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An Introduction to His Poetry

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This book was written in three different locations: in Tel-Aviv, in Tübingen, and in Washington. Each location "read" me and Shlonsky's poetry differently. Tel-Aviv, Shlonsky's city, emphasized urban modernism; Tübingen in southern Germany uncovered the theological dimension for me, the process of secularization and the complex relationships with Christianity; while Washington, D.C. colored Shlonsky's poetry as a poetry of immigrants.

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Contents

Introduction

Public awareness of the poet Abraham Shlonsky is connected with his pioneering and mischievous spirit, with *Uts li Guts li* (the Israeli Rumpelstiltsken) and with *Eugene Onegin*, with his rebellion against Bialik and with Tel-Aviv bohemia. Indeed, most studies dealing with his poetry have placed it almost exclusively within the constructive currents of Hebrew culture. They have emphasized the positive and pioneering aspect of his work: his translations into Hebrew, his renewal of the language, his contribution to theater, journalism, and even to the advertising industry. Other studies have analyzed his poetry by means of Russian formalism and the new criticism, and have barely referred to content-related subjects.

This book seeks to fill that void by putting particular emphasis on the range of subjects at the center of Shlonsky's poetry. The intention, first of all, is to represent and pronounce judgment upon the condition of the modern man as that of lack or absence, and second of all, to characterize Shlonsky's poetry as yearning to express negation and absence and not experiences of building or positivist fullness. In contrast to the image of Shlonsky's poetry as constructive and structured, an image that the poet himself reinforced in his many newspaper articles, his poetry decisively expresses what can be termed "a desire for absence" – a desire to experience negation in all its hues: urban alienation, solitude and madness, political exile, Sisyphean physical labor, a modern world embroiled in chaos, a life devoid of any general meaning, and specifically, a life devoid of religious meaning. Shlonsky's poetry stresses the Nietzschean transvaluation of values, which affirms fleeting and tragic existence for the individual while at the same time enabling him to be the creator of values and worlds through his rhetorical force. This poetry represents the losses associated with modernity by using varied themes including the death of god and secular existence (for example in the collections *Lekh Lekha* – Go forth and *Metom* – Perfection), coping with death (in *Stam* – Ordinarily), madness and loss of the ideal self (in *Avne'i Bohu* – Stones of void), idealization and compensatory narcissism (in *Avne'i Gvil* – Rough stones and in *Sefer Hasulamot* – The Book of ladders), and others. In a poetics maintaining that absence and negation are the absolute, Shlonsky makes use of innovative images and metaphors which join distant semantic fields, and uses a renewed language which entices the reader to favor the negative instead of rejecting it.

The book follows the various representations of absence and negation in Shlonsky's poetry in a chronological manner. The first chapter, which discusses the collections *Stam* and *B'ḥefazi* (In my haste), opens with the reception of his poetry by its early critics, who related to its negative themes and characterized the poet as "rootless." The rhetoric used by Shlonsky in order to support and

advance his poetry is presented in the rest of the chapter in his programmatic writings in which the poet presents himself as a prophet or as a pioneer of Hebrew culture, who desires to normalize and universalize that culture. In this manner, he defends himself in the face of accusations of being rootless and lack of ideological commitment. These opinions had a decisive influence upon the later acceptance of his poetry and cloaked its desire for absence.

The second chapter discusses the collection *Gilboa*. It undermines the accepted interpretation which sees it only as a positive expression of the pioneering undertaking and does not relate to portions of the poetry and imagery which reveal the pioneering act as a masochistic one in which agricultural work is also presented as Sisyphean and punishing, both to the individual and to the environment. We will also review Shlonsky's ambivalent attitude toward agricultural work expressed in his writings and letters. This ambivalence also explains his transition from expressionistic poetry, dedicated to the chaotic existence of modern times and liberation in Sisyphean agricultural work, to an urban, symbolist poetry.

The third chapter, which discusses the collection *Lekh Lekha*, elucidates the passage to an urban poetry as a clear expression of desire for absence. This transition signals a distancing from the pioneer's agricultural, positivist, moral-socialist world, and aspires to a metropolitan experience resting on artificiality, sophistication, alienation, and social injustice – in other words, resting on unambiguous negation according to the period's ideological, socialist-agricultural assumptions.

