

Review

Nili Scharf Gold, *Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet*
Waltham, Brandeis University Press, 2008, 468pp

GROUNDBREAKING RESEARCH USUALLY REVOLVES AROUND INNOVATIVE analysis of extant materials or the exploitation of new materials that demand reevaluation of previously held assumptions. It is uncommon for one study to contain both of these elements, but Nili Gold's new book constitutes a rare example of this combination.

Intimate familiarity with Yehuda Amichai's 1963 novel *Not of this Time, Not of this Place*, which chronicles the return of its Israeli protagonist Joel to his German hometown, led Gold to conclude that German language, German culture, and Amichai's childhood years in Germany continued to play a strong role in his life long after his arrival in Israel. Yet, despite the strong influence of Romanticism and the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke, which both looked at one's childhood years as powerful material for the creation of poetry, Amichai's *Poems 1948-1962* seems to contain almost no mention of Germany, where Amichai spent the first twelve years of his life, or its language and culture. Clearly the cultural forces working to shape Israeli society in its formative and inaugural periods pushed Jewish immigrants in Palestine to adopt Sabra norms and abandon their Diaspora roots but how could a poet so attuned to the nuances of everyday experience completely repress important elements of his identity and banish them from his poetry?

Picking up on subtle nuances in his poetry, Gold noticed that aspects of Amichai's German past, although not readily apparent, were present in his first canonical collection. Amichai had developed a camouflaging technique to obscure them, and Gold's study shows how this technique and proper understanding of its function offer a whole new way of understanding his poetry. Rather than repressing his entire childhood, Amichai allowed certain elements, such as his intimate familiarity with Hebrew prayer, to remain clearly visible in his poetry, while disguising traumatic experiences of critical psychic import, such as his relationship with his childhood friend

Ruth Hannover, who perished in the Holocaust, and his immigration, that underpin his biography and help explain his poetry. Sometimes the camouflaging process led him to employ simple techniques, such as the conversion of references to Wuerzburg to references to Paris or Jerusalem and the replacement of European forests and rivers with olive trees and dried river beds, but frequently his poetic strategies proved much more complex.

Despite Amichai's reputation as an accessible poet employing simple language, large portions of *Poems 1948–1962* prove enigmatic. It is precisely for the most hermetic of these texts that awareness of camouflage proves most useful. A skilled reader cognizant of camouflage's role can decipher poems employed by Amichai to subtly express important facets of his identity. For example, Gold shows how "The Elegy on the Lost Child" voices the tension existing between the seemingly hidden child Ludwig Pfeuffer (Amichai's given name) and the poetic persona of the emerging national poet.

For one to recognize camouflage, however, one needs to have a sense of what the camouflaged objects actually look like. In the case of Amichai's poetry, one needs a fuller sense of who Yehuda Amichai actually was to understand how he camouflaged his identity in his poetry. As a result, Gold organizes her book to reveal the abandoned landmarks of Amichai's early life and to show how this past survives veiled throughout his corpus. In so doing she overturns long held assumptions about Amichai's poetry. While critics frequently link Amichai's emergence as a poet to his experiences in the War of Independence and his loose affiliation with the emerging poets of the avant-garde "Likrat" group in the early 1950s, Gold decisively proves that Amichai had already dedicated his life to poetry, developed his own *Arts poetica*, and started writing poetry in accordance with it prior to the war.

In working to develop her argument concerning the continued importance of Amichai's German past and the theory of camouflage, Gold could not rely exclusively on published materials, and she searched out previously unexplored materials that could shed light on his life and poetic development. Interviews with Jewish survivors of Wuerzburg's pre-war Jewish community and Amichai's oral testimony found in the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies aided Gold, but the Yehuda Amichai Papers housed at Yale University's Beinecke Library, and his letters to Ruth Z., as well as an early sonnet cycle in her possession, which will be housed at the First Israelis Archive of Ben-Gurion University's Heksherim Institute, provide vital support to her conclusions.

The first researcher to methodically explore the Amichai Papers, Gold was disappointed to find that the archive lacked materials prior to 1954. Nonetheless, the archive contains dated notebooks from 1954 to 1959, as

well as subsequent notebooks, filled with German writing that testifies to the centrality of this language and associated ideas in Amichai's biography and poetry from 1954 onwards. The notebooks contain short German poems, drafts of published Hebrew poems with key lines or stanzas written in German, German poems peppered with Hebrew terms, and numerous macaronic Hebrew-German verses. The notebooks give voice to part of Amichai's identity rarely seen in his writing, especially in the period prior to 1963 when use of the technique of camouflage was most intense, while also providing a skillful and knowledgeable reader with the opportunity to better understand how the technique of camouflage functioned and for what purposes.

A German-infused variant of the poem "And We Shall Not Get Excited" directly expresses the speaker's struggle with the sense of being robbed of his words and his language following his immigration to Palestine; its published Hebrew variant indirectly voices this struggle by stressing the need for dispassionate communication of experience across language as part of a process of cultural transmission. Not only do the German-infused manuscripts help illuminate Amichai's camouflaging process and the process of emotional cooling it involves, it also helps clarify obscure images present in many poems in *Poems 1948-1962*, such as "Elegy on an Abandoned Village", and allow for their more effective decipherment. While this poem draws on Amichai's experience of visiting an abandoned Arab village in 1948, as well as an evacuated Jewish settlement in the Negev in 1947, the abandonment of Jewish Wuerzburg by God and man during the Holocaust lies at its heart. Images of trains and snow that signal this layer prove enigmatic to those attempting to understand the poem in an exclusively Israeli context, but become resonant once their origins in Amichai's German childhood become clear.

