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Visions of Jewish Modernism

Barbara Mann

The relation between text and image is one of the abiding tensions within modernism. It has found expression in myriad forms, from individual works of art, such as Pablo Picasso's cubist collages, to the more general interplay between literature and the fine arts, as well as that between writers and painters, such as Gertrude Stein and Picasso, to cite one well-known example. Furthermore, modernist literature often mimicked contemporaneous artistic modes in an attempt to produce the concrete materiality of painting in language, something that is conventionally considered a temporal medium. Indeed, modernism's interplay between literature and the fine arts may be understood as simply a continuation of the rivalry between the "sister arts," wherein the expressive effects of poetry and painting "competed" for aesthetic supremacy.¹ G. E. Lessing's "Laöcoon: An Essay on the Limits of Poetry and Painting" (1766) remains the most influential and systematic division of literature and painting in temporal and spatial terms. Poetry for Lessing was the genre that most closely approximated painting's material ability to represent the world in all its sensual detail. By contrast, neoclassical formulations of *ut pictura poesis*, a phrase originating with Horace, compared poetry to painting by way of the concept of voice, referring to them as "speaking picture" and "mute poetry."² Whether or not these critical judgments adequately define the full gamut of painterly and literary production, historically they have had enormous interpretive agency.

Modernism's insistent and often complementary deployment of images and text seems, however, to be more than just the latest iteration of one of Western culture's essential divisions. The expressive efficacy of image as opposed to word, of body

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674 as opposed to spirit, is at the very core of modernism's extended testing of the limits of representation. In this article, I contend that Jewish writers and artists had a special relation to this central tension within modernism, given the history of European Jewish culture and its normative prohibition on visual representation. This aniconic sensibility, deriving from the Second Commandment, "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image," has been felt in various ways at different junctures in history across Jewish cultures.³ Historically, a resistance toward visual or "pagan" representation has often been a barometer of Jewish-gentile relations, a way for Jews to set themselves apart from the larger, surrounding non-Jewish populations.⁴ Broadly speaking, it has engendered a cultural tradition that is wholly bound up with the text, both in practical and in more esoteric senses. These traditional parameters had a profound influence on emergent forms of modern Jewish culture, be they secular literary genres, such as lyric poetry and novels, or the newly available realm of the fine arts. Indeed, since the *Haskalah* [Jewish enlightenment], attitudes toward the visual, both for and against, have underscored the general passage of traditional Jewish societies into secularism and modernity.

Recent studies such as Richard Cohen's *Jewish Icons*⁵ and the critical collection, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*,⁶ have sought to overturn, and even displace, the normative view regarding the role, or lack thereof, of aesthetics within modern Jewish society and thought; these works describe with impressive intellectual rigor both the intensity with which Jewish cultures have produced visual artifacts and the tendentiousness of claims to the contrary. Scholars of religion such as Leora Batnitzky and Kalman Bland have contextualized normative assumptions regarding Judaism's antipathy to art within the ideological and philosophical interrogations of nineteenth century German Jewish intellectuals.⁷ Bland sums up the field thus:

Aniconism was either a vice to be condemned or a virtue worthy of praise. Condemnation served the ideological needs of those who hoped to rid Europe of Judaism. Praise served the ideological needs of those who struggled to perpetuate assimilated Jewish life in the Diaspora. Regardless of their ideological motive, they agreed that Judaism was fundamentally aniconic.⁸

Though the assumption "that Judaism was fundamentally aniconic" has now been conclusively debunked, its motivating power for modern Jewish culture should not be dismissed. Within modern Hebrew writing, the perceived stricture on visual representation found much thematic and stylistic expression.⁹ Since its emergence in Eastern Europe in the early nineteenth century, Hebrew *belles lettres* had been intimately connected to the social, demographic and political sea-changes within traditional Jewish society, both reflecting and even shaping evolving notions of self, identity and nation. The presence and meaning of an aniconic sensibility (as described by Bland) thus figured in Jewish cultural production, and was part-and-parcel of its discourse about becoming modern. While traditional Jewish identity had been tied, for better or for worse, to the text, new notions of the self could be imagined by way of an engagement with the visual. In some cases, this took the form of a newly felt relation to the natural

landscape; in other cases, it called for a renewed attention to the particulars of the human form.¹⁰ In what I have elsewhere called “Jewish imagism,”¹¹ poets placed a premium on the poetic word as such and on stylistic practices that somehow produced the desired effects of the plastic arts. Jewish painters such as Moses Soyer and El Lissitzky displayed a particularly acute sensitivity to the role that language and text could play in the space of the canvas. Here, I focus on four paradigmatic individuals: two better-known figures—Marc Chagall (1887–1985) and Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938)—whose work places them at the center, if there is one, of international modernism, and Chaim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934) and David Fogel (1891–1944), two Hebrew writers whose orthographic insularity has often isolated them from consideration within broader studies of modernism. Each figure demonstrates a sensitivity to the tension between text and image, between word and picture. I begin with painting and a consideration of Chagall, whose polyphonic multiculturalism forms the backbone of his artistic world. The remainder of the article considers the work of poets, especially the challenge of secular literary production in the “holy tongue.” Bialik was the central figure of the Hebrew *Techiya* [Revival], a *fin-de-siècle* cultural and literary renaissance that sought to shape a newly reborn sense of Jewish self and nation. Heralded as “the Hebrew national poet” shortly after the publication of his first poem “*El Ha-tsipur*” [To the Bird] (1892), Bialik was a proto-modernist, whose linguistic inventiveness catapulted Hebrew poetic language into modernity; at the same time, and writing in a period of political and cultural revival, his work displayed an awareness of the limits of language, whether in personal communication or as a tool of nation-building. After examining Bialik’s philosophies of language, I turn to the autobiographical work of Mandelstam. One of the founders of Acmeism (roughly, the Russian equivalent of Anglo-American Imagism), Mandelstam’s work has only recently received focused attention within the rubric of Jewish culture.¹² My reading of portions of his memoir, *The Noise of Time* (1928), in relation to contemporary discourse on language and identity in Jewish culture will serve as a bridge to the lesser-known figure of David Fogel. The meaning of Fogel’s work will, I believe, be greatly enhanced by situating him squarely within international modernism. In Fogel’s volume *Before the Dark Gate* (1923), we find a resolution, of sorts, of Hebrew writing’s historical “problem” with the visual. Though this is by no means an exhaustive account of how the text-image divide has manifested itself in works by Jewish writers and artists,¹³ I hope the particular composition of this “quartet” will demonstrate what may be gleaned from viewing international modernism from one of its proverbial margins.¹⁴

I. Portrait of the Jewish Artist

We had been entirely a generation of children of the cheder, just Talmudic students, exhausting so many passing years solely with the analysis of texts. We seized upon pencils and paintbrushes and began to dissect Nature, but we were also dissecting ourselves. Who were we? What would be our place among the nations? What would our culture consist of? What should our art resemble? All this sketched itself in the *shtetlech* of Lithuania, White Russia and the Ukraine, and it continued on to Paris, and ended up in Moscow.

— El Lissitzky, 1923¹⁵

676 By standing before nature and “dissecting” themselves with paint and brush, modern Jewish painters were acutely aware of the shape and shadow of the bookcase behind them. The self-portraits they created often reflected a tension between word and image. While this distinction characterized modernism generally, within Jewish creative expression it emblemized two ostensibly contradictory ideas about the self: an older, more text-adept self and a new self that was more at ease with visual forms and experience. Before addressing this sense of self in the work of Marc Chagall, I would like to look at one exemplary painting by Moses Soyer that directly thematizes our concerns, *The Lover of Books* (1934) (Figure 1).