The collection *Metom*, which immediately follows the collection *Lekh Lekha*, is discussed in the fourth chapter. It expresses existence without God, secularism as a cosmic and tragic fact, which is also a complex one, with multiple, poetic meanings. This existence is even more spiritual than the traditionalist-religious existence which is depicted as materialistic. This attractive representation of secularism (represented as absence) creates a willingness or desire to experience the absence of traditional religiosity as a new spirituality.

The fifth chapter discusses the collection *Avne'i Bohu*. This collection expands the urban theme which already appeared in *Lekh Lekha*. This is one of Shlonsky's most influential collections and is almost completely devoted to the description of the modern Hebrew poet's pilgrimage to Paris. This pilgrimage is represented as a journey to the negative, and the central experiences described in it are those of the modern individual's spiritual confusion, the commercialism which makes all human values negotiable, solitude, alienation and ultimately, the dismantling of self and madness. However, this experience, which the poet seeks and even desires, is not represented in a realistic manner, but rather in a

polished and precise symbolist style, using prodigious metaphors and rich language, depicting it as paradoxically enticing.

Shlonsky continues to represent the urban experience in the collection *Shire'i Hamapolet v'Hapi'us* (Poems of collapse and reconciliation), which also focuses on European cities and which will be discussed in the sixth chapter. This time the emphasis is on Prague. In light of the tense political atmosphere of the late 1930s, the speaker did not experience the loss of the subjective self, but rather experienced a more objective fear of the rationalization of life and the technology of destruction. These fears receive, among other things, symbolic expression in the Golem of Prague, a symbol of human creativity – technology turning against its creators.

In the seventh chapter which deals with the collection *Avne'i Gvil*, the speaker, who presented himself as heroic, also wants to present the quotidian real self who experiences ambivalent sentiments toward aging, confusion about the aims and audience of his poetry, and boredom with his way of life. These poems, which appear in the collection along with poems which continue to present the speaker in a heroic manner, express a need to give a sometimes ironic account of this sense of the diminished self accompanying old age, although there is also a sense of reconciliation and satisfaction with how his life has developed.

The last chapter, *Sefer Hasulamot*, also simultaneously represents the speaker as a charismatic-mystical being, merging with all creation, alongside a speaker who subverts this idealization and presents himself as someone who "was kicked" "by an indifferent foot" of time, or as someone who has experienced his own recorded voice as something hateful. This subversion of the previous persona is a further expression of the desire for negation of the self. Nevertheless, the collection expresses Shlonsky's new love for the poet Tsila Shamir which compensates for the diminished self.

Thus, I interpret Shlonsky's poetry as yearning for negation, nothingness, and absence. The desire for absence changes its objects (universal chaos, urban alienation, secularism) but preserves a similar emotional stance. This stance requires being tested by those very extreme experiences in which the poetic self loses itself in cosmic-political chaos, difficult physical labor or urban solitude and alienation, as well as in situations where the empowered, modernist self-image experiences negation and criticism, seeing itself as illusory and exposing the randomness of its existence. Shlonsky's poetry reveals a basic poetic stance which undergoes development. He is referred to as a modernist prophet calling for an objective cultural revolution, as a speaker who moves from feelings of personal, mystical connectedness to the world to skeptical-materialistic considerations regarding that connectedness. In other words, the process presented in his poetry is a process of gradual withdrawal into oneself. He begins with desire

for absence, expressing a search for situations in which the self becomes lost in "extreme" experiences, such as agricultural work or urban solitude and madness, and concludes by seeking to cope with the speaker's realistic image which in old age has become weaker and has lost its relevance.

Chapter One
The Collections *Stam* (Ordinarily) and *B'ḥefazi* (In my Haste)

Rootlessness and authenticity as aesthetic criteria

The desire for absence is expressed by the active search for negation, emptiness and nothingness, driven by the negation of the world and feelings of fear and sorrow. The Reception of Shlonsky's poetry was decisively influenced by these sentiments which the poet communicated in his poems. Relating to his poetry as expressing a world vision bound by nothingness was particularly central to readers with unequivocal political commitments. This response was primarily expressed in the criticism unleashed upon the members of the *Yaḥdav* group, a modernist literary group which had Shlonsky as its leader and chief poet. *Yaḥdav* was active from 1926–1939, and included the poets Natan Alterman, Leah Goldberg, Avraham Ḥalfi, Alexander Penn and others, who rebelled against Bialik's poetic style. Dan Miron refers to the response of various political circles to "Yaḥdav:

