

Hayyim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), probably the most prominent poet in modern Hebrew literature, would have been horrified to find himself included in this anthology. He belonged to the Jewish enlightenment tradition, a devoted Zionist who was often described as a “national poet.” Though he had a thorough traditional Jewish education, he lived as a secular, modern European intellectual. He did not express any particular interest in the kabbalah or any other aspect of Jewish esoteric tradition, though like every person of the same background he was familiar with its terminology and ideas. After settling in Tel Aviv he dedicated himself to a vast project of collection and publication of Jewish traditional literature, but he did not emphasize the esoteric-mystical works; he asked Gershom Scholem (in 1926) to deal with that. His lectures, essays, and letters do not indicate that he had any interest in mysticism, whether Jewish or Christian; it is possible that the term is not mentioned anywhere in his works.

It is my suggestion that Bialik’s lyrical poetry includes elements that exemplify the problem of “mysticism sacred and profane”; can a person be a mystic without being, first and foremost, a devotee of a particular religion? Bialik’s secular poetry seems to demonstrate that some of the main characteristics of mysticism, as described in the introduction, can be found in a context that is not a direct expression of a relationship between a mystic and his God. One of Bialik’s early poems, entitled *Zohar*¹ (“*Brilliance*”), serves as an example. This extensive poem, written in 1909, begins with the following lines:

In the midst of my childhood I have been engulfed by loneliness,
And craved all my life for silence and the hidden,
From the body of the world I craved for its light,
Something which I could not fathom murmured like wine inside
me.

I was looking for hiding-places. There I silently observed,
I was like a visionary looking into the eye of universe.
There my friends were revealed to me, I received their secrets,
And sealed their voices in my mute heart
My friends, how numerous they were: any flying bird,
Any tree and its shadow, every bush in the forest,
The face of the meek moon shining into a window,
The darkness of a cellar, the creaking of a gate . . .
The sweet and awesome mixture of light with darkness
In the depth of a well,
Where the echo of my voice and my image are found,
The chiming of a clock, the tooth of a saw grinding within
a log,
As if they are pronouncing the forbidden name of God . . .

It is striking how many of the terms and metaphors used by the poet are negative in nature: silence, mute, secret, hiding, sealing, etc. — serving as a testimony that his statement “something I could not fathom” is indeed something that he could not express in words. When positive terms are used, they are vague: “From the body of the world I craved to its light,” indicating that he does not wish to be where he is, and craves to be somewhere else, probably a more spiritual place, which cannot be defined or described. The “friends” — the sounds and lights, shadows and images — seem to be connected somehow with the “its light,” but nothing clearer can be gleaned from these phrases. If mystical language is one that denies itself, this is a good example of this phenomenon.

In the poem “Peeked and Died” (written in 1916) Bialik used a traditional Talmudic parable² and some terms taken from the ancient esoteric tradition in order to portray the poet struggling to express the truth behind language.³ It is written in the manner of a ballad, and the hero, the mystic=poet, sacrifices his life in his quest for the impossible:⁴

Peeked and Died

He entered the secret treasuries of the *pardes*, his torch in his
hand,
and the *pardes* had fifty gates
and there were obstacles in all its paths, deep depths
and mounting mountains,

and the brilliance of swords at the gates, and beyond the thresh-
olds
snakes were lying in ambush —
He passed in peace among them all, passing over the snakes
and sneaking below the sword.

He hastened to enter the innermost, his torch in front of him.
*Tarshishim*⁵ withdrew,
silently wondering: the brave one, will he endeavor to reach
the fiftieth gate?

He will endeavor! — He will come to the most hidden treasuries
where no trespasser has ever trodden.
He strove to reach borderless borders, the place where the oppo-
sites
become one in their source.

He strove on, and found the most straight path —
the crooked one,
and turned to it, and came at one time to a place —
the absence of time, the absence of place.

He arrived where light ends, with darkness, to the ends of the void,
which no eye has ever observed,
Yet the last gate, the fiftieth — Oh, hiding God,
is still so far away!

The torch is dying out, dying out, the roads intersperse each
other . . .
and the paths become more crooked —

and all of them are just corridors to corridors—where is the last
gate?
And where is the palace itself?

His soul is tired of striving, his eyesight is failing
and his spirit loses its uprightness;
when he could no more walk on two feet, erect—
he crawled on his belly.

When his mouth was licking the earth, a last prayer on his lips
burning incessantly:
“If I only could reach the fiftieth gate, just for a moment, to peek
beyond the screen.”

The prayer was answered; and before the dying torch
reached its end—
the fiftieth gate, the beauty of pure marble stones
appeared before him.