Soyer and his twin brother Raphael, also a painter, were born in Russia in 1899, and immigrated to the United States in 1912. Both studied art in New York, and during the 1930s were involved in leftist political activity. Moses Soyer was associated with Yiddish cultural and political circles and was a member of the art committee of the World Congress of Jewish Culture.¹⁶ His “lover of books” stands in front of an enormous set of shelves filled with undecipherable and nameless matched sets, piles of folio-sized volumes; the books of the bottom shelf are especially crumbling and indistinguishable. Clutching a book and what appears to be a picture frame, a bearded, sage-like figure in a formless coat, stares out of the painting, directly at the viewer, with a frank and slightly questioning gaze. Behind him on the wall and along the top shelf rest a collection of painted and sculpted figures, whose styles span the entirety of Western art, from the classical bust on the left, through what appears to be a photograph of a dancing woman behind his left shoulder. The robed figure hanging on the far right recalls a pious woman, perhaps a Pietà; the remaining two pictures—one with an elaborate frame, the other barely indistinguishable from the wall behind it—contain loose, abstract sketches of androgynous human forms. The painting’s most detailed figure—the old man—stands among these more-and-less finished portraits as another art object, something that is evident by the placement of his head and that portion of his torso rising above the shelf like a bust. Has the Jewish lover of books become, like the objects behind him, merely an object of historical interest, fit to be hung in a museum? He grasps both a large book and a picture frame. The book seems the size of an art folio, but it could just as well be a volume of the Talmud. There is, in this archetypal European Jew, more than a hint of Rembrandt’s depictions of Dutch Jews and biblical scenes.¹⁷ The insertion of this figure, staring out from among the icons of Western art, is a kind of provocation; the painting asks the very same questions the youthful Russian painter El Lissitzky posed in 1923: how does the Jew fit into an aesthetic tradition dominated by classical, pagan, and Christian motifs? More importantly, how will Jews represent themselves? How will depictions of Jews by Jewish artists differ from those of Jewish subjects by non-Jewish artists?¹⁸ The question of self-representation was particularly acute for secular Jewish art and artists. While historically Jews had served as subjects for European painters, “[b]y creating their own artwork, Jewish artists in Russia brought to an end the monopolization by the Other of the visual definition of the Jews. Jewish artists asserted their own gaze, removing Jews from their marginalized condition by reading them into the center of their cultural representation.”¹⁹ Soyer’s painting “asserts



Fig 1. Moses Soyer, *The Lover of Books* (1934), 42 x 23 ½ in., oil on canvas. Gift of Ida Soyer. Photo: John Parnell, The Jewish Museum, New York, NY, USA. Photo Credit: The Jewish Museum / Art Resource, NY. ©VAGA, NY. ►

the gaze of the Jew” by inserting this gaze into its very frame.²⁰ At the same time the painting insists that the stubborn remnants of Jewish textuality remain inscribed within this newfound visual prowess. Judaism’s abiding attachment to the text will continue to figure in the Jew’s self-representation, even if only as a faded and undistinguished backdrop. In the work of painters such as Marc Chagall, textuality proved an even more productive form of interference.

Chagall’s *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers* is an excellent example of a specifically Jewish textuality—Yiddish language and literature—troubling the ostensibly universal language of modernist art (Figure 2).²¹ Painted in Paris in 1912–13, this complex and provocative meditation on the painter’s cultural origins powerfully asserts the Jewish artist’s gaze. Like Chagall’s other work from this period, *Self-portrait with Seven Fingers* is “an attempt to understand himself and to go back to his roots, to show the world where he came from, of Jewish and Russian provincial life.”²² Chagall places himself in the figure of the painter at the center of his creative world, in a freewheeling, almost hysterically overdetermined fashion. The words Paris and Vitebsk, the latter being the painter’s birthplace, float near the top of the painting’s frame in Yiddish script. Paris is also graphically represented by a recognizable sketch from Chagall’s own work, “Paris outside My Window,” while Vitebsk is remembered as if in a dream for its small homes



▲
 Fig 2. Marc Chagall, *Self-portrait with Seven Fingers* (1912–13), 132 x 93 cm. Oil on canvas. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Photo credit: Banque d'Images, ADAGP / Art Resource, NY. ©ARS, NY.

and looming church steeple. The words are signs transmitting information, but they are also objects, whose shapes are significant in and of themselves; they become a part of the picture plane which is first and foremost, in Chagall's words, "a surface covered with representations of objects—beasts, birds, or humans—in a certain order in which anecdotal illustrational logic has no importance. The visual effectiveness of the painted composition comes first."²³

Textual interference in Chagall's work is also evident in the literalization of Yiddish idioms, a frequent practice which has been extensively described and debated by critics.²⁴ To do something *mit ale zibn finger* [with all seven fingers] means to do it wholeheartedly, with all of one's faculties and senses, with the rational apparatus of the mind as well as the emotions.²⁵ The artist's body, in an acrobatic feat, both blends in with and mirrors the floor and easel. His body parts resemble the dabs of paint on his palette, which have already assumed a geometrical form of their own accord. The painter seems to become a part of his own work (the painting on the easel is *To Russia with Love*), while his body is transformed into the collection of shapes he paints: his

face, cut into a square, mirrors the shape of the canvas before him. The self is presented as a cognitive palimpsest of these textual and visual forms, of the past and the present, an amalgam of memories of Vitebsk and the seductive whirl of Paris outside his window.

No discussion of word-image relations in Chagall's work would be complete without some mention of his most complex melding of textual and pictorial reference, the ambitious *Introduction to the Yiddish Theater* (1920), an auditorium-sized set of murals and paintings prepared for the debut of the Yiddish Theater in Moscow (Figure 3). The murals, which lay unattended for decades in storage in the former Soviet Union, have been the subject of a retrospective at the Guggenheim Museum in New York and several studies.²⁶ The mural allowed Chagall to work in the wide array of political and cultural discourses available to him: the international avant-garde, the embryonic Soviet culture, and the Jewish and Russian folk traditions. Traditional Jewish hermeneutics, epitomized by the dialogic openness of the Talmud in which competing views and typefaces co-exist on the same page, could also have served as a model.²⁷ The mural itself is a "chronotopic"²⁸ vision of the theater with liberal doses of Chagall's mythic biography, including the painter himself, delivered to the director Aleksei Granovski by his patron, the art critic Abram Efros. Their names appear above their heads, like traditional Russian icons; Chagall's and Granovski's names, though in Hebrew letters, are written from left to right, as with Cyrillic or Latin letters. Hiding throughout the mural are numerous uses of actual words, particularly proper names: Chagall's family's names are embroidered onto the leg of the flute player, and those of the three classic Yiddish prose stylists "patched onto" the back of a performer's thigh. Traditional *klezmer* musicians appear against an abstract, spherical background, while theater performers, one wearing Jewish prayer straps, practice in front of a set of partial figures.

The stock elements of the Rabelaisian "world upside down" are present throughout the mural, including grotesquely deformed body shapes and distorted perspectives. The carnivalesque merges with another kind of site, what Benjamin Harshav describes as the "proverbial, mythical 'space,'" of the *shtetl*, "a collective locus of a network of social and ideological relationships wrought in the phraseology of Yiddish folklore and literature... This collective imaginary space was supported by a peculiar Jewish geography."²⁹ In the mural, *shtetl* scenes, which are also references to Chagall's other paintings, bracket the theatrical world: against the left edge of the mural, a peasant plays a fiddle; the profiled positioning of his face and the cow's head recall the painter's famous *I and the Village* (1911–12). On the mural's right edge, a man milks an upside down cow, below which a distorted fiddler plays while another figure with clown-like pants urinates on a pig, defiling what is already profane.³⁰ The multiple transgressions of this cameo image exemplify Chagall's sense of ownership vis-à-vis European culture as a whole, as well as his fidelity to the innately porous, variegated worldview allowed by the example of Yiddish, a hybrid and heterogeneous language par excellence. Indeed, these playful explorations of text and image, an essential component of Chagall's cultural milieu in both Paris and Moscow, were engaged with considerable more anxiety by modern Hebrew poets, given the direct, orthographic link of their work to Judaism's normative aniconic sensibilities.



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 Fig. 3. Marc Chagall, *Study for the Introduction to the Yiddish Theater* (1919–20). Ink, watercolor, gouache, and crayon. Photo: Philippe Migeat. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Photo credit: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY. ©ARS, NY.

2. Before the Bookcase: Bialik and the Limits of Modern Hebrew Writing

Both Soyfer's *Lover of Books* and Chagall's *Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers* foreground portraits of the self—the aging lover of books and the grotesquely cubist young artist—against representations of the past which are themselves informed by textual references. The uneasy relation between this textually-bound Jew and the world of aesthetics is most famously dramatized in Hebrew poetry in Saul Tchernichovski's "*Le-nokhach pesel apolo*" [Before a Statue of Apollo] (1899):

I have come unto you — do you know me?
 Here I am, the Jew: we have an eternal quarrel!..³¹

A contemporary of Bialik's, and the other central figure of the *Techiya*, Tchernichovski was renowned for his treatment of classical themes, the integration of forms such as the sonnet into modern Hebrew, and his elaborate poetic meditations upon Jewish history and the place of the modern Jewish poet in a pantheistic world. "Before a Statue of Apollo" is Tchernichovski's most succinct poetic statement of Jewish culture's complex relation to the classical tradition. The poem claims, in part, that the speaker's devotion to Apollo is actually a "return" to long dormant, primal currents within Jewish culture. Though the poet was surely attuned to the irony of the poem's unusual address—in Hebrew to a Greek statue—the poem itself configures these worlds as firmly intertwined within the speaker's sense of self and cultural composition.