> The *Hashomer HaTsa'ir* movement saw the group's members as rootless decadents, people of chaos with no national or class allegiance, and as followers of a fashion of despair and nihilism imported from the 'declining,' capitalist West. The attitude of the extreme right was, of course, even more negative. Inspired by Uri Zvi Greenberg and his expressionist poetics in its *Sikriki* political incarnation, who voted Shlonsky's and his followers' works as a heap of superficial, aesthetic adornments testifying to human emptiness and national alienation, stemming from the absence of cultural bonds to Hebrew 'racial' sources and slavish imitation of international artistic fashions.[1]

Critics and readers of Shlonsky's poetry complained about the lack of commitment to clear, political values, such as equality and national might, and saw his poetry as detached from the experience of the Land of Israel and its achievements. Shlonsky's father wrote to him about the responses to the poem "Honolulu," which criticized the detachment of the poem from the activity in the Land:

> Getsil, Gampil Todros and Dvorah Baron among them do not understand Honolulu [...] Honolulu what is that, and the Mandate? The Balfour Declaration, Weizmann's politics, Ussishkin, etc. The rebirth of the country, the rebirth of the spirit. [...] they looked in the

1 Dan Miron, *Noge'ah b'Davar: Masot al sifrut, tarbut v'ḥevra* [Concerning: essays on literature, culture and society] (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1991), 74–75.

> dictionary. Lookin geography, try to read between the lines and nothing will come of it. They didn't understand the poet's opinion, because his thoughts are not their thoughts. They have no interest in an account of the world.[2]

Avraham B. Yoffe summarizes the spirit of the criticism during that period in an article entitled "Almavet" ("Immortality"), which was printed in the Hebrew newspaper *Davar* on December 25, 1933. He maintains that the writers of the last two generations,

> Those who created the new literature did not move their hand from the hand of the reader. Thousands of strands have connected them. – They have bound up their lives to the lives of the people. They love the people and when you love, so then shine with the soul of Tevye the Milkman and Bontshe Shvayg forever. And these, our modern writers, 'have left the readers.' The divine spirit of the people no longer watches over their creations. They are 'beautiful-souls,' they dwell in the 'higher canopies,' torn from their source of nurture and they stand apart from things, above them, and for that their literature is a literature of imitation.[3]

Avraham Hagorni-Green, who wrote about the acceptance of Shlonsky's poetry, maintains that this disconnection is perceived as a regrettable fact and as a poetic phase which the poet eventually will overcome. "He will repent" and will write poems that reflect the sentiments of the pioneers and their experiences, and will infuse those who build the Land with strength.[4] Hagorni-Green summarizes the early criticism in the following:

> The expectation for the new and the fresh, from a desire to accept it, to forgive its 'strangeness' and 'illusions,' on the basis of understanding the reasons for their creation (following the World War and the Revolution, the experience of the Third Aliyah, his young age), although with the hope that this eruption will quickly be reined in and that his progressive development will be in the spirit of the tradition of Hebrew poetry's past and will express, in a direct manner, the actual life in the Land.[5]

However, Shlonsky did not "repent." He distanced himself from a simplistic, positive description of the pioneering experience in the Land of Israel. He fully

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2 Avraham Hagorni-Green, *Shlonsky b'avutot Bialik* [Shlonsky in the bonds of Bialik] (Tel Aviv: Or-Am, 1986), 58.

3 A. B. Yoffe, *Shlonsky: hameshorer u'zmano* [Shlonsky: the poet and his time] (Merḥavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1966), 96–97.

4 Avraham Hagorni-Green, "Milḥamto shel Avraham Shlonsky l'ma'an heḥadash ben shte'i milḥamot olam" [Avraham Shlonsky's war for the new between two world wars] (doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University, 1976), 36.

5 Ibid., 36

adapted himself to the fundamental principles of international modernism of the 1920s, which, despite its multiple factions was against realism and demanded direct expression of the artist's soul and world. This commitment to modernism in poetry distanced Shlonsky's poetry from poetry reflecting the experience of the simple pioneer, and made it difficult and incomprehensible to most readers.

