a tragedy or a soaring upward but a descent into the abyss.” Leah Goldberg, “He’arot la-estetiqa shel ha-simbolizm” [Notes on the aesthetics of Symbolism], in *Mi-dor u-me’ever: Bhnit u-te’amim be-sifrut klalit* [Explorations and tastes in general literature] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1977), 61.

⁸ Zelda Schneurson Mishkovsky, *Shirey Zelda* [Zelda’s poems] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985), 59; English translation by Marcia Falk, *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems of Zelda* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), 66.

⁹ The definition of Symbolism is difficult and fraught with controversy. See Dory Manor, “Ha-ra’am ha-ilem: Al shirat mallarme ve-al tirguma le-ivrit” [The silent thunder: On Mallarmé’s poetry and its translation into Hebrew], in *Stéphane Mallarmé, ha-ra’am ha-ilem* [Stéphane Mallarmé, the silent thunder], trans. Dory Manor (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2012). The difference between Zelda’s Symbolism and the works Goldberg describes can also be explained by arguing that Zelda takes a midpoint position between the Kabbalistic-Romantic conception and the Symbolist one (Tsamir, *Be-shem ha-nof*, 187). This is precisely where Goldberg places the difference between Romanticism and Symbolism: “As opposed to the abyss of Romanticism, the abyss of the Symbolists is for the most part a dive into depths from which there is no return, and at times this is also the way to nothingness. The ‘abyss’ of Romanticism held out the lure of greatness and glory, unlike the Symbolist ‘abyss’” (Goldberg, “He’arot la-estetiqa,” 65).

¹⁰ Zvi Mark, “Distant Signs and Ancient Wonders: Hasidic Faith in the Poetry of Zelda,” *Havruta 2*, no. 1 (2009): 62–71, esp. 70–71.

in each word and each stage of reading. The revelation is not a “surplus addition” or an “apologetic move of a religious poet” required to end her poem with a justification of God. It is part of a poetic development that occurs in the course of reading, requires rereading, and produces a hermeneutic process.¹¹ This circular logic is also reflected in Zelda’s comment that the splendor of the king’s daughter is concealed beneath a gray dress.

חבצלת-השרון

קרבי, לבי, נפשי—
 יוצאים אל ניהוח החבצלת.
 נשימת האשר,
 משוש החולות.
 הנה היא עולה אלי מן השחב
 מן הריק
 מאין אפק.
 פורחת בכנפיה הלבנות.
 שוב העולם ממשות מלששת
 מזל עליון
 בעל-קדשה ודאי.

Lily of Sharon

My entrails, my heart, my soul—
 Yearn for the lily’s fragrance.
 The breath of happiness
 The joy of sands.
 Here she comes up to me from the dankness
 From the void
 From no-horizon.
 Flourishing in her white wings.
 Once again the world is polished substance
 Supernal fortune
 Definitely possessing holiness.¹²

¹¹ Bar-Yosef cites Dan Levi, who sees the appeal to God as a detached part of the poem. By contrast, Bar-Yosef demonstrates the system of prolepses for a religious reading by means of the poem “Be-malkhut ha-shqi’a” (In the kingdom of sunset) (Schneurson Mishkovsky, *Shirey Zelda*, 202), where all the descriptions of nature—the light, the kingdom, the crowns—are eventually revealed as religiously charged expressions (Bar-Yosef, *Al shirat Zelda*, 136).

¹² Schneurson-Mishkovsky, *Shirey Zelda*, 58; translated by Nitsa Kann, “A Boat of Light: Zoharic Images in Zelda’s Poetry,” *Nashim* 19 (2010): 64–95.