Tchernichovski's work is replete with this sense of Jewish culture as merely one step in the evolution of world culture and motivated by a panoramic view of history as the progress of mixed cultures and belief systems. Therefore, when the poet asks if the statue "knows" him, he is also actually asking if the statue "recognizes" him, that is, remembers him from a time when they were not of seemingly inimical worlds. For Tchernichovski, this "return" to Apollo is firmly linked to the natural landscape, and to the childhood for which the poet nostalgically longs.

The tension between word and text is commonly thematized in Jewish modernist writing through a description of bookshelves, or the bookcase, before which the poet stands and rhapsodizes upon his relationship to Jewish tradition. The most famous Hebrew example of what Walter Benjamin called, with some irony, “the mild boredom of order”³² imposed upon books, is undoubtedly Bialik’s “*Lifney Aron Ha-sfarim*” [Before the Bookcase] (1910). Bialik’s generic inventiveness and expansiveness led him to create an oeuvre that included epic, historical poems, lyric love poems, natural odes, and what became known as “*shirey za’am*” [poems of wrath], wherein the poet castigated everyone—Jews, gentiles and even God himself—for the disastrous and often brutal state of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. “Before the Bookcase” was composed shortly after Bialik completed *Sefer Ha-agada* [The book of agada] a comprehensive compilation of Hebrew parables, folklore and other midrashic texts. Apparently this immersion in classical Jewish texts only reinforced for Bialik just how far he had drifted from traditional Jewish life. The poem’s speaker resembles that of other poems that he composed, both thoroughly enmeshed in and alienated from the world of traditional learning. He recalls the “ancient scrolls” of his youth, asking: “Do you still know me? I’m John Doe!”

And now, after the passage of time,
and I am already wrinkled-of-forehead and wrinkled-of-soul,
behold the wheel of my life has returned me
and stood me once again before you, hidden ones of the bookcase,
offspring of Lvov, Slavita, Amsterdam and Frankfurt,
and again my hand leafs through your scrolls
and my eye gropes, weary, between the lines.³³

The speaker searches for the “traces of his soul” (*ikvot nafshi*) among these letters, which have become strange to him; this realization is described as a kind of mutual blindness:

Let me look, let me see—and I do not know you, old ones,
from within your letters,
open eyes will no longer gaze
into the depths of my soul,
sad eyes of ancestral ones,
and I no longer hear from there the whisper of their lips,
murmuring in a forgotten grave, untouched by human foot.
Like strands of black pearls, whose string was cut.
Your columns of text are mine; your pages have been widowed
and every single letter is orphaned unto itself—
has my eye dimmed and my ear become hard of hearing?

In the poem’s recognition scene, the speaker’s desire to be “known” by this formative element of his childhood world exposes the distance between his former self and the present, between the religious, provincial environment of the Jewish shtetl, and the speaker’s newly cosmopolitan self. The poem’s rhetorical gesture is actually a kind of

682 doomed apostrophe since bookcases cannot “recognize” people, much less talk back to them. The mute presence of the dusty scrolls enables the poet to elaborate upon the twisting of his own identity, the “traces of [his] soul.” Though the books in question as well as the poem itself are written in Hebrew, Yiddish was the language of instruction in the *cheder*, the setting for traditional Jewish learning in Eastern Europe. Thus lurking within the deep structure of Bialik’s scene is the Yiddish distinction between two kinds of books: the Germanic *bikher*, a more general usage indicating secular books, and the Hebraic *sforim*, meaning religious texts only. *Bikher* were associated with the domestic world of “women and uneducated men,” the officially designated audience of Yiddish books, while *sforim* emblemized the masculine world of canonical learning.³⁴ The terms also refer to two distinct but related semiotic realms within Eastern European Jewish life, itself composed of low and high cultures marked by linguistic difference.³⁵ Each language, and each set of texts, demanded a different kind of reading. Thus, the activity of *lernen* or *leynen torah* (to study or read Jewish law) constituted a particular kind of Jewish self, a male subject who was immersed and enmeshed in the text he studied. In contradistinction, the idea of *araynkukn in a bukh* (to browse or look at a secular book) implied another kind of self, one whose physical distance or separation from the text was indicated in the Yiddish verb *kukn* (to look). Bialik’s speaker addresses *sforim* in “Before the Bookcase,” but the poem effectively collapses the distinction between the two kinds of books; he looks at the *sforim* which no longer carry meaning for him, and they break apart, characterized only by their own pure, unintelligible materiality—“like strands of black pearls, whose string was cut.”

Both “Before the Bookcase” and “Before a Statue of Apollo” pin the identity of their speakers on the impossible recognition of silent objects, or rather, objects which “speak” only in metaphorical or mediated terms—that is, books through a reading of their text, the statue through its resemblance to the human form. It is clearly the poet who does the talking, turning the silence of the bookcase and statue to his advantage. The difference between the poems would seem to be as simple as that between a poet who turns to a bookcase and one who turns to a statue for his sense of self. Yet the speaker of “Before the Bookcase” has turned away from these books; the poem describes the impossibility of his return. And if his relationship to the rows of text is rendered again and again in visual terms—the “groping” or “dimmed” eye—Tchernichovski’s kneeling before the “god of wonder” also recalls the textual ties that bind, as the poem’s last line refers to a pantheistic kind of desert god: “fettered... with phylactery straps.”³⁶ On the one hand, these poems seem to offer diametrically opposed versions of a modern Jewish self, each resting on one side of the divide between textuality and visuality. On the other hand, this distinction is somewhat undone by the mutually imbricating relation of word and image in each poem.

The shattering of meaning symbolized by the poem’s images of a cut string and dispersed pearls is a central preoccupation of Bialik’s *ars poetical* essays. These essays treat contemporary literary and social trends and hold ongoing significance for their conceptions of language and identity. They are essential both to a complete understanding of Bialik’s work, and to the history of Hebrew poetry. “*Chevley Lashon*” [Language

pangs] (1905), explicitly addresses the “birth” of a new national language, the passage of Hebrew from a largely written tradition of letters to the domain of secular literary genres and vernacular speech. This process was perceived as essential to the revival and survival of the Jews as a national entity. Bialik’s essay pins the success of this project on the idea of language as either coinage to be passed between the poet and his audience, or property to be acquired, traded, accumulated, and re-circulated within the Jewish national audience. Beneath these empowering conceptions of language as capital, there is also a darker strain, particularly evident in the use of body imagery to illustrate the consequences of all this exchange: Language may become spoiled, contaminated or even “crippled” through this constant contact and usage within the public sphere.³⁷

While Bialik was a proto-modernist in verse who largely wrote in classical forms, his essays engage with the modernist topos of the limits of language and the symbiotic relation between form and content. For example, in “Language Pains” he states that “[e]ven if words are nothing but ‘vessels’ for the concepts inside them, this very ‘inner essence’ always receives the form and shape of the vessel, like water in a glass.”³⁸ These formulations often employ figurative language involving relations of surface and depth, or inner and outer states. “*Gilui va-kisui ba-lashon*” [Revelment and concealment in language] (1915) details the different functions of language’s inner and outer parts: the “shell” or “husk,” appropriate for public usage, is linked to abstraction, mathematics and logic, while the inner essence is “the domain of poetry, the language of the individual soul.”³⁹ This essay also distinguishes the poet from the prose writer, comparing them to two people trying to cross a river. The prose writer crosses when the ice is frozen solid and is, therefore, blithely unaware of the dangerous depths below. The poet, however, “crosses the river as it is melting apart, upon its floating, wavering blocks of ice. He cannot leave his foot on one block longer than an instant, longer than it takes to leap from one block to the next, and so on. Between the gaps the abyss looms, the foot slips, the danger is near.” The poet is characterized by a commitment to “the passing moment” and, therefore, must “flee from all that is fixed and still in language.”⁴⁰ In both images, the inner depths associated with the private, symbolic realm, are the poet’s preferred territory. Paradoxically, these same “depths” are also inextricably connected to the more communal strata of language, precisely those layers of meaning through which the poem achieves its effects. The modernist challenge is to produce a similar result but through the inverse process—that is, to make the surface itself highly meaningful.

One brief example from Bialik’s *oeuvre* will demonstrate how these two modes of representation might actually work in a poem.

“*Ha-kayitz gove’a*” [Summer is Dying] (1905):

The summer is dying in gold and amber
and in the royal purple
of park leaves falling and of twilight clouds
wallowing in their blood.

And the orchard empties. Only single strolling men
and single strolling women
may lift a yearning eye to the flight of the final
flock of storks.

And the heart is being orphaned. Soon a cloudy day
will knock on the window, silent:
“Checked your shoes? Patched your cloaks?
Go store the potatoes [*bulbes*].”⁴¹

The poem’s opening mood emerges from a purely sensual description of the movement of summer into fall. This effect is largely due to the treatment of color as essence, as a grammatical substantive. The gold, amber, and purple are initially represented as detached from the objects (the leaves) that they describe, much like looking at an impressionist canvas, in which one first sees blotches of color that only gradually cohere into figurative form. This detachment of color and the stanza’s awkward word order force the reader to build the verse from the color up into a comprehensible scene. Only the last line, with its hint of violence, suggests a conventional poetic reading of autumn, the paradoxical blaze of glory signifying death.