This distance from a positive, realistic description of the experience together with the sense of the *fin-de-siècle* apocalyptic world, gave birth to a poetry which desired to express transcendental feelings of terror, solitude and absence. The expression of solitude and terror is designed for poetic situations in which the speaker stands isolated from society and therefore is freed from its pressures, such as the situation of a stranger in a city and an exile on a boat. These situations are characterized by an absence of relations toward things which affix identity by means of social institutions such as relationships, family, work, community, and nation. Conditions such as these, contrary to ordinary, habitual life, permit ambivalent contact with things such as terror, solitude, etc., situations which are unclear and negative by nature, and which can barely be controlled – death, for example, which forces an arbitrary end to life, and general world history, which necessitates exile and emigration.

The feared absence, forced upon the poet from the outside and beyond his control, is also an internal motivator of his poetry and therefore, he equally desires and fears it. A source of emotional ambivalence, this attraction-repulsion to and from nothingness and absence does not stem from Shlonsky's life in an obvious manner. These sentiments of anxiety about and attraction to absence, which in the poetry of others such as Uri Zvi Greenberg and David Vogel[6] stemmed "naturally" from their personal life styles and solitary tendencies, appeared in Shlonsky's poetry alongside a way of life seemingly contradictory to a preoccupation with emptiness and meaninglessness; indeed, Shlonsky's life was productive and connected to society in an exceptional manner, as well as being full of determination for strenuous labor.[7] His tremendous spiritual energy was saved for his poetry, in which he saw himself as first in the group leading the avant-garde,

6 Uri Zvi Greenberg chose silence and solitude in many periods of his life. See: Dan Miron, *Ḥadashot me'eyzor hakotev: iyunim b'shira ha'ivrit haḥadasha* [News from the pole: studies in new Hebrew poetry] (Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1993) 165–327. Reference to Uri Zvi Greenberg's silence can be found on page 201 and Vogel testifies to his desire for solitude in his diary in *K'tsot hayamim*, in phrases such as "Indeed I desire complete solitude. Indeed, I want to savor the torments until the end," from his book *Taḥanot Kabot* [Extinguished stations] (Tel Aviv: HaSifri'a Hahadasha, 1990), 319.

7 Shlonsky indicates in his diary his commitment to hard work. This commitment to work was intended to prevent feelings of emptiness. See: *Shlonsky, Pirke yoman* [Diary selections] (Tel Aviv: Arye Aharoni, 1981), 23.

the spearhead of modernist poets implementing a revolution in Hebrew poetry. Shlonsky surrounded himself with tasks related to building the new Hebrew culture, from editing literary supplements to translating plays for the theater. This concentration on Tel Aviv's cultural life and his ability to be an initiator in it probably distanced him from a "life in parentheses," a life of anxiety and longing for the emptiness, death and solitude which nourished his poetry. His biography depicts an ambitious, active individual, a master of language who realized his desire to be a famous poet at an amazingly young age. Indeed, due to sensitivity to his surroundings and his realistic options, he became the most influential Hebrew poet are cultural trend setter before the age of thirty.[8] In his contacts with others, Shlonsky chose to project the image of a virtuoso, nimble and witty in temperament. Shlonsky didn't employ the romantic rhetoric of the suffering poet, rejected by a society unable to appreciate his poetry, which was the rhetoric and life style of many poets. Optimistic about the cultural revolution being nurtured by Russian futurism, he believed that through education it was possible to bring the audience closer to difficult modernist poetry.[9] In his youth, he experienced feelings of self-doubt and anxiety as a young, unknown poet, but he forced himself to restrain these feelings.[10] In contrast to the persona of the artist as a self-wounding individual, Shlonsky operated directly to publicize himself, due to his conscious awareness of his talent.[11] His articles in "Torim" (Columns) and in

8 See the chapter "To choose biography" in Hagorni-Green's book, *Shlonsky*, 13–52. This chapter summarizes Shlonsky's biography as a successful man.

9 In his article "Ta'anot u'ma'anot" [Arguments and responses] Shlonsky objects to the artist's adapting himself to the reader's level and wants to convince him of the need for high art. See his book *Yalkut Eshel* [The complete works of Avraham Shlonsky] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1960), 28–32. Originally the article appeared under the name 'Piroshim' in *Torim*, Vol. 13, October 3, 1933, 1.