In this poem, the relationship wherein a person turns to God is reversed or becomes bidirectional: God, who conceals himself, nevertheless leaves a “trace” (*reshimo*)¹³ in the world. The fragrance is the breath of happiness, the joy of the sands. As breath, it enables the sands’ existence, endows their vitality, while constituting their passion and desire. The sands, both in their Hebrew connotation (the Hebrew word for “sand,” *hol*, also means “profane”) and in their image—as a place that is barren and dry, devoid of water—suggest the profane world: the fragrance enlivens the profane world, and it is also that world’s object of desire. The fragrance fuses with the visual appearance of the lily of Sharon, and the symbol creates a synesthetic experience that envelops the speaker and the reader.¹⁴

The line ending the first part of the poem clarifies the poetic process. The lily is the joy of the sands, the kingdom revealed in them, and it is also the revelation of the poem itself. The birth of the lily emerges from a triple emptiness: “from the dankness / From the void / From no horizon.” Its blossoming is not part of an organic, anticipated process but rather a surprising, alchemical occurrence, the creation of something out of nothing, abundance out of scarcity. The void and the no-horizon suggest a condition of stagnation, a loss of all the senses, including vision. This is an image of theological collapse and disorientation. Yet it is precisely in this condition of confusion that a magical, alchemical birth occurs, a birth related to the careful, modest observation of the sacred fragrance of the lily in the profane/sand-filled world.¹⁵

The lily of Sharon is a condensed symbol that emphasizes the gap between inside and outside. The bulb is internal, unseen until the moment of revelation. Its beauty is elusive, in need of discovery. The latter is achieved by means of reading or writing, by the speaking or reading subject discovering the flower’s bloom in the course of reading the poem. Thus, the poem contains two parallel processes: the first is the shift from ugliness and desolation to beauty and vitality (a poetic process), and the second is the shift from concealment to revelation or from profanity to sanctity (a theological process). The beautiful and divine are intermingled in the poetic act, concealed beneath gray apparel and barren sands.

The shift from the simplicity of the image to the fullness of the world is an act of consolation, mending the rift between empty, bereft reality and revealed divinity. Non-revelation is the rift between the word and the thing itself, or between reality and God. Objects stand empty without the “sound of the river,”¹⁶ and the heavens do not tell of God’s glory. In modern terms, the relation between Signifier and signified is ruptured at the beginning of the poem as an emptying of reality and its signifiers.

The image first appears as a natural description (a ruptured, profane reality that does not point to God); it is only later, by means of the poetic process, that God is revealed. The flower

¹³ *Reshimo* is a central concept in the thought of the Kabbalist Isaac Luria. It refers to the imprint left by God after his retreat in the process of *tsimtsum* (contraction) that enabled the creation of the world. This process created a vacant space, in which the world was created. Yet God left behind *reshimo*—imprints or traces. See Moshe Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah*, trans. Ruth Bar-Ilan and Ora Wiskind-Elper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 199.

¹⁴ Synesthesia is a poetic technique that is central to the Symbolist movement. Shimon Zandbank, *Megamot yesod ba-shira ha-modernit* [Basic trends in modern poetry] (Tel Aviv: Ha-universita Ha-meshuderet, 1990), 18.

¹⁵ Nitsa Kann (“Boat of Light,” 85) compares Zelda’s poetry to Zoharic literature and argues that the symbolism of the Zohar and the desire for unification are central in Zelda’s poetry. Regarding this poem she shows the movement from chaos and separation into a unification of the self.

¹⁶ See the poem “Histarta nafshekha mimeni” [You hid your soul from me], in Schneurson-Mishkovsky, *Shirey Zelda*, 53.

is much more than a flower:¹⁷ it is the birth of a “refined reality” borne by the theological-poetic fragrance. The poem retains the flower’s materiality, alongside the surplus understanding of that concreteness. The word “refined” indicates that (divine) beauty becomes manifest and precise, like the product of a material process, what Agamben will call poiesis. “Refined” refers to an action that must be applied to a material to reveal its radiance (removing dust, applying sandpaper—material actions expressing the effort of discovery). This act corresponds to the metaphoric removal of profane “sand” from reality, transforming it from an object that does not lend itself to additional meanings to a symbol replete with meaning and a divine fragrance. The sparkling, precious object, says Zelda, resides within the mundane one, that which is not displayed as a spectacle. This understanding points to an additional use value, which deviates from secular or capitalist economy. This is the material nature of Zelda’s poetry: the lily, the poem, and sanctity itself are endowed with concreteness. They are not removed from the world but rather reside in it, always within reach.