The hand was shaking, the eye stricken by the brilliance—should
he knock?
He restrained himself for another moment,
and suddenly asserted himself and dared, stood up from crawling,
and knocked.

Then the torch went out, the doors of the gate were opened—
and he peeked inside,
and his body fell down, beside the smoking coal
on the threshold of the belimah.

The terminology chosen by Bialik in this “mystical ballad” is taken, mainly, from four linguistic contexts. The first is biblical, especially images taken from the Genesis narrative of Paradise. The snake is present as a threat, and, later, the hero is crawling on his belly like the snake, after it was cursed and punished. The sword described in the beginning is, probably, the one protecting the Garden of Eden, and its edge of fire is clearly described.

The second linguistic stratum is the talmudic one, especially the narrative of the Four Sages who Entered the Pardes. Besides the pardes itself, the title is taken from that narrative—“peeked and died” is the talmudic description of the fate of one of the four sages—Ben Zoma in some versions, Ben Azai in others. Other rabbinic terms are those of *traklin* and *prozdor*—the preparation for the meeting with God and its achievement.

The number fifty itself is taken from rabbinic literature—the fifty gates of wisdom, which the medieval kabbalists interpreted as relating to the third *sefirah*, *binah*.

The third is the Hekhalot mystical literature descriptions of the ascension of the *yordey ha-merkavah* to the celestial realm and the throne of glory. The obstacles on their way are described in great detail, and price of failure is often cruel death.⁶

The fourth stratum is medieval philosophy and mysticism, from Maimonidean negative theology and classical kabbalah. The concept of the divine realm in which opposites become identical has been used by Bialik to indicate the realm in which semantic language loses its distinctive meanings and metalinguistic truth gleams at the end of the journey.

This same subject has been presented by Bialik in a most powerful and poetic essay, “Language Closing and Disclosing,” which is presented here, in Yael Lotan’s translation.⁷ This is an intuitive, impressionistic presentation of Bialik’s conception of language; it is not based on a study of any philosophical or linguistic monographs on the subject (though some traces of German nineteenth-century attitudes are discernible), but rather a forceful poetic-mystical assertion of the enormous power and inherent limitations of expressive language. The paradoxical nature of the relationship between language and truth, when linguistic expression is the only avenue by which truth can be glimpsed, while at the same time it hides and distorts it, is presented in this unique essay.

Language Closing and Disclosing

Men scatter words to the winds, deliberately or casually, masses of words in all their possible combinations, but only few know or consider

what those words were like in their days of glory. Some words came into the world only after a long and difficult travail lasting several generations; others flared up like lightning and with a flash lit the whole world; through some passed untold souls, one after the other, each leaving behind it a certain shade and flavour; still others have served as vehicles for highly complex mechanisms of profound thought and exalted feeling in marvellous permutations. Some words are like great mountain ranges—others like a yawning abyss. A single small word may have encompassed the whole essence, the surviving soul of an entire philosophical system, the summary of a complete world-view. A word may have overcome nations and countries, unthroned kings and shaken the foundations of heaven and earth. And then the day came and these words fell from their heights into the marketplace, and today men toy with them in idle talk, as if they were no more than beads.

Is that such a strange thing? One does not question the ways of nature. This is how it has always been—some words rise to power, others come down in the world. Essentially, there is not a lightweight word in the language that was not born in a moment of stupendous spiritual revelation, a grand triumph of the soul. Thus, when the first man was struck by the sound of thunder—“The voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice of the Lord is full of majesty”—and fell on his face, amazed and shaken with awe, a wild sound breaking from his lips—imitatively, as it were—a bestial roar, a growl-like “r . . . rrr . . . r,” a sound preserved in the word for thunder in many languages—did not that savage cry greatly relieve his thunder-struck soul? And did that cry, the echo of a profoundly-shaken being, reveal less of the force of creativity than the most telling phrase of the highest significance ever produced by a great visionary in a moment of spiritual elation? Did not that little syllable, the seed of a future word, contain within it the miraculous composition of *primeval* emotions, fiercely novel and wild—anxiety and fear, amazement, submission and admiration, the impulse of self-preservation and many others? And, if it did, was not the first man at that moment a great artist and visionary, intuitively creating a vocal expression—a very faithful one, at least for himself—for deep and complicated spiritual upheavals? And—as a certain wise man has said—how much profound philosophy and divine revelation was in the little word “I,” when uttered by the first man? And yet we see that these words, and many like them,