Amichai's letters to Ruth Z. and the sonnet cycle "Binyamina, 1947", which he wrote in her honor, prove even more significant, because they help to clarify aspects of his poetic development from 1947 to 1954, while exposing a formative period in his life that has been largely unbeknownst to scholars. During his life, Amichai had pointed Ruth Z. out to Gold as the subject of a poem that chronicles a love that ends in betrayal.

Following his death, Gold was able to get Ruth Z. to speak about Amichai and her relationship with him. During their interviews, Gold learned that Ruth had been the first great love of Amichai's adult life and that he had planned to marry her. In fact she was the one who coined his new name. Their relationship, which became intimate in January 1947, gradually unraveled, however, following Ruth Z.'s departure in fall 1947 for

study in America, where she met her future husband. Her description of the couple's relationship and Amichai's prewar poetic aspirations and activity proved incredibly valuable, but Ruth Z. soon made "Binyamina, 1947" and a collection of approximately 100 aerograms that Amichai sent to her between August 31, 1947 and April 11, 1948 available to Gold. Not only do the letters chronicle Amichai's love for Ruth Z., his life as a school teacher in Haifa, his increasing involvement in combat activity, and his growing identification with the emerging nation, they contain important discussions of Amichai's poetic outlook, individual poems, a poem cycle, and poem fragments. Consequently "Binyamina, 1947" and the poems contained in these letters constitute Amichai's earliest extant poems and offer a new vantage point from which to gauge his poetic career.

Gold's comparison of the unpublished "Binyamina, 1947" with "We Loved Here" yields significant results. "We Loved Here", a 23-poem sonnet cycle that anchors Amichai's 1955 debut collection *Now and in Other Days*, is genetically linked to its much shorter predecessor. Despite the self-evident nature of this connection testified to by integration of materials from the former cycle into the latter, one would be hard pressed to identify the presence of Amichai's relationship with Ruth Z., which anchors "Binyamina, 1947", in "We Loved Here". Instead the technique of camouflage, which Gold points to as a coping mechanism, provides Amichai with a way of simultaneously voicing his feelings of pain and concealing them. Nonetheless, awareness of Amichai and Ruth Z.'s time together in Binyamina in 1947 chronicled in the former cycle helps one to identify the latter cycle's thematic core and pierce the hermetic seal that prevents its effective interpretation. Comparison of the two cycles yields other important information, such as the fact that Amichai had already begun to employ a low linguistic register, considered one of the identifiable characteristic of his verse, prior to the war.

Beyond assisting in explication of the technique of camouflage and interpretation of a hermetic work in Amichai's corpus, the appearance in the letters of large portions of the lyrical cycle "In the Public Garden", long dated to the late 1950s, voices Amichai's achievement of literary maturity and aesthetic innovativeness in his prewar poetry. While Gershon Shaked dates Amichai's mature style to a few years after the War of Independence, the nearly complete T. S. Eliot-inspired modernist epic "In the Public Garden", with its employment of associative connections and mood as unifying principles, together with "Binyamina, 1947", points to a much earlier date for Amichai's movement beyond juvenilia. Furthermore, the decision to delay the publication of "In the Public Garden" points to the

way in which Amichai blurred the facts of his poetic development and staged his emergence on the literary scene for maximum effect. Amichai led with more conservatively designed poems that he felt would resonate more effectively with the national mood and establish his literary reputation before publishing more innovative work once he had established himself. As a result, the letters help to show how Amichai consciously worked to become Israel's national poet.

As the letters show, the 1948 war played a critical role in solidifying Amichai's connection with his adopted homeland and it was during this period that he ceased being a German émigré. Aspects of his German past could remain in his poetry, but in the early state period he pledged himself to camouflaging them. Nonetheless, as Gold proves aspects of this German past made it into poetry perceived as authentically Israeli. One lingering aspect of this past was Amichai's unwillingness to fully embrace the emerging society's promotion of heroism on the battlefield as a *sine qua non* of masculinity. While critique of this norm would not have been tolerated from an outsider, Amichai's presumed Israeliness allowed him to challenge Israeli society through poems such as "I Want to Die in My Bed" that expressed such sentiment. In effect, the technique of camouflage helped Amichai transform Israeli society more effectively than if he had made a frontal assault on its extant norms.

Gold's study should merit the interest of more than just Amichai scholars. Her research provides a new approach to the literature of immigrant writers, both Israeli and non-Israeli, that has the potential for emulation. It also calls for the reevaluation of extant theories concerning the development of State Generation poetry. Meanwhile the book's biographical sections offer new information and sources for historians interested in issues of nationalism and national identification in the Yishuv and the early state period, as well as for those interested in the Holocaust's impact on Israeli society. This book will be required reading for scholars of Israel Studies for a long time to come.

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