The circle of desire ends in the pleasure of encounter and the certainty of sanctity. This part begins with the word “again,” suggesting a recurrent situation—one of separation and encounter, recurring “again and again” (רצוא ושוב). Furthermore—and this is another restorative attribute appearing in the poem, perhaps even the essence of the profane/sacred circle—the poem does not *describe* the birth of the lily but rather *is* the manifestation of the lily in matter, occurring in the course of reading. *The poem is the possibility of the poem’s revelation.* Like most of Zelda’s poems, the form of the stanza follows a circular logic that is both self-contained and closed (e.g., the final stanzaic period is a common feature in her poetry).

The stanza becomes what Agamben calls a vessel, a womb of “infinite” joy, in which desire and its object, the symbol and the thing itself, exist in a region of indistinctness, of imperishable passion. Agamben, writing about Dante’s love poetry, proposes an entire theological-poetic process that takes place inside the stanza: love shapes the image, which takes the form of love poetry. In this sense, the poem is a configuration of imperishable passion, in which the object of revelation is the poem itself.¹⁸ Zelda’s poetry employs the same mechanism: it is not just the poem that becomes a refined reality but the entire “world” expressed in the poem, in a never-ending circle of desire and fulfillment. Zelda proposes a theological economy in which revelation can occur—as a hermeneutic circle—at any moment: in this sense, abundance and repletion are concrete experiences that can occur precisely because they are subject to free use; that is, they are outside the economic order. This economic-theological conception is revealed as a critique of capitalism, the spectacle, and secularism, as we shall see below in the analysis of the poem “Drunk, Divided Will” (Ratson shikor, mesukhsakh).

¹⁷ This contrasts with Gertrude Stein’s famous line “Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” in the poem “Sacred Emily.” This famous line poses these very questions regarding Symbolist practices. Zelda, of course, occupies the opposite pole of linguistic conception, adopting a dense, multivalent idiom. Her use of symbolism can also be compared to the famous passage from Mallarmé’s essay “Crisis in Poetry,” trans. Mary Ann Caws, in *Stéphane Mallarmé, Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York: New Directions, 1982), 76. In other words, for Zelda and Mallarmé the flower becomes an abstract entity, above and beyond the specific flower; it becomes a symbol, but in different ways.

¹⁸ Agamben, *Stanzas*.

DRUNK, DIVIDED WILL: THE SYMBOL AS AN ECONOMIC-THEOLOGICAL PROPOSITION

In his book *The Society of the Spectacle*, which, to a large extent, informs Agamben's thought, Guy Debord argues that in our era, the image is detached from any referent, appearing as a spectacle without content: "The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered."¹⁹ Debord describes the relation between these detached images ("an official language of universal separation")²⁰ from a Marxist perspective. "The spectacle is both the result and the project of the dominant mode of production."²¹ In the relationship characterizing the world of images, detached from any referent, the image is its own goal: "The spectacle is able to subject human beings to itself because the economy has already totally subjugated them. It is nothing other than the economy developing for itself. It is at once a faithful reflection of the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers."²² Objects, suggests Debord, no longer possess use value, but only exchange value and spectacle value. Agamben, following Debord, argues that our era is one of perfect separation: humans are separated from the sacred sphere, the image from its source (and the word from the thing it denotes), and objects from their use value. "In its extreme form, the capitalist religion realizes the pure form of separation, to the point that there is nothing left to separate."²³ Although these claims may seem a bit general, they reflect a dominant semiotic and linguistic state of affairs, and not only a political one. This is where poetry comes into play. We suggest that the symbol Zelda proposes stands in opposition to the "spectacular symbol." Simple, unspectacular reality is revealed as replete, by means of an aesthetic process that occurs in the course of the poem and the symbolic conception that informs it:

רצון שיכור, מסוכסך

רצון שכור, מסכסך, שותת דם
שכפה את עצמו על מזלות,
על סוד עולם,
ילהט בלב דורי.
את האויר החפשי, החוגג,
קבל ביד קפדנית.
שמש ותהומות—סוסי עבודה
במשקו.

משנה להיות אשה
פשוטה, ביתית, רפה,
בדור עז, דור אלימות,
להיות בישנית, לאה,
בדור קה, בדור אנשי ממפר,

¹⁹ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, theanarchistlibrary.org (2005), thesis 2.