10 Shlonsky writes about this demand of himself not to cry in his poetry, but rather to build, in his diary entry, 22. Even Avraham Hagorni-Green testifies to Shlonsky's perception: "The poet is a man – thus he maintained – an architect. Among a thousand predators, he is forbidden to cry, to reveal a private secret," see Hagorni-Green, *Shlonsky*, 47. Also see the article "Atara l'yoshana?" [To crown the old]: "However I am not one of the criers, I don't believe that by turning the clock backwards it is possible to return the hour which has been plucked and fallen for eternity," in *Shlonsky, Yalkut Eshel*, 175.

11 Avraham Hagorni-Green describes Shlonsky's confidence, "...during the break, between the two parts of his lecture [Bistritsky's...] a young, seventeen-year old approaches him, in the unique P. Cohen high school uniform and introduces himself, with no superfluous etiquette, by the name of 'Avraham,' a writer of poetry in Hebrew. He takes a school notebook out of his bag, extends it towards him and persistently demands that he read it. Without another glance, the high school boy adds, turning to go, that he read Bistritsky's article about Bialik's silence in *Hashilo'aḥ*. 'Good, let him shut up a bit and let others show the force of their poetry.' Moving away a bit, without expecting a response, he turns his head around and adds: 'My last name is

"K'tuvim" (Writings) were written with confidence, in the joyous, polemic style of an individual sure of his strength.[12] In light of his projected persona, his virtuosic plays on language in the poems, his refusal to cloak himself in the image of the rejected, suffering poet, and his refusal to direct his life in that manner, he did not convince many critics of his poetry's themes of terror, emptiness, and solitude.

Among those who offered negative criticism of Shlonsky's poetry were poets and critics who were otherwise unalike as Dov Sadan, David Vogel, Gershon Shofman, Natan Zach, Meir Wieseltier, and Chana Kronfeld. A similarity of fundamental sentiments can be observed among the critics. The early critics, whose criticism was summarized, polished and formalistically and philosophically backed up by Natan Zach, accused Shlonsky's poetry of a lack of authenticity, use of artificial language, "empty bells and whistles," and of disengagement from a concrete humanity and landscape. As is known, Zach had the same criticism toward Alterman's poetry as well as that to Shlonsky's poetry which had a decisive influence upon Alterman. In the eyes of contemporary critics such as Chana Kronfeld and Michael Gluzman, Shlonsky's poetics is shared by him and many other poets in the male Hebrew canon. This is a maximalist poetics which uses a rich Hebrew lexicon, based in a biblical, non-oral language, and is largely available to men with a background of yeshiva study; it is a hegemonic poetics representing a collectivist, socialist Zionism. This poetics contrasted to the minimalist poetics of Rachel Blubstein, Yokheved Bat-Miriam, Esther Raab and David Vogel, a poetics which was held in esteem by these critics.[13] In his article "He'arot ḥadashot l'maḥloket yeshana – al sefer *Avnei Tohu* l'A. Shlonsky v'svivo" (New comments on an old controversy – about A. Shlonsky's *Stones of Void* and its environment), Dan Miron relates directly to Zach's criticism – the problem of a poetry which is not perceived as having its source in authentic experience. Shlonsky attempts to alter the common expectations of poetry readers, who ask that the

Shlonsky.' It would have been impossible not to be impressed by the 'young man's' confidence, and the poems in the notebook would indeed be sent to *Hashilo'aḥ*." (21) Hagorni-Green, *Shlonsky*, 25–26.

12 Even Shlonsky's 'serious' programmatic articles contain humor and many plays on language. For example, in "Meshorer b'malkhut hashishit", [Poet in the sixth monarchy],Shkonsky characterizes the relation between poetry and journalism as "a relationship of 'shufra' ('beauty') and 'erah' ('occurence,'), Parnassus and 'parnasah' ('livelihood'). Similarly, his impressionistic theoretical writings seem to sometimes include polemic. For example, in his amusing piece "Ha'antishemi'ut sheli" [My anti-Semitism], Shlonsky is not satisfied with merely a description of the Israeli obsessive invention of 'creative' names for its children, but rather engages in biting humor against it. "Meshorer b'malkhut hashishit," *Yalkut Eshel*, 11–19; "Ha'antishemi'ut sheli," ibid. 216–218.