The first stanza is the poet’s “calling card” for the new Hebrew poetry, evidence that it can deploy the imagery and symbolism of European autumnal poetry. In the second stanza, the lone strollers are gathered up, eclipsed into a single giant eye yearning after many storks, who head for warmer climates while the strollers are stuck on their own in winter. The third stanza effectively abandons the romantic European model; its vernacular closing couplet evokes a deeper, communal strata: *bulbes* [potatoes in Yiddish], a nutritional mainstay for impoverished Jewish families in Eastern Europe, were featured in many Yiddish folk lyrics detailing life’s hardships. The poem encapsulates the difficulties faced by both Hebrew and Hebrew language poets in becoming modern. I want to suggest here that the domain of the visual, in this example evoked through the use of color as an object, offered one way of making this passage.

Finally, Bialik’s essays reveal a growing frustration with regard to the representational limits of language, and its tendency to stand between the self and the world:

For it is clear that language with all its associations does not introduce us at all to the inner area, the essence of things, but that, on the contrary, language itself stands as a barrier before them. On the other side of the barrier of language, behind its curtain, [stands] the spirit of man stripped of its husk of speech, only eternal chaos... The word is a tapestry of the void (*rikmat ha-tohu*). Just as physical bodies become sensible to the eye and definite in their borders in their blockage of the light, so the word acquires its existence precisely in that it clogs the small aperture against this same void and blocks its darkness, so that it won’t well up, pervading and blurring its boundaries.⁴²

In this passage, the word is no longer “hard currency” grounding some stable economy of the self, but tenuously fabricated, woven from the “void.” In fact, the Hebrew term here is from the description of chaos in the *Book of Genesis* as “unformed and void.”

This fabric of nothingness only becomes substantial when exposed to light, and to the scrutiny of the human eye. This same visualizing process gives form to the word, which then acts as the only material means of preventing an overflowing of the void and a dissolution of the self. The conundrum upon which the passage stumbles is this: Does language “enlighten” by introducing us to knowledge of the world, or does it blind us to it? The formulation perhaps errs in conceptualizing the two as separate entities to begin with, in believing the world to be something “out there” that can be comprehended apart from language. Bialik’s awareness of this impasse is also the source of the passage’s extreme syntactical difficulty—is the void inside or out?—and its vacillation between tropes of language or speech and vision. Language is, after all, that strange phenomenon which seems to begin inside the self, but has its greatest, material consequence externally, in relation to others—hence, the passage’s painfully palpable sense of the self as a surface, an aperture upon and through which language plays. The idea of surface as an expressive vehicle was at the heart of modernism’s visual revolution, and is also central to Fogel’s imagist project. Before turning to a discussion of Fogel’s poetry, however, I will consider the figure of Osip Mandelstam. How might we uncover the presence of the text-image divide in the work of a Jewish poet who not only wrote in Russian, but became a baptized Christian? Oddly enough, Bialik’s bookcase as well as his fear of language’s proximity to the chaotic void provide ample context.

3. Osip Mandelstam’s “Judaic Chaos”

The interpenetration of textual and visual registers, incipient in Bialik and Tchernichovski, became paramount for later Hebrew modernist writing devoted to poetic worship of the image. Contemporaneous manifestos of Anglo-American imagism and Russian acmeism⁴³ called for a replacement of subjective, mood-oriented dreaminess with a commitment to craft, precision and the symbolic value of “small, dry things.”⁴⁴ One account described the change in this way: the Acmeists “continued the Symbolists’ focus on artistic technique, but produced not so much melodious lines, a musical effect, as the pictorial, graphic clarity of visual images”⁴⁵ Ezra Pound draws the same distinction between music and sculpture in a 1914 manifesto:

There is a sort of poetry where music, sheer melody, seems as if it were just bursting into speech.

There is another sort of poetry where painting or sculpture seems as if it were “just coming over into speech.”

The first sort of poetry has long been called “lyric”....

The other sort of poetry is as old as the lyric and as honorable, but, until recently, no one has named it. Ibycus and Liu Ch’e presented the “Image.”⁴⁶

This postimpressionist revolt against symbolism generally looked to the plastic arts for *ars poetical* inspiration, a transition described with characteristic precision by Mandelstam himself as “the neo-classical shawl turned to stone.”⁴⁷ Thus, like his Anglo-American contemporaries, Mandelstam’s early volumes *Stone* (1913) and *Tristia*

686 (1922) drew extensively on materials from the visual and plastic arts. References to Jewish roots are oblique in these early writings; though the poet perceived his cultural heritage as “chaotic,” he resists identifying it specifically as Jewish in his early work. As Clare Cavanagh notes, he seems unaware of “the larger Jewish ‘tradition’ of self-creation in which he and his poetic project participate.”⁴⁸ Mandelstam’s poems that evoked Jewish themes often did so in opposition to a preferred “Hellenic” worldview, similar to the tension sketched in Tchernichovski’s address to Apollo. Mandelstam’s relation to Christianity is also complex: his conversion seems equally a matter of cultural self-fashioning, and the result of a practical desire to circumvent Jewish quotas at institutions of higher education. Jewishness in the early work thus operated either “in disguise” or as the device through which the poet will “enter the portals of Christian culture.”⁴⁹ However, the prose of the middle to late 1920s, collected under the title *The Noise of Time*, demonstrated “a concerted effort to reconcile his Jewish heritage with his quest for world culture, on the one hand, and his struggle to place both himself and his culture in relation to the new Soviet state, on the other.” It is as if, in Cavanagh’s moving terms, “his Jewish past followed him into the non-Jewish ‘home and family’ he attempted to construct for himself in Russian and European literature.”⁵⁰ I focus here on the poet’s rendering of this Jewish past within the context of contemporaneous discourse on visibility, Jewish identity, and Hebrew and Yiddish writing.

The essays of *The Noise of Time* repeatedly describe the poet’s early exposure to language specifically within the parameters of a Jewish setting, what he calls “the Judaic chaos,” “the unknown womb world whence I had issued, which I feared.... The chaos of Judaism showed through all the chinks of the stone-clad Petersburg apartment: in the threat of ruin, in the cap hanging in the room of the guest from the provinces, in the spiky script of the unread books of Genesis, thrown into the dust one shelf lower than Goethe and Schiller, in the shreds of the yellow ritual.”⁵¹ In the spirit of the acmeist commitment to “the word as such” and the simplicity of “A=A,”⁵² the Jewish world of Mandelstam’s childhood is rendered primarily through objects and fragments. Books are simply another kind of object, to be feared for their biblical “spiky script,” or forgotten under the dust. For Bialik the fact that tradition has ceased to signify—books no longer recognize him—precipitates an existential trauma, while for Mandelstam this same situation simply provides another opportunity to practice “the sharp edge of Acmeism.”⁵³ This idea is elegantly conveyed in Mandelstam’s vivid memory of the family bookcase. His description bears an uncanny similarity to that of Bialik’s poem and Soyfer’s painting with regard to the bookcase’s physical description as well as its formative importance for the poet’s emerging artistic self:

The bookcase of early childhood is a man’s companion for life. The arrangement of the shelves, the choice of books, the colors of the spines are for him the color, height, and arrangement of world literature itself ... Every book in the first bookcase is, willy-nilly, a classic, and not one of them can ever be expelled ... There was nothing haphazard in the way that strange little library had been deposited, like a geological bed, over several decades. The paternal and maternal elements in it were not mixed, but existed separately, and a cross section of the strata showed the spiritual efforts of the entire family, as well as

the inoculation of it with alien blood. I always remember the lower shelf as chaotic: the books were not standing upright, side by side but lay like ruins: reddish five-volume works with ragged covers, a Russian history of the Jews written in the clumsy, shy language of a Russian-speaking Talmudist. This was the Judaic chaos thrown in the dust ... This was the level to which my Hebrew primer, which I never mastered, quickly fell ... The Hebrew primer as illustrated with pictures which showed one and the same little boy, wearing a visored cap and with a melancholy adult face, in all sorts of situations—with a cat, a book, a pail, a watering can. I saw nothing of myself in that boy and with all my being revolted against the book and the subject ... Above these Jewish ruins there began the orderly arrangement of books; those were the Germans ... the old Leipzig and Tübingen editions, chubby little butterballs stamped in claret-colored bindings ... All this was my father fighting his way as an autodidact into the German world out of the Talmudic wilds ... Still higher were my mother's Russian books—Pushkin in Isakov's 1876 edition ... The color of Pushkin? Every color is accidental—what color could one choose for the purl of speech. Oh, that idiotic alphabet of colors by Rimbaud...!⁵⁴