²⁰ Ibid., thesis 3.

²¹ Ibid., thesis 6.

²² Ibid., thesis 16.

²³ Agamben, *Profanations*, 81.

אֲשֶׁר לוֹ כְּסִיל וְכִימָה וְיָרַח—
 פְּנִסֵי פְרָסוּם, תְּוִי פֶז, סְמָלֵי צָבָא.
 לְצַעַד בְּרַחוּב מוֹצֵל
 מְהַרְהֵרֶת אֶט-אֶט,
 לְטַעַם אֶת סִין
 בְּאַפְרִסְק מְבֻשָׁם,
 לְהַבִּיט עַל פְּרִיס
 בְּקוֹלְנוּעַ קַר,
 כְּשֶׁהֵם טְסִים
 סָבִיב הָעוֹלָם
 כְּשֶׁהֵם פּוֹרְחִים בְּחָלָל.
 לְהִיּוֹת בֵּין כּוֹבָשִׁים
 וְנִכְבָּשִׁים,
 כְּשֶׁכֵּל יִצוֹר נִכְלָם, נִפְחָד,
 בּוֹדָד.

מִשְׁנָה לְבַל לְמוֹל עָבִי אֵיבָה,
 כְּשֶׁהֵלֵב נִמְשָׁךְ
 לְשׁ"י עוֹלְמוֹת.

Drunk, Divided Will

The drunk, divided, bloody will
 That has imposed itself on fates,
 On the world's secret,
 Blazes in my era's heart.
 It shackles the free rejoicing air
 With a precise hand.
 Sun and abyss—workhorses
 On its farm.

It is odd to be a woman—
 Simple, domestic, frail,
 In a bold era, an era of violence,
 To be shy, languid,
 In a cold era, an era of salesmen—
 For whom Orion, Pleiades and Moon
 Are neon ads, tickets of gold, military decorations.
 To pace a shaded street,
 Pondering slowly,
 To taste China
 In a scented peach,
 To gaze at Paris
 In the chilly cinema,

As they jet
 Around the world,
 As they bloom in space.
 To be between the conquerors
 And the conquered,
 When every being is abashed, afraid,
 Alone.

It is odd to wilt before the clouds of hate
 When the heart is drawn
 To a myriad of worlds.²⁴

The poem's first four lines present a historical situation by means of a personification. The generation is represented as a distraught and bleeding drunk, placing the focus on a historical subject appearing in a scene full of violence and conflict. This subject violently imposes himself on the mystery of the world, on stars and signs. The subjugation of mystery is described as forcing oneself on things, on the world's enigmas. It is a strong desire—a will to conquer what should remain beyond reach.

"It shackles the free rejoicing air / With a precise hand": the rigorous hand records and files, occupied in the classification and sorting of reality, in an attempt to uncover and organize. This is the hand of science and knowledge, coercing the free air. Mystery, it transpires, is the evasion of the classification of knowledge and is described as "free" and "rejoicing air," a kind of elusive surplus, a surviving remnant. This surplus rejoices (in Hebrew, *hogege*, derived from the root word *hag*, meaning "holiday," "celebration") in two senses: first, in that it designates a time that points to the existence of a sacred sphere and, second, in the expression of simple joy. Celebratory time, the holy day, exists as a time that is neither utilitarian (it belongs to a cyclical, rather than a linear, temporal conception) nor profitable; however, it is "air," therefore vital and conducive, again, to Zelda's "breath of happiness." The poem suggests a contrast between the violent, bloody dance of distraught desire and the joyful celebration of free air, which reflects a different historical conception: a modernist, progressive, logic-based outlook contrasted by a worldview that is joyful, dancing in a circle of return, of tradition and sanctity, and compared to air—something that seemingly does not exist and therefore ostensibly lacks value. Walking in a circle—reminding us of Agamben's circle of endless desire in the stanza—is uneconomical and unprofitable. The subject who walks thus revolves around the same point and does not advance, unlike the straight line of progress from point A to point B.