13 Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 21–43.

poem convince them of the authenticity of its fundamental experience. According to Miron's argument, this expectation necessarily results in disappointment with Shlonsky's poetry and alienation from it. According to Miron, the reader's lack of persuasion as to the experience which allegedly stands behind the poem stems from the disconnect between seemingly threatening and negative content, the "experience" that the poem tries to convey, and the lines of the poem with their exact rhyme conveyed in a light and flowing manner. Poetry disengaged from experience, argues Miron, is simply poetry with basic assumptions differing from the romantic ones, and as a result, Shlonsky's poetry is a worthy example and a legitimate continuation of neo-classical poetry of wit. The misleading basic assumption of the romantic-experiential sort which lies at the foundation of the negative criticism of Shlonsky, from Dov Sadan to Meir Weiseltier, is given a concise, clear formulation by Miron. It is a mistake to expect a romantic poetics of experience in poetry which doesn't obey this poetics. According to Miron, the central assumption of the poetics of experience is that the poem must originate in a "causal organic" manner in a heightened life experience, and it must persuade us by various formal means – rhythm, tone, structure of the stanzas, etc. – that the poem has developed from an honest and authentic experiential source.

In other words, in contrast to the critical assumptions of a poetics of experience which tries to find in Shlonsky's poetry a reading experience which his poetry did not intend, Miron offers the reader a Shlonsky who is a sharp, neo-classical poet, whose poetry imitates a certain subject, primarily a contemplative one, by means of a language perceived as appropriate to the subject it imitates but to which it has no causal relationship. According to Miron's source, the critic F. R. Leavis, serious, witty poetry is a sub-category of a poetry of wit, which connects the tradition of seventeenth and eighteenth century poetry with the poetry of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. This poetry is "an attempt to combine and blend a light, playful expressive system with contemplative and even 'serious' emotive intentions in their matters, and sometimes even threatening in their writing."[14] According to this perspective, the aim of Shlonsky's poetry is "in its 'restraint,' its 'drying up' of the stormy, liquid, emotional experience, and placing it by means of playfulness and sophistication as abstraction and generalization."[15] Miron's defense deviates from the customary interpretation of poetry by significant use of the literary work's reconstructed historical context. Indeed, Shlonsky states in his diary that poetry needs to be constructive and to refrain from an outpouring of feeling; however, a distance exists between his self-demand for emotional restraint and the poetics of wit, which demands an ironic, detached distance from a "press-

14 Ibid., 66
15 Ibid.

ing" moral commitment regarding the world. As we shall see, Shlonsky adopts the poetics of wit only in selected parts of his poetry. The prohibition against an outpouring of emotion which appears in his diary is mainly a prohibition against presenting a speaker who "cries" and spills his guts, in favor of presenting a more objective point of view, expressive of the suffering in modern existence. Shlonsky's declared poetics, as expressed in his articles and manifesto "Ra'ananut," (Freshness) [16] also does not espouse witty poetics. Such a poetics was also not part of the audience's expectations that poetry be a heightened expression by the individual who displays his aspirations and the suffering of his existence.[17]

An interpretative alternative to the criticism of Shlonsky's poetry as inauthentic, in other words an interpretive alternative which could "save" Shlonsky's poetry from the romantic expectations of an experiential poetics, is the postmodernist interpretation. This interpretation emphasizes precisely the artist and the work's lack of autonomy and the manner in which the cultural discourse structures identity. According to this interpretation, the themes of emptiness and absence chosen by Shlonsky are not derived from an internal source of the soul, but rather, they express the modernist discourse of that period.[18] Indeed, Shlonsky expresses perfectly the assumptions of the modernist discourse. In his articles, poetry, and diaries he presents an unmistakable example of all the characteristics of the modernist artist as culture hero: elitist individualism, revolutionary spirit, possessing a pessimistic and internationalist world view, writer of manifestos, founder of a school and publisher of a literary publication.[19]

According to this interpretation, "the desire for absence" in Shlonsky's poetry is a further expression of the modernist discourse which to a great extent has established his identity.

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16 Avraham Shlonsky, "Ra'ananut," [Freshness], *Manifestim shel Modernism* [Manifestoes of modernism], ed. Benjamin Harshav (Jerusalem: Carmel, 2001), 202.