Mandelstam's elaborate description underscores the variety of cultural alternatives available to the emergent Eastern European Jewish intelligentsia. The bookcase—a metonymy for the canon—is the site of a stratified intellectual hybridity, shot through with “alien blood.” Knowledge is understood in gendered terms, either maternal or paternal in origin, but never both. In contrast to Bialik's religious “scrolls,” the specifics of Mandelstam's “Judaic chaos” are examples of secular literature: a history book and a Hebrew schoolbook. His estrangement, however, from the “Jewish ruins” is absolute, and articulated in relation to his parents, themselves Central European immigrants who had adopted the Russian language and culture. The poet's embrace of his mother's culture is specifically related to language. As he describes her “sonorous Russian”: She was “the first of her whole family to achieve pure and clear Russian sounds”; “[h]er vocabulary was poor and restricted, the locutions were trite, but it was a language, it had roots and confidence.” His father, by contrast, “had absolutely no language; his speech was tongue-tie[d] and languagelessness.... A completely abstract, counterfeit language, the ornate and twisted speech of an autodidact, where normal words are intertwined with the ancient philosophical terms of Herder, Leibniz, and Spinoza, the capricious syntax of a Talmudist, the artificial, not always finished sentence: it was anything in the world, but not a language, neither Russian nor German.”⁵⁵

We can intuit Mandelstam's *ars poetical* leanings in the preference for a simple, rooted language, and in the free-floating importance of color throughout the description of the bookcase. The beginnings of Mandelstam's own penchant for German and Russian classics is also evident here, while the Acmeist insistence on language's visual, material qualities—the “color of speech,” the “alphabet of colors”—acquires a domestic setting, at once both Russian and Jewish. His description of this primal scene is informed both by an essential bond between Jewish culture and textuality and an uneasy sense of the inadequacy of this link in contemporary times. Mandelstam therefore renders the bookcase in visual, sensual terms—through color, texture, and even taste and scent, such that the spatial arrangement of books on shelves repeats the conventional opposition between Semitic chaos and Classical order. While Bialik remembers himself as a boy

688 in *cheder*, it is only the pictorial image of such a boy that most firmly engraves itself in Mandelstam's memory. The power of this visual image may also lie beneath the poet's visceral reaction to the Jewish State Theater of Moscow, whose performances he saw with Simon Mikhoels in Kiev in 1926. While wandering through the "oldest, most indomitable city in the Ukraine," Mandelstam noted that in "a basement synagogue" there were "a hundred venerable old men in striped *talesim* [prayer shawls] seated like schoolchildren behind narrow yellow desks. . . . If only Chagall were here!"⁵⁶

Mandelstam's memory of language as male and female rings thoroughly of the *bikher-sforim* division discussed above in relation to Bialik: "The speech of the father and the speech of the mother—does not our language feed throughout all its long life on the confluence of these two, do they not compose its character?"⁵⁷ Indeed, his claim that "[i]n my childhood I absolutely never heard Yiddish" should be treated with some skepticism.⁵⁸ Although his mother had mastered Russian, the "official" and therefore "masculine," vernacular, his father remained anomalous and utterly marginal, an example of someone who failed to find the ultimate canonical language, namely philosophy. Mandelstam's memory also displays an interesting penchant for an inversion of Jewish culture's "high" and "low" semiotic realms. In Mandelstam's bookcase, the father's *sforim* (Hebrew and German) occupy the bottom shelves while the mother's secular Russian *bikher* are placed above. His father's speech is paradoxically both denigrated (tongue-tied, counterfeit) and elevated (abstract, philosophical), while his mother's language is "poor" yet linked to the "literary Great Russian language."⁵⁹ This division precisely describes the advantages and disadvantages facing modernist Hebrew and Yiddish writers: One language offered the authoritative burden of an ancient tongue; the other was a supple vernacular with links to the wide flow of daily life. The articulation of these bonds between language, identity, and Jewishness within Mandelstam himself, perhaps the most adamantly "worldly" of modernist Jewish poets, demonstrates the tenacity of their claims upon the Jewish writer.

Thus far we have seen how for Jewish artists from Soyfer to Bialik and Mandelstam, the bookcase symbolized a bifurcated vision of the modernist self. Even more fundamentally, however, the tension between word and image, as evidenced in Bialik and Mandelstam, exemplified both modernism's and modern Judaism's struggle with representation. The work of Kafka, and perhaps also of Proust, each in its own way, probed this difficulty within modernism's more canonical languages. David Fogel, an aspiring Hebrew writer working on the edges of European centers of literary and artistic creation, was keenly attuned to the power of a more material poetics, a poetry of collage, the fragment, and colloquial language. In his work we can find a radical rebellion against Judaism's normative prohibitions on visibility, and a consequently fuller deployment of Hebrew as a modern literary vernacular.

4. David Fogel and the Color of Poetry

I have become outside. And there is no inside.

—Fogel, diary entry, 25th May 1919⁶⁰

For the past decade or so, the modernist Hebrew and Yiddish writer David Fogel (1891–1943) has drawn an increasing amount of critical and scholarly attention.⁶¹ His impressionist, erotically-charged prose fiction, despite its often idiosyncratic and unconventional (for its time) subject matter and voice, may nevertheless be read as part of the general evolution of modern Hebrew literature as a vehicle of secular self-expression. His slim poetic output, consisting of a single volume of Hebrew verse published in Vienna in 1923, and a somewhat larger body of posthumously published work,⁶² served as belated inspiration for a later generation of Israeli poets, who delighted in the poetry's spare minimalism and strange interior landscapes. A collection of prose published in 1990, including evocative selections from Fogel's early diaries, and the translation of a sprawling Yiddish novel based on his wartime experiences in France, only further deepened critical appreciation of this unique writer.⁶³ Fogel himself was murdered in Auschwitz, one of the last modern Hebrew writers on European soil.⁶⁴ Though scholarly treatments have diverged over the ideological and political meaning of his *oeuvre*,⁶⁵ there is now general agreement regarding its essential place in any account of modern Hebrew literature.

It has become a commonplace within Fogel criticism to remark upon the “colorful” quality of the poet's work, that is, the abundance of color references in his poems.⁶⁶ Indeed, the relation between color and language has fascinated modernist poets and critics alike, and it is at the core of Rainer Marie Rilke's passionate reaction to Cézanne work in 1907, recorded in his *Letters on Cézanne*. The collection remains one of modernism's quintessential statements on the complex relationship between poetry and painting. In Rilke's view, Cézanne's “painting is something that takes place among the colors, and how one has to leave them alone completely, so that they can settle the matter among themselves. Their intercourse: this is the whole of painting.”⁶⁷ For Cézanne, it was precisely the point that paint could be both color and object—the signifying medium itself, revealed in thick or patchy brushstrokes, as well as the fruit in all its unnerving, quivering realness on the canvas. In other words, paint retained its ability to represent the world, while “baring the device,” flaunting the mechanism through which representation achieves its results. The tension between the two, what made Cézanne's work so exemplary for Rilke, is most acutely felt in the attention to surface, where the plane of the canvas is forced to carry the full weight of a scene's depth. Though this may be a truism for painting generally, with Cézanne this tension is thematized and made the center of his artistic practice. Cézanne's work thus presented a huge challenge to other painters, and to writers as well. Perhaps more than any other Hebrew poet, Fogel met this challenge,⁶⁸ hence the often difficult abstraction of his poems. The concept of the Cézannian “*passage*” is a good metaphor for understanding how different layers of poetic space—formal, linguistic and thematic—interact in Fogel's work. *Passage* implies a manipulation of surface/depth relations, an elision of contour and boundary, and a privileging of the surface of the canvas. The practice of *passage* elevates color at the expense of form, making color the primary device through which painted objects coalesce before the viewing eye.⁶⁹ *Passage* insists on the primacy of the human eye as the constructive agent of the scene. The viewer of a Cézannian

690 landscape is called upon to perceive this landscape from the painter's idiosyncratic point of view, to participate in its composition, compiling its elements in comprehensible fashion. The canvas may be perceived as a continuous whole, but is in fact only more gradually absorbed and made sensible. This is the work of *passage*, in the creation of the canvas as well as in its apprehension.⁷⁰