The line that closes the poem's first part—"Sun and abyss—workhorses / On its farm"—clarifies the historical situation. As we have seen, the sun and the abyss—that which is above and that which is below—are the symbols of mystery, symbolizing that which is not understood. The world unfolds as an expanse of mystery, yet the "generation" learns, or violently attempts (in a drunk, unbounded fury), to exploit the world's resources, whether material or spiritual. The world's limits, the heavens and the abyss, become an instrument in a production scheme, workhorses on the generation's homestead. The derogatory epithet "workhorses on its farm" harnesses and demeans—in other words, secularizes—these vast expanses for the benefit of the human

²⁴ Schneurson Mishkovsky, *Shirey Zelda*, 34 (trans. Uri Segal).

mission. Zelda presents a typical modernist-capitalist scene, in which modern desire violently subjugates the world. This is a radical statement in which the act of secularization is clearly contrasted with the idea of freedom. The mission of science and the acquisition of knowledge are perceived as a conquest and enslavement of the world's vast expanses in the service of human needs.

This poetic critique elucidates the title of the book—*Penai* (Free time)—as one that seeks to lend new meaning to the idea of “leisure culture” and the worldview it suggests. In Zelda’s words, “Only God has free time.”²⁵ Leisure, in its usual meaning, refers to the relation between the continuous time in which the entire world—in the Marxist metaphor—is subjected to production and celebratory time, which belongs to the sacred sphere as a time of rest, a recess from work. Here is how Raymond Williams describes the birth of the category of “leisure” as the domesticated otherness of work: the bourgeois citizen, returning home from work, introduces the concept of “leisure,” during which he can devote himself to his nonprofitable pastimes.²⁶ Leisure is the reverse side of harnessing oneself to the burden of work: it is acquired by means of the economic profit offered by work, while at the same time enabling the bourgeois to devote himself to that work.

The Sabbath creates a “palace in time” that opposes the capitalist dichotomy of work/leisure: on the Sabbath, the conquest of space and the efforts of production and utilization are suspended in favor of valueless rejoicing.²⁷ In this sense, “free air” is the possibility of life outside the capitalist production system, a possibility that is threatened in the modern era described by Zelda. The poet thus formulates a position that is at once theological and almost Marxist, through the use of the “rejoicing” concept. In addition, similarly to the poetic process described in our previous analysis, the celebratory encounter—the discovery of the sacred sphere—takes place inside the poem itself. In other words, poetry is posited as a “strange” buffer that attempts to repel the violent power of the generation’s desire. The title *Penai* thus functions as a linguistic insistence on the creation of another meaning, in addition to the immediate one of “leisure.” In the title, “free time” stands alone without any referents to efficiency, which are its necessary partner in a capitalist society. *Penai* thereby consecrates the thoughtful and the bare, that which is neither efficient nor profitable.²⁸

The poet’s position regarding her generation is a “strange” one of aloofness and separation, yet not of alienation: the poem attempts to formulate a perspective that goes beyond the capitalist one of use value. This contrast is clearly seen in the relationship between the domesticity and simplicity of the feminine figure and the power and violence of the generation. The contrast is expressed in the spatial visual images appearing in the poem: Zelda’s walk through space, which is also the poem’s walk, is a restrained one, moving slowly between the house and the street, within a small space that creates a limited movement. By contrast, the generation

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 36.

²⁶ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

²⁷ In his book *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951), Abraham Joshua Heschel refers to the technological culture that leads to the conquest of space and the theological proposition of the Sabbath as a kind of “palace in time.” It is difficult to say whether, when *Penai* was published, Zelda knew of Heschel’s book, which was published in English in 1951 and translated into Hebrew only in the 1980s.

²⁸ For Agamben, the Sabbath occupies a central place in the formulation of a time or space that opposes the consumer-based totality of capitalism. See Giorgio Agamben, “The Hunger of the Ox,” in *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 104–13.

seeks to conquer space in its entirety: it flies around the world, soaring into outer space, between abysses, suns, and stars. The poet's words in the first stanza indicate that this sweeping, violent, and spectacular movement reduces the free air, reduces reality, while the soft, languid, domestic, and enclosed movement enables the infinite openness of mystery and the rejoicing of the sacred dance.