17 Shlonsky was aware of these expectations and even put them into the mouth of a pioneer in his article "Ta'anot u'ma'anot." The pioneer argues against Shlonsky: "Write simply, the way our forefathers wrote, and express our suffering and yearnings simply, like in ancient times." Where we are concerned, it is important to emphasize that despite the argument between the pioneer and Shlonsky about form, both of them agree about content: "Sivloteynu u'kisufeynu" [Our suffering and yearnings] Shlonsky, *Yalkut Eshel*, 30.

18 Rachel already hints at the possibility for this interpretation and she is prepared to forgive the poet for his "delusions because of his talent to live so very much as a member of his time." See Rachel, "El Ot Hazman" [To a sign of the time], *Dvar*, April 8, 1927.

19 See the works "Individualistn mesukan" (Dangerous individualist) and "Dor bli Donquishotim" (A generation without Don Quixotes) in which Shlonsky delineates with a vigorous precision the modern artist's program. Shlonsky, *Yalkut Eshel*, 36–40, 41–50.

Further on I will show how in spite of this, it is possible to find authentic experience throughout his abstract poetry, and the characteristics of Shlonsky's modernist vision will be examined.

The importance of pessimism – the contrast with Bialik

Shlonsky stresses the importance of adhering to a tragic and pessimistic vision. The tragic and pessimistic attitude is for him an important element to his sense of a rebellious and heretical world, unaccustomed to reality which leads to conflict with a reality which is stronger than the subject. He sees controversy as a central means to preserve spiritual tension,[20] despite spiritual weakness on his part owing to optimism and mutual agreement. A pessimistic consciousness is necessary to whoever perceives self-fulfillment as a struggle against the culture and society of his surroundings. An expression of a tragic and pessimistic preference can be seen in his eulogy of Bialik. In this eulogy, Shlonsky delineates Bialik's "sentiment of the world," but because he has built his self-image in contrast to Bialik's, this delineation reveals the proper sentiment regarding the world according to Shlonsky himself.

> Bialik hated, not only hated in his world view, but rather, this principle of world sentiment, all the assembled sufferings, the ascetic, wallowing in the murky valley, committing heresy against the fertile principle of life and the moral-tragic despair rotting the tree of life at its base, which both his hands held fast to. He was the healthy gall, as opposed to beautifully diseased bile, symbolized for us in both sides of the coin, in the persons of Gnessin on the one hand and Brenner on the other.[21]

It is no coincidence that Shlonsky emphasizes the "healthy gall" in contrast to "beautifully diseased bile," and in his rebellion against Bialik hints that he belongs to the pessimistic tradition of Gnessin and Brenner. This quote shows that tragic and moral despair are mainly an ideological choice perceiving such a world sentiment as sublime and lofty.

The reader of Shlonsky's articles and poetry frequently changes his feelings and position regarding the themes and experience conveyed. Often his poetry places contradictory demands which are difficult to reconcile. Many of his poems require a believing reader because the poems were indeed created following specific experiences (for example the poems in the cycles "L'abba-ema" [For father-mother] and "Shirei Hanakhar" [Poems of foreign lands], but in many

20 Shlonsky, "Me'inyan l'inyan" [From matter to matter], *Torim*, December 2, 1935.
21 Avraham Shlonsky, "Ḥaim Naḥman Bialik" *Torim*, Aleph (I), Vol. 45–46, July 13, 1934.

other instances the specific, experiential content of his poems forms an excuse for a display of self-serving linguistic virtuosity, in which it seems that Shlonsky could have used any experiential basis or utterance.[22] The problem sensed by the reader relating to the poetry's pessimistic themes is central to its evaluation and interpretation. Nonetheless, the prevailing attitude toward it is nearly stipulated in an absolute manner by the Zach-Alterman controversy, and therefore, based to a great extent on *Avne'i Bohu*, the book of poems which influenced Alterman. The emancipation of Shlonsky's poetry from Alterman's "bonds of criticism" may only be in a careful reading of his poetry and not by a reading which sees only the potential in the early poetry that was to be realized in *Avne'i Bohu*.