are absorbed in the language—and nothing happens. The soul is hardly touched by them. Their content has been consumed, their spiritual force has vanished—or been *stored away*—and only their shells, having become public property, remain in the language and are used automatically and carelessly, within the narrow boundaries of logic and social intercourse, as *outward* signals and abstract references for things felt and seen. We are now at a point where human language is divided in two, one part growing at the expense of the other—the inner language, that of the singular soul, whose principal aspect, as in music, is the “how”—in the sphere of poetry; and the external language of abstractions and generalizations, whose principal aspect, as in mathematics, is the “what”—in the sphere of logic. And, who knows?—perhaps it is better for man to inherit the empty shell of a word, so that he may fill it anew, or add to it of his own substance and illuminate it with his own light. Man seeks to have his own portion in this world, and were the spoken word to retain forever its original substance and luminescence, were it accompanied eternally by the self-same retinue of feelings and ideas which became associated with it in its days of glory, perhaps no “talking animal” would be able to disclose his own selfhood and spiritual light. For, after all, an empty vessel may be filled, but a full one may not—and if the empty word can enslave, how much more the full.

What is strange is the confidence and self-assurance with which men speak, as if they were conveying their expressed ideas and feelings across still waters over an iron bridge—little thinking how frail is that bridge of words, how deep and dark the abyss that gapes below, and how miraculous every step safely passed.

But it is plain that language, for all its intricacies, does not introduce us into the inner being of things but rather stands between us and them. Beyond the language, behind its screen, man’s soul, bared of words, wonders without end. Mutely, an eternal “what” hanging upon the lips. And even the “what” is scarcely appropriate, for it carries the suggestion of hope for an answer. What, then, is there? “Surcease—a desistance from speech.” And if, nevertheless, man made speech and thereby acquired confidence, it is only because of the terror of remaining even momentarily alone with that dark Chaos, with that “surcease,” face-to-face, unmediated. “For there shall no man see me and live,” says Chaos, and every word, every utterance, covers a fraction of the

“surcease,” becomes a shell concealing a dark drop of the everlasting impasse. *There is not a single word that can cancel a single question.* What then can it do? It can cover it up. It matters not what word, you may exchange it for another, so long as it suffices to cover and mediate. Those twin sisters, those parallel poles—wordless music and symbolic mathematics—prove that words are not of the essence, but a mere membrane over Chaos. But as objects become visible and their outlines are defined when they block the light, so a word receives its substance in the process of sealing a small crack through which the darkness of Chaos might otherwise seep. When a man sits alone and trembling in the midnight darkness, he talks to himself, says his prayers or whistles. *It is a sure remedy to divert the mind and dispel fears.* And this is the power of the spoken word, or of a whole system of words: not its explicit meaning, if such exist at all, but its capacity to distract the mind. Shutting one’s eyes is, after all, the easiest and most convenient, if imaginary, escape from danger; and where opening the eyes is itself the danger, what better escape can there be?—“Moses did well to hide his face.” Perhaps the earliest speech was not between one man and another, not a social tool, a means to an end, but the solitary expression of a man alone, an inner need, an end in itself—“My spirit wondereth within me, and I commune with mine own heart” . . . The first man did not rest till he heard himself speak. But that same speech, which in the beginning had raised his consciousness from the inchoate depths, now came to stand between him and “that which lies beyond,” as if to say—From here on, Man, look only at what lies before thee. Never look back, never seek to glimpse the mystery; but even shouldst thou glimpse it, it will avail thee naught, for no man may gaze upon Chaos face-to-face and live. A dream once forgotten may be recalled no more. And thy desire shall be to Chaos and speech shall rule over thee.

And so, in fact, mind and speech only rule over what lies before us, and are narrowly circumscribed by time and place. But man walks in their shadow, and the closer he moves to the imaginary light before him, the greater grows the shadow behind, and so the enveloping darkness is not diminished. It may be possible to resolve everything which lies before us—resolve it poorly or well, no matter, so long as the mind of man is never for an instant left without a close covering of words, as tightly woven as the scales of a coat of mail. The illumination of mind

and speech—the ember and the flame—is unquenchable. But what is the area bathed in that illusory light, compared with the limitless ocean of eternal darkness which still stretches, and will forever stretch, outside? And yet it is precisely the dreadful infinite darkness which always attracts the secret heart of man and arouses hidden longings to glimpse it, if only for an instant. All fear it, all are drawn to it. With our tongues we build superstructures of words and systems to hide it from sight—and at once the fingernails begin to scabble and seek an opening, a tiny slit, through which to peer, if but for a second, at “that which lies beyond.” Alas, man’s labor is in vain! As soon as a crack appears, another barrier rises up, in the form of a new word or a new system, to screen the sight from our eyes.