Fogel's poems also demand from the reader a participatory visualization, wherein the word is treated as a material object or substance, and its referential qualities become secondary.⁷¹ Poetry which strips language of its referential qualities—in the case of Hebrew, its historical depth—may be understood as a linguistic equivalent of modernist art's radical renovation of surface/depth relations.⁷² We find a call for just such an iconoclastic treatment of Hebrew in Fogel's "Language and Style in Our Young Literature" (1931), a public lecture which was his only direct statement concerning the creation of a modern Hebrew literary idiom.⁷³ In Fogel's view, at the root of Hebrew literature's "complete anarchy" was an overly-deferential view of the Hebrew language, "that attraction to the holy tongue whose origins lie in the days of the *Haskalah*; this attraction unconsciously distorts our judgment when we come to read a modern Hebrew text: "[W]e still treat Hebrew as a holy thing... Our special attachment to the Assyrian script is the root of this trouble. We tend to judge leniently everything written in Hebrew, especially a work written in the ornate holy tongue that is full of lexical and expressive innovation."⁷⁴

Hebrew's "linguistic material" presented particular problems to the modern writer, whose desire to shape it according to his own individual style was thwarted by Hebrew's abundance of classical authority. Yet it is precisely these deeply referential qualities that made Hebrew so valued a tool in national identity construction. Fogel's break with this tradition is effected in passing, almost casually, through the term "Assyrian," rendering Hebrew strange, removed from a solely or specifically Jewish/religious content, as just another Semitic language. The passage also reveals Fogel's sensitivity to language's most overtly visual facet—its orthography. This material difference set Hebrew and Yiddish writing apart from European culture as a whole. Fogel's determination to "be European" in Hebrew seems almost a declaration: if Hebrew is truly the ultimate box for a modernist writer to find himself in, this is the kind of adventure that can be had in it. How does Fogel's "malnourished"⁷⁵ Hebrew find expression in the poems? And what kind of self emerges from Hebrew poetry when it is forcibly removed from "God's writing on the tablets" and rendered in plain "Assyrian script"?

Answers to these questions can be gleaned from Fogel's signature volume, *Before the Dark Gate* (1923), which explores the meeting of this "malnourished" Hebrew self with the landscape of *passage*. Contemporaneous critiques leveled against the book concerned the monotony of its lyrics. In Shlonsky's words: "Its outside: a black cover. And its inside: 'black closets,' 'black birds,' 'black ship'.... and night-night-night. Also father has a 'black coat' and 'his beard is black' etc."⁷⁶ Or Avigdor Hameiri's somewhat less scathing remembrance of his initial reaction to Fogel: Instead of telling a story about a landscape, he merely gives pictures of it.⁷⁷ Two astute readers, Bialik and Asher Barash, both characterized the distinctiveness of Fogel's poetic achievement in terms of

the plastic arts: Bialik is said to have claimed that his poems reminded him of abstract painting,⁷⁸ while Barash noted their resemblance to metallurgy: “There is something in them not found in Hebrew poetry until now: a thin, silvered style, almost filigree.”⁷⁹ All these reactions hint that the poems of *Before the Dark Gate* are meant to be looked at, even touched, as much as read. Both Bialik’s and Barash’s observations underline the material aspect of Fogel’s poetic language—that is, the propensity for formal, spatial relations implied in the reference to abstract painting, or the metaphorical comparison with filigree, a technique which preserves some of silver’s molten dynamism within the finished object.

The volume’s overall structure is less dependent on thematic concerns and more organically related to the idea of *passage*.⁸⁰ When reading the numbered poems in sequence, instead of focusing on their thematic situations, a fluidity of image seeps from poem to poem, creating not simply repetition, but a cumulative effect, akin to what Joseph Frank has called “spatial form.”⁸¹ Each poem also works internally in a similar fashion. The Fogelian stanza is typically compact and self-contained, often consisting of a single sentence, with little enjambment. Enjambment would force the eye to read along the poem more strongly. Instead, the individual strophes pile up against one another, their concise, vivid images interacting along the axis of the poem as it unfolds down the page. The importance of physical surface for Fogel’s poems is evident in the very infrastructure of their imagery, which is characteristically created through the meeting of spatial planes. Even intangible items become substantive by being laid upon or against something: “The desert afternoon’s gold weighs silently/ on expanses of sand” and “Weary skies/ sweat palely/ upon the silence.”⁸² Likewise, objects—a dog, the speaker, a sun—stand against a solid colored surface. This imagery also includes the interruption of a monolithic or monochromatic surface (silence or darkness) by another color or language. For example, Poem 41 describes the movement of “all the many moments of beauty/ that have passed like pearl drops/ our dark lives.”⁸³ Similarly, in Poem 66: “passing images cast/ flashes of all the colors/ into our darkness.”⁸⁴ These images place a premium on fragmentation as an aesthetic value, even an expressive necessity, in the face of “things falling apart.” The subjective process of perception is described through external figuration; the self becomes a surface which acquires the world’s markings. Indeed, the volume as a whole displays an ambivalence concerning interiority and external impressions, a confusion rendered through a proliferation of surface. Poetic *passage* is a means of managing this self which is caught in-between, neither wholly interior nor entirely dependent on external elements.⁸⁵ The poems of *Before the Dark Gate* often record tightly-staged scenes of interiors and exteriors such as a room overlooking a street, high windows glimpsed from below, or a view from the edge of a city.⁸⁶ The body is another surface whereupon the productive confusion of internal and external experience is made concrete.

All of this means that reading *Before the Dark Gate* entails intense visualization on the part of the reader, a process mimicking the physical relation implied by Cézannian *passage*. In sensing this relation, the gap between themselves and the poetry before them, Fogel’s readers have also felt its strangeness, its “Assyrian script.” The poems

692 resist reading, if by “reading” we mean a traditional, word-bound activity. Instead, they ask to be seen, to be comprehended through their visual cues and imagery. Reading poems 25 and 26 side-by-side provides an excellent illustration of how *passage* functions (see appendix for the full text of the two poems). The poems render complementary versions of the same situation: a woman longing for her lover. In Poem 25, the speaker is outdoors and mobile, in Poem 26, inside and stationary. Both scenes recall those portions of the biblical *Song of Songs* in which a female speaker longs for her beloved at night. *The Song of Songs* occupied a privileged position in the gallery of classical texts engaged by modern Hebrew poetry, not only for its semantic specificity and plentitude of terms relating to the human body and the natural world, but also for its densely textured allegory. The *Song* and its rich thematic and linguistic arsenal were an important part of any modern Hebrew poet’s tool-kit. However, in keeping with his general disdain for Hebrew’s classical cache, Fogel strips the biblical setting of this exemplary specificity, granting it generalized, surreal, almost gothic overtones. As Chana Kronfeld notes regarding another poem from this series, “[t]he only direct and unambiguous textual marker in the language of the poem that points to *The Song of Songs* is the word *dodi*.”⁸⁷

The poems should be “seen” as a series of clusters of colors and spatial relationships, which are reconfigured and re-emerge throughout the poems. Conventionally binary distinctions—surface/depth, light/dark/, night/day, wet/dry—are manipulated in such a way as to suggest the gradations of a palette rather than firmly oppositional categories. For example, Poem 25 opens with an ambiguous location—“night’s edge”—a phrase which spatializes night by giving it a physical quality. The description of the speaker and her hair sweeping across her nightshirt is picked up in Poem 26 as “the night of my hair/ like a dark cascade” and the evening’s “spread[ing] a black dress” as a kind of visual scramble of the colors and their motion in Poem 25. Imagery is formed through relations among solid objects and planes, the mixing of subject and object, woman and night. In perhaps the most delicately wrought cluster of images, Fogel’s poems confound both physics and natural biology, turning solids into streams of light or air and rendering light what is normally dark. In Poem 25, the speaker’s power is so great, her flesh blazes like a sun at night. In Poem 26, the sound of this blaze (LoHET) is echoed in the description of the speaker’s torso as a gleaming flame (LaHEvET). In another series of surface-dependent imagery, water falls like light onto dark backgrounds: In Poem 25, the spring’s waters murmur in the darkness, while in Poem 26, the speaker’s legs are described as clear or bright “streams” in the dark, yet the final image is of tears. Elements of these clusters of spatial relations and color intertwine and overlap, just as *passage* operates in a painting.