Modernist eclecticism and criticism of the "isms"

The collections *Stam*, *B'hefazi*, and *Dva'i* (Anguish) mark the beginning of Shlonsky's modernist poetry. The poems in these collections were published beginning in 1922 in different forums for Hebrew literature in Israel, such as *Hapoel Hatza'ir*, *Davar*, *Hedim*, and *K'tuvim*, and abroad in *Ha'olam*, published in Paris, and *Prat* which appeared in Vienna. These collections are to a large extent heterogeneous, as this period was the most experimental in Shlonsky's poetry. The characteristic themes of Shlonsky's poetry are expressed in a skillful array of different styles, from French symbolism through German expressionism and Russian cubo-futurism and imaginism. Shlonsky, who identified with modernism in general, did not identify with any of its specific currents,[23] and his poetry was eclectic. The reasons for his identification with general modernism originate in a declared poetics and the condition of modernist Hebrew poetry at that time. In his article "Ale'i teref" ("Predatory leaves"),[24] he outlines his lack of willingness to adopt a specific modernist current, "ism," in his twofold attitude toward Jewish tradition which he adopts and rejects simultaneously. On the one hand, this attitude is an integration of inspiration provided by the Old Testament, combining various genres, and on the other hand, it is a rejection of the *Shulḥan Arukh*. Shlonsky provides a good example of how the Old Testament serves all modernist styles:

22 Shlonsky's light or popular poetry exemplifies linguistic virtuosity that functions as a basis for any content. See Ḥagit Halperin, *Me'agvani'a v'ad simfoni'a: Hashira hakala shel Avraham Shlonsky v'parodiot al shirato* [From tomato to symphony: the light poetry of Avraham Shlonsky and parodies of it] (Tel Aviv: Katz Institute for Research in Hebrew Literature, 1997).
23 Avraham Shlonsky, "Ale'i Teref" [Leaves of prey], *Ktuvim*, Ed. 9, October 6, 1926.
24 Ibid, 2.

> Tell me now: which of the "isms" hasn't been turned into a song in our Jewish Bible? And which of its expressions hasn't come before the audience of the Lord? From 'mountains will skip like rams' and 'the rivers will clap their hands' (true imaginism!) and through every passage from the books of the prophets (total expressionism!) and 'A ruin! A ruin! A ruin!' Ezekiel's dadaist cry, upon being driven mad.[25]

The second aspect, in other words, is a rejection of the *Shulḥan Arukh*, and includes a rejection of all sets of rules, even rules that express themselves in the images of thou shalt and thou shalt not of modernist currents and manifestos.

As stated, the identification of many in Hebrew and Jewish literature with modernism as a whole, a type of "classical modernism," is a consequence of the specific circumstances of this literature, relating to its late and peripheral entry into modern literature and compensating for its marginality by eclecticism.[26] Similarly, the number of writers and readers of Hebrew literature was small and the majority, despite their participation in the modern Zionist project, experienced literature according to the norms of romantic poetry and the realistic novel of the nineteenth century. In such a literary atmosphere there may have been less room for internal squabbles between various modernist styles than in Russian and German literatures. These circumstances require an audience for modern poetry as a whole, before advancing one or another current.

Indirect evidence of this lack of readiness by literary circles for significant conflicts (concerning form) within the modernist camp of that period can be gleaned from the late date (the 1950s) of what can be described as the first modernist internal controversy between Zach and Alterman. It can be assumed that the historical circumstances of Hebrew literature had been justified by a generally supportive ideology of newness and freshness in the poetry, without committing to any particular form. Indeed, Shlonsky commits to the new in general, without sounding eclectic and non-committal, by calling for internal rebellion, what he terms "restrained fire."[27] That "restrained fire" is a symbol of "life," the internal being that gives everything value, and thereby essentially denies any attempt to define poetic expression by general means and certain rules.

As stated, because Shlonsky's early poetry undertakes combinations and experiments, it is difficult to characterize it by criteria taken from a particular

25 Ibid.

26 See the introduction in Benjamin Ḥarshav, *Introspectivism b'New York: kolel mivḥar shire'i A. Leyeles b'tirgum meyiddish* [Introspectivism in New York: including a selection of A. Leyeles poetry in Yiddish] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hame'uḥad, 1997). See also Amos Oz, "Contemporary Hebrew Literature", *Partisan Review*, 49, 1982.

27 Shlonsky, "Ale'i teref."