And so it goes on forever—a word comes and a word goes, a system rises and a system falls, and the eternal impasse remains unaltered, undiminished. The issuance of promissory notes, or the recording of the debt, none of these constitutes payment; at best they serve temporarily to relieve the mind of its burden. And the same holds true of categorical speech, which is to say, the naming of names and the fixing of orders and qualifications for things observed and their combinations. No mere speech can give or imply an answer to the substantive question. Even the most explicit answer is only a rephrasing of the question; the question-mark is converted into a full-stop, which is a way of closing instead of disclosing. If we were to strip bare the final, innermost core of all words and systems, we would in the end, after the ultimate extraction of meaning, be left with the all-embracing, terrible “what,” behind which looms an even more horrifying X, the “surcease.” But man will always crumble the debt into small fragments, hoping vainly to ease the payment in that way. And when his hope is frustrated, he trades words and systems for others, which is to say, he issues new notes for old, putting off the time of reckoning, and, in the end, the debt is never paid.

When a word or a system falls from glory and makes room for another, it is not because of a diminution of its power to reveal, illuminate or cancel the impasse—wholly or in part—but rather the reverse: worn thin by constant use and handling, it no longer provides an adequate covering or serves to divert the mind. Glancing through the opening, man to his horror discovers dread Chaos looming beyond; quickly

he stops up the crack with a new word, that is to say, he applies the old familiar cure, and is rescued from terror. And no wonder—the cure works for those who believe in it, just as belief itself is a diversion of the mind. An analogy may be taken from the protagonists themselves. So long as he is alive, striving, moving and acting, a man fills a space and everything appears clear; “all is well with me.” The flow of life and all its contents are but a continued effort, a ceaseless endeavour to divert the mind. Every moment spent in the pursuit of one thing is also a moment spent in fleeing another—and that is all the profit thereof. The profit of pursuit is the escape. At any moment, the pursuer finds present satisfaction not in what he has gained, but in what he has succeeded in escaping, and it is that which gives him temporary respite and security. “For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope.” But then a man dies, and the space that he had filled is left void. Nothing diverts the mind—the screen is gone. The unknown rises before us in all its frightening dimension, and for a moment we sit on the ground before it, in darkness, mournful and still as stone. But only for a moment, for the force of life rushes in to seal the gap and provide us with a new remedy calculated to distract the mind and dispel the fear, and before the grave is quite covered, the void has been filled with a word. It may be a word of eulogy or of condolence, of philosophy or of belief in the after-life, and the like. The most dangerous moment—in speech as in life—is, therefore, the one between covering and covering, when Chaos glimmers. But such moments are rare in the routine of language as in the routine of life, and men generally skip over them, sensing nothing. The Lord preserveth the simple.

From all the foregoing comes the vast distinction between the language of speakers of prose and the language of speakers of poetry. The former, masters of the direct meaning, rely upon the common factor shared by words and phenomena, upon that which is firm and lasting in language, upon the accepted form—therefore they can make their verbal way in safety. Like one who crosses a frozen river by walking on its solid ice, they are free and able to ignore the swirling deep underneath their feet. Whereas the latter, masters of the hidden and secret meaning, are all their lives obsessed by the singularity of things, by that unique something, by that one point which binds into a coherent unit all phenomena and the language-forms that denote them, by the ephemeral

moment which can never return, by the particular soul and immanent nature of things as grasped in a certain moment by the mind of the observer; therefore they must always flee from whatever is fixed and inanimate in the language, thus conflicting with their purpose, towards its living and mobile elements. Moreover, they are compelled at all times to introduce into it—by means of the keys in their possession—ceaseless movement, novel combinations and juxtapositions. The words vibrate under their hands, dimming and blazing, sinking and kindling, like the gems upon the *ephed*, emptying and filling, discarding one soul and taking on another. Thus the language is revitalized and transformed; a minute change can put a new gleam on an old word. The secular becomes sacred and the sacred profane. Words which seemed immutable are momentarily removed from their settings and exchanged. And meanwhile, betwixt and between, the chasm glimmers. And that is the secret of the tremendous influence of the language of poetry. It tempts the sense of responsibility, the sweet terror of the test, so like the man who crosses the river in thaw, when the ice floes glide and roll. He dare not rest his foot on a floe for more than an instant, only just long enough to leap onto the next one and the next. And in between them twinkles the chasm, the foot slips, danger is near . . .

But, nevertheless, some cross safely from one bank to the other—for the Lord preserveth not only the simple.

Thus far about the language of words. But there are other, wordless languages—of music, weeping and laughter. And these too, belong to the “talking animal.” They begin where words end, and their proper function is not to close but to open. They well up from the abyss, they are its tide. Therefore they overflow at times and sweep us away on the crest of their waves and none can withstand them; and sometimes they drive a man out of his mind or out of this world. But a spirit’s creation lacking a single echo of those three, is not alive and should never have been born.

[Translated by Yael Lotan]