With this appreciation for Fogel’s densely wrought imagery, we can return to the meaning of color in his work, keeping in mind the idea of color as symbolic of painting’s desirable, non-referential qualities. Poem 26 is remarkable for having a color-related word in every stanza, except the single word “*bo’ah*” [come] in line 10. In a sense, the poem is constituted by these patches of color, given the numerical predominance of color vis-à-vis other semantic spheres.⁸⁸ These patches nevertheless appear in a deter-

mined sequence marked by verbs of progressive action: “come” (twice), “approach,” “deepens” (in its imperfect progressive form), and the hypothetical future of the line “I [will] no longer see.” Kronfeld has demonstrated how this use of shifting tense aspect, due largely to the “incompleteness within the Hebrew syntax of his time,” perfectly serves Fogel’s creation of an indeterminate state or mood, what she calls “a hesitation between impressionist, atmospheric shades of a discrete moment in space and time, and the expressionist, internalized reality of the speaker’s state of mind.”⁸⁹ The tension between the poem’s “hesitant” sequencing and its patches of color illustrates a general principle regarding the use of colors in *Before the Dark Gate*: Colors slow down the flow of things. The unusual forms of blue and black in Poem 25’s first stanza, jammed up against one another, provide a concise example of this principle: “my wild hair/ sweeps black the blue of my nightshirt.” Grammatically adjectives, they function syntactically as adverb and object. Their proximity on the line briefly reduces their syntactic function (the function determining flow or sequence). Color acts synchronically, mitigating against the diachronic sequence of the poem. Thus color, which played an important role in the passage from impressionism to expressionism in Fogel’s work⁹⁰ is simply the most readily recognized element of his poetry’s larger concern with surface/depth relations.

Of course, any act of reading does a certain amount of violence to the text; any interpretation is a kind of reduction. These limitations of the interpretive act correspond to those inhering in the imaginative act, in the impossibility of grasping the whole of experience. There is something slightly reverential in the acknowledgment of this impossibility, as if to truly grasp the world would be to miss the point or to achieve something that is not poetry. It is therefore relevant that both Poems 25 and 26 describe the unfulfilled desire to be reunited with a lover; this circuit of loss is inscribed again and again throughout *Before the Dark Gate*. For if Fogel’s poems are “about” anything, it is not the loss of the past (childhood, family, a former self) but the way the past refuses to stay put, that it is an invention of the present, however inadequate the imagination’s attempts to give it shape.

This interdependence of past and present is a key effect of poetic *passage*, and has ramifications beyond the personal past of the individual poetic speaker; indeed, Fogel’s work critiques the retrievability of a collective past. Poetic *passage* works against Jewish history’s meta-narrative of redemption which implies a forward, linear motion in time and space—out of “Exile,” as both historical period and geographic site, into the “Land of Israel.” In contradistinction, Fogelian *passage* binds various moments in the poems together in order to “thicken” time. In art historical terms, Cubism represented the furthest extreme of this reification of time and the “culmination” of *passage*. This view of history has been astutely characterized by Wendy Steiner: “Cubism... tells us to think of history in a new way, not as plotted narrative moving toward a resolution, but as a cubist painting whose elements maintain their heterogeneity—objects, people, things, signs; the banal, the dramatic; the contemporaneous, the anachronous—in an aestheticized structure of interrelations.”⁹¹ Of course this ahistoricized view is precisely why some critics lambasted modernism. Yet such a poetics does not necessarily imply

694 a negation of time's passage, simply a reevaluation of how time is experienced. Fogel's work approached a Bergsonian kind of perception that is closer to intuition than intellect: an "aesthetic mode of apprehension which involves a full physical and spiritual reaction to the things of the world, by which we place ourselves within the object of perception."⁹² For the poet this meant conceiving of the self in spatial terms, as a body in the world with a spacious interiority and the capacity to intuit the essence of the world's objects, a subjectivity at odds with the firm divide between human subject and natural landscape posited by enlightenment Hebrew poetry. This reconfiguring of the self was achieved through an intense engagement with visuality and aesthetics. Fogel's radical re-visioning of Hebrew poetic language builds upon and moves forward from the proto-modernist word-image tensions in Bialik and earlier poets, who could only grapple with visual registers. In embracing such a poetics, Fogel's work forced Hebrew writing to participate in that revolution of human consciousness which Virginia Woolf claimed occurred in or around December 1910.

APPENDIX OF POEMS 25–26, *Before the Dark Gate*

Poem 25

From night's edge here I stray
and my wild hair
sweeps black the blue of my nightshirt.

At the foot of a hill
a hidden eye/spring
whispers darkly to the night.

— Strange eye/spring,
has not my beloved drunk
from your waters? —

Like a dark stain
mute crouches a wood
upon the horizon.

Perhaps his weary soul
is resting
upon the carpets of her shadow?

Like a noonday sun
my flesh blazes
through the night.

And my sparks fall
like stars
into the darkness.

Poem 26

Upon the paleness of my bed
glows silent naked my torso
like a white flame.

The night of my hair
like a dark cascade descends,
onto the rug's design.

Come, my beloved!
My modest beauty blazes eternal
to your eyes' blue.

Come — — —

The redness of my walls will deepen.

A lone evening
approaches my couch
and spreads a black dress
upon me.

The two streams of my legs
the bright ones
I [will] no longer see.

I cry in the dark.

Notes

1. For differing accounts of the history of this relationship see Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 3–57, and Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems of the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). The inherently political nature of this divide is described in W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

2. Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, 5.

3. See, for example, H. Howarth, "Jewish Art and the Fear of Images," *Commentary* 9 (1950): 142–150 and Robert Gordis and Moshe Davidowitz, eds. *Art in Judaism: Studies in the Jewish Artistic Experience* (New York: National Council on Art in Jewish Life, 1975).

4. See Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

5. Richard Cohen, *Jewish Icons: Art and Society in Modern Europe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

6. Catherine M. Soussloff, ed. *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

7. See Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also the special issue of *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11:3 (September 2004), "Icon, Image and Text in Modern Jewish Culture."

8. Kalman Bland, "Anti-semitism and Aniconism: The Germaphone Requiem for Jewish Visual Art," in Soussoff, *Jewish Identity in Modern Art History*, 41–66, here 43.

9. See Avner Holtzman's *Aesthetics and National Revival: Hebrew Literature Against the Visual Arts* (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan/Haifa University Press, 1999). [Hebrew]

10. See Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Problem of the Body for the People of the Book," *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Syracuse: SUNY Press, 1992), 17–46.

11. See Barbara Mann, "Toward an Understanding of Jewish Imagism," *Religion & Literature* 30:3 (Autumn 1998): 23–46; "Framing the Native: Esther Raab's Visual Poetics," *Israel Studies* (Winter 1999): 234–257; "Picturing Anna Margolin: Yiddish Poetry and Idolatry," *Modern Language Quarterly* 63:4 (December 2002): 501–536; and "Jewish Imagism and 'the Mosaic Negative,'" *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 11: 3 (2004): 282–291.

12. My discussion of the relationship between Mandelstam's Jewishness and his poetry is indebted to Clare Cavanaugh's groundbreaking work on the poet, especially "The Poetics of Jewishness: Mandelstam, Dante and the 'Honorable Calling of Jew,'" *Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 35:3 (Fall 1991): 317–348 and *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

13. For a persuasive account of how these issues find expression in another cultural context, see Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena: Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

14. On the necessity of such a theoretical mapping, see Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

15. "The Mohilev Synagogue, Memories," *RIMON: A Hebrew Magazine of Arts and Letters*, 3 (Berlin: Rimom-Verlag, 1923), 9.

16. For details on the Soyer brothers and their place in American Jewish painting, see Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe, eds. *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in America 1900–1945* (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1991).

17. See especially his *Head of an Old Man*, *The Jewish Doctor Ephraim Bueno*, and *Moses Smashing the Tablets of the Law*. Significantly, according to Svetlana Alpers, "the only words Rembrandt inscribed in a painting are the Hebrew words transmitted by God on the tablets of the law held aloft in the 'Moses'... and the Hebrew characters written by the hand from heaven that appear in 'Belshazzar's Feast,'" *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 192.

18. See Judith Wechsler, "El Lizzitsky's 'Interchange Stations': The Letter and the Spirit," in *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb, eds. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 187–200. This question remained a concern even for painters whose work did not overtly engage with Jewish themes. For example, in James Breslin's view, the "suspicion of graven images" was one type of authority rejected by Mark Rothko as part of his artistic maturation, and therefore his work's "Jewishness" may be understood as a matter of negation, not identification. See his "The Trials of Mark Rothko," *Representations* 1 (Fall 1986): 1–41.

19. See Linda Nochlin's "Starting with the Self: Jewish Identity and its Representation," *The Jew in the Text*, 7–19.

20. Seth Wolitz, "Experiencing Visibility and Phantom Existence" in *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change: 1890–1990* (New York: Prestel-Verlag/Jewish Museum, 1995), 14.

21. My discussion of Chagall is indebted to Benjamin Harshav's work, which I cite throughout. For the ineluctable bond between word and image in Chagall, see especially Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times: A Documentary Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 77–85.

22. Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 71.

23. From an interview with the artist by James Johnson Sweeney, "Art Chronicle: An Interview with Marc Chagall," *The Partisan Review*, 11 (Winter 1944): 89.

24. See Benjamin Harshav, "The Role of Language in Modern Art: On Texts and Subtexts in Chagall's Paintings," *Modernism/Modernity* 1:2 (1994), 51–87, esp. 71–82.