Significantly, the air's "rejoicing" is not linked to a specific time. The poem thus subverts the interdependence between leisure and work, standing in opposition to the way in which the Jewish national holidays and the Sabbath are organized as "vacation time," shaping and delineating the return to work with renewed energy. Free time, for Zelda, stands alone, refusing to become the "other" of regular time. Similarly, literature is not the site of the birth of the modern individual but rather a theological space, and the poem exposes life in modern society not as an arrangement that grants freedom to the private person but as an existence consisting of conflictual, detached experiences. The only possible privacy, a complete private existence, is found in theological freedom, in opposition to the secularized position, here also presented as capitalist, detached, and ruptured: a rift between modernism and tradition, between work and leisure, between self and other.

As a mirror image of her own aesthetics, Zelda posits Futurist aesthetics: "As they jet / Around the world, / As they bloom in space." This is a description of a large, broad movement that delights in the products of space-conquering technology. The phrase "clouds of hate" suggests the cannon smoke that aroused the aesthetic pleasure derived from the spectacle of modern warfare, as expressed in the manifestos of radical Futurism.²⁹ This picture has to be set against the simple, grounded, and impoverished symbol that Zelda's poetry offers. If the complete poetic process resides in the everyday lily, then discord, confusion, and hate are found in the glorious, space-blooming spectacle.

It is important, too, to revisit the poem's title—the desire that is forever in discord. In this sense, discord is both the nature of the spectacular aesthetics that the poet describes and her detached attitude toward the conditions of real life. The discordant imagery of the poem can be understood from the perspective of the society of the spectacle, as well as the poetic insistence on the whole, unified symbol. The sun and the abyss that are enslaved indicate precisely how, in Debord's words, the "triumph of this separation-based economic system proletarianizes the whole world."³⁰

The "clouds of hate" of the divided will are the negative image of the sky that Zelda proposes. The poet's face is turned to the heavens, both toward the "clouds of hostility" and to Shai Olamot ("310 worlds," here translated as "a myriad of worlds"—a Kabbalist term referring to the future mystical world promised to the righteous). The heavens of the society of the spectacle are full of cannon smoke, occluding, with bright lights or stifling darkness, the free, rejoicing air. Zelda presents this visual image in opposition to the aesthetics of poverty. In the poet's symbolic world, there is no need to conquer large areas or numerous worlds—it is the poetics of a seemingly small, "cheap" symbol that is in fact abundant and replete (thus, she can taste China in a peach).

²⁹ "We want to exalt movements of aggression.... We want to sing the man at the wheel, the ideal axis of which crosses the earth, itself hurled along its orbit.... Beauty exists only in struggle.... We want to glorify war." F. T. Marinetti, *The Futurist Manifesto*, in *Three Intellectuals in Politics*, trans. James Joll (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), 179–84.

³⁰ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 26.

In the poem, Zelda describes the subjugation of theological or poetic symbols by capitalist production. The key moment of this position appears in the poem's second part: "In a cold era, an era of salesmen— / For whom Orion, Pleiades and Moon / Are neon ads, tickets of gold, military decorations." These lines introduce the question of representation, intimately related to the sun and the abyss from the first stanza. The stellar bodies Orion, Pleiades, and the moon—cosmic objects, like the sun and the abyss—become or are transformed into images of the modern world. The phrase "tickets of gold" (*tavei paz*) evokes an image of coupons, such as the "gold coupon" (*tav ha-zahav*) of Shufersal, an Israeli supermarket chain—a kind of "gift card" distributed to employees before holidays, something to "please" and soothe them and make them forget their working conditions.³¹ This is the "leisure" provided by employers to their workers, who are expected to appreciate such systems of compensation. Gold is thus transformed into a note, an image of itself; it loses its realness as it is transformed into the depiction of capital as spectacle.

This is a critique of two symbolic systems: the national military system and consumer society. The two are presented as similar in their subjugating violence and in the limiting, oppressive relationships that they maintain with their referents. The national symbolic system employs the stars to indicate its power, by means of a militant (and, again, Futurist) aesthetics. The poetic option that Zelda proposes contrasts with the nationalist and consumerist symbolic systems and the alienation they feature, seeking to create a hesitant, delicate, strange position that occupies a region between the conquerors and the conquered.