25. According to the artist, he included the seven fingers "to make fantastic elements appear beside realistic ones." Quoted in Alexander Kamensky, *Chagall: The Russian Years 1907–1922* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 135. Originally cited in *Marc Chagall: Retrospective de l'oeuvre peinte* (Paris, 1984).

26. See "Chagall: Postmodernism and Fictional Worlds in Painting," *Marc Chagall and the Jewish Theater* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 15–63.

27. *Ibid.*, 21.

28. The felicitous connection between Chagall and Mikhail Bakhtin, the cultural theorist who lived in Vitebsk during the time that Chagall directed the Vitebsk Academy of Art, remains to be explored.

29. Benjamin Harshav, *The Meaning of Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 94.

30. For the elision of the pig and the Jew in European carnival symbolism see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986).

31. "Before a Statue of Apollo," in: Saul Tchernichovski, *Shirim* [Poems], vol 1 (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1966), 86. [Hebrew]. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Hebrew are the author's.

32. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting," *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 59.

33. Ch. N. Bialik, *Poems*, ed. Avner Holtzman (Tel Aviv: Davar, 2004), 375–376. [Hebrew]

34. For a critical review of the history of Yiddish literature's feminization, see Naomi Seidman, "A Marriage Made in Heaven?": *The Sexual Politics of Hebrew and Yiddish* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

35. See Itamar Even-Zohar's important work on polysystems in Eastern European Jewish culture in "Polysystem Studies," a special issue of *Poetics Today* 11:1 (Spring 1990). According to Even-Zohar, "[t]he structure of relations between Hebrew and Yiddish in Eastern Europe throughout the ages was that of *high* vs. *low* culture... transferring a text from one language to the other meant either canonizing it (in the case of transfer from Yiddish to Hebrew) or popularizing it (in the case of transfer from Hebrew to Yiddish)," "Polysystem Studies," 111.

36. Leather straps traditionally worn by men during prayer.

37. "Chevley Lashon," *Collected Writings* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1956), 185–186. [Hebrew]

38. *Ibid.*, 189.

39. "*Gilui ve-kisui ba-lashon*," *Collected Writings*, 191. Partial translation in Chaim Nahman Bialik, *Revelment and Concealment: Five Essays*, Afterward by Zali Gurevitch (Jerusalem: Ibid Editions, 2000), 11–26, here 13–14.

40. Bialik, "*Gilui ve-kisui*," 193; "Revelment and Concealment," 24–26.

41. Bialik, *Poems*, 330.

42. Bialik, "*Gilui ve-kisui*," 192; "Revelment and Concealment," 15–16.

43. See the excellent discussion of these parallel movements in Elaine Rusinko's "Russian Acmeism and Anglo-American Imagism," *Urbans Review* 1:2 (Spring 1978): 37–49.

44. The phrase is from T. E. Hulme's "Romanticism and Classicism" (1912), reprinted in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, David Lodge, ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 101.

45. Victor Zhirmunski, "Overcoming Symbolism" (1915). Cited in Roberta Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet* (New York: Picador, 1994), 45.

46. *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 82–83.

47. In his "Akhmatova" (1914), cited in Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova*, 64.

48. Cavanagh, *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition*, 107, 110.

49. *Ibid.*, 112, 114.

50. *Ibid.*, 106, 105.

51. *The Noise of Time*, Clarence Brown, ed. and trans. (New York: Penguin, 1993), 77.

52. "Morning of Acmeism," *The Complete Critical Prose*, ed. Jane Gray Harris (Dana Point, CA: Ardis, 1997), 40–43.

53. *Ibid.*, 41.

54. "The Bookcase," *The Noise of Time*, 78–79.

55. "The Judaic Chaos," *The Noise of Time*, 84–85.

56. "Kiev," *The Complete Critical Prose*, 156. See also the article "Mikhoels," 161–164.

57. "The Judaic Chaos," *The Noise of Time*, 84.
58. In this regard, see also Cavanaugh's suggestive comments on Mandelstam and Kafka, in *Osip Mandelstam and the Modernist Creation of Tradition*, 206–207.
59. "The Judaic Chaos," *The Noise of Time*, 84–85.
60. Fogel, *Stories, Diary*, 324.
61. See the special issue of *Prooftexts* 13:1 (1993), "David Fogel: The Emergence of Hebrew Modernism," and the comprehensive review of Fogel's critical reception by Dan Miron in "Conditional Love: The Critical Reception of David Fogel's Poetry" [Hebrew], in *Aderet le-Binyamin* [An overcoat for Benjamin], ed. Ziva Ben-Porat (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute of Poetics and Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuchad, 1999), 29–98.
62. See *Kol Hashirim* [Collected Poems, 1915–1941], 3rd edition, ed. Dan Pagis (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad), 1975 [1966], and *Le'ever ha-dmama* [Toward Stillness], ed. Aharon Komem (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz and Me-uchad), 1983. This article will refer to the most recent edition of Fogel's poetry: *Kol Hashirim* [Collected Poems], ed. Aharon Komem (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz and Me-uchad), 1998.
63. *Takhanot Kavot* [Stories, Diary], Menachem Perry, ed. (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad, 1990).
64. On Fogel's essential European-ness see Robert Alter, "Fogel and the Forging of a Hebrew Self," *Prooftexts* 13:1 (January 1993): 3–13.
65. See especially Michael Gluzman, "Deterritorialisation and the Politics of Simplicity: Rereading David Fogel," *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University, 2003), 68–99, and Miron's critique of what he calls "the Berkeley school" in Miron, "Conditional Love," 80ff.
66. Yael Schwartz, "Flashes of All the Colors" [Hebrew], *Siman Kri'ah* 1 (September 1972): 76–108, and Shimon Sandbank, "George Trakl, David Fogel — And Colors," *Two Pools in a Wood: Connections and Parallels between Hebrew and European Poetry* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad, 1976).
67. *Letters on Cézanne*, ed. Clara Rilke, trans. Joel Agee (New York: Fromm International, 1985 [1952]), 75. From a letter dated October 21, 1907.
68. Fogel mentions Rilke's prose as a model in his 1931 lecture, "Language and Style in Our Young Literature," but it is likely that the reference is to "The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge" (1910), a book composed under the influence of Rilke's experience of Cézanne (*Letters on Cézanne*, xxiv).
69. On the importance of color in *passage* and generally in Cézanne's work, see John Elderfield, "The Whole World: Color in Cézanne," *Arts Magazine* 52:8 (April 1978): 148–152.
70. Although the essay does not use the term *passage*, this process and its epistemological implications are eloquently detailed in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's "Cézanne's Doubt," *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964): 9–25.
71. We may here recall the useful frame of reader response criticism, according to which "the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" and the act of "reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character." Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process," in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader* (3rd edition), eds. Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (New York: Arnold Publishing, 1998), 76.
72. See Gluzman's discussion of Fogel and his reference to modernist painting's critique of the "figure in the field." In Gluzman, "Deterritorialization and the Politics of Simplicity," 94–95.
73. *Siman Kri'ah* 304 (1974): 388, translation from Yael Meroz and Eric Zakim, *Prooftexts* 13:1 (January 1993): 16. Hereafter cited by page number of the English translation.
74. Fogel, "Language and Style," 18–19.
75. *Takhanot Kavot* [Stories, Diary], Menachem Perry, ed. (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuchad, 1990), 295.
76. "Before the Dark Gate," *Hedim* 6 (1923): 66–67. Cited in Gluzman, "Deterritorialization and the Politics of Simplicity," 41.
77. Cited in Dan Pagis's "Introduction" to Fogel, *Collected Poems*, 33.
78. According to Avigdor Ha-meiri. *Ibid.*, 34.

79. *Ibid.*, 37.
80. Dan Pagis characterizes the book's overall structure in terms of discrete thematic units relating the poetic speaker's "life in the shadow of death" (67).
81. *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991 [1945]).
82. Fogel, *Collected Poems*, 48.
83. *Ibid.*, 56.
84. *Ibid.*, 82.
85. For a persuasive account of how this notion of subjectivity functions in Fogel's novel *Married Life*, see Eric Zakim, "Between Fragment and Authority in David Fogel's (Re)Presentation of Subjectivity." *Prooftexts* 13:1 (January 1993): 103–124.
86. Poems 7, 41 and 2.
87. Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 99. I am indebted to Kronfeld for her careful reading of my analysis of these poems.
88. See Sandbank, *Two Pools in a Wood*, 71.
89. Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*, 97–98. See also Gluzman's analysis of this syntactic device in "Deterritorialisation and the Politics of Simplicity," 88–92.
90. Sandbank, *Two Pools in a Wood*, 71.
91. Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric*, 191.
92. Elaine Rusinko, "Acmeism, Post-symbolism, and Henri Bergson," *Slavic Review* 41:3 (Fall 1982): 509.