Zelda's poetics offers a critical stance that is both political and theological. Unlike the mystical symbol, which attempts, or at least yearns, to grasp the "thing" itself (though this may be criticized as a naïve yearning), the image in the society of the spectacle has become detached from the thing that it symbolizes, alienated and separated from the thing itself. Zelda's description of tasting China in a peach proposes the option of an image that contains the thing itself. The synesthesia that characterizes Symbolism, as well as the Kabbalist symbol, is not an arbitrary poetic trait; rather, it reflects a profound conception of language and its symbolic properties.

Zelda's position is "strange" in that it seeks to deviate from the symbolizing circle of consumer society. She presents this symbolizing mechanism as violent and coercive, proposing instead a flaneur-like, thoughtful position of modest, aimless movement through space. This is a movement born of unprofitable and uneconomical leisure. To this end she seeks to remove the occluding sky, the capitalist symbol that comes to dominate all mechanisms in a way that cannot be restrained, consecrated, or violated.

Zelda's occupation of the interval between conquerors and conquered is a confused, self-conscious position that impairs the wholeness of speech. The line "When every being is abashed, afraid, / Alone" is a kind of fragmented stutter, groping in verbal darkness, illustrating the lack of a linguistic mechanism that could give rise to a different language system—a messianic one of yearning. As Agamben argues, in a world of alienation, sacredness loses its ability to exist: the sky is occluded, and the ability to think, imagine, or speak about the heavens is lost.

Zelda's poetry—particularly as it is expressed in the poem "Drunk, Divided Will"—is political poetry precisely because of how it distinguishes itself from a national and capitalist discourse. Zelda does not engage in the national discourse but rather speaks out against it, proposing a

³¹ According to Shufersal's website, the "golden coupon" has been the "leading coupon of the leading Israeli supermarket chain since 1958," thereby indicating that these coupons were already being distributed at the time of the book's writing.

different language and other poetic-theological options. In her manner of connecting the nihilism of modern capitalism to the emergence of national sentiment, she formulates a nonnational, theological, and patently diasporic position—hence, a distinctly political one. Furthermore, this position is nearly Marxist in its economic understanding: her poetry proposes an ontological economy in which the “coin”—that is, the poem—has no exchange or spectacle value. It only has use value. This is a “poor” poetics, accessible to all, which opposes work and profit. This is what Agamben calls “the inoperative work,” which “exposes in the act the potential that has brought it into being: if it is a poem it will expose in the poem the potential of language... only in this sense can one say that inoperativity is a poem of poetry.... Rendering inoperative the works of language, the arts, politics and economy, it shows what a human body can do, opens it to a new possible use.”³² The splinters of divinity and poetry are to be found right here, beneath the dust of the sand dunes, to be used freely by all.

It is only in the light of this insight that we can fully understand the figure of the poor, simple poet that appears in Zelda’s work. For instance, in the poem “Sabbath and Weekday” (Shabbat ve-hol), the speaker is suspected of stealing because of her shabby, gray appearance. This figure, exemplifying Zelda’s poetry in general, is inseparable from the poetic trajectory we have examined here and can be understood only against this background and in light of the processes of extraction and revelation that embody her movement from the profane “weekday” to the Sabbath and to poetry:

אֶבֶל בַּיּוֹם רֵאשׁוֹן שָׁל חַל
נִפְשִׁי מְשֻׁלָּכֶת...
בְּבוֹאִי לַחֲנוּת יִרְגִישׁ מִיַּד הַחֲנֻנִי
שֶׁבָּאתִי מִכּוֹכֵב אַחֵר, וּבִתְמִהוֹן
יִסְקֹר מֵרְאִי, לוֹ זָר, פְּלִטַּת הַתְּהוֹם

But on the first, profane weekday
My soul is thrown away...
As I come to the store the grocer senses
That I am from another planet, and bewildered
He observes my strange appearance, the refugee of the abyss.³³

□ A

³² Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 93–94.

³³ Schneurson Mishkovsky, *Shirey Zelda*, 30.