

The Manifestations of Cultural Memory in the Poetry of Yehuda Amichai

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Abstract

Yehuda Amichai has been widely extolled and universally accommodated for the simplicity and national integrity that is subtly knitted in his poetry. His writings serve as the point of departure and as a model and metaphor for reflection on the significance of literature in the cultural life of the Jewish society besides the construction of individual and national identity. The manifestations of cultural memory in Amichai's poetry reveal new dimensions of the parameters of the catastrophe following the perpetual atrocities of the Jewish race. The reminiscence of the past, the present and all of time is vividly captured within the ambit of cultural memory and hence a sophisticated study of Amichai's enormous contribution is obligatory.

Keywords: Cultural memory, Jews, Holocaust, Eternal present, Time

Yehuda Amichai is one of the most celebrated of Hebrew poets in recent years. According to Jonathan Wilson, "He should have won the Nobel Prize in any of the last twenty years" (172). However, politics and the fact that "he came from the wrong side of the Stockade" (*ibid*) have denied him that honour. Amichai was a man of humble origin, born to an orthodox Jewish family in Wurzburg, Germany, on 3 May, 1924. He migrated to Palestine in 1935 and consequently to Jerusalem in 1936 where he served as a member of the *Palmach*, the defence force of the Jewish community in pre-state Israel. He volunteered and fought in World War II as a member of the British Army, Jewish Brigade and also in the Israeli War of Independence on the southern front and in the Negev.

As a poet, he was first inspired by the works of Dylan Thomas, T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden which he read during World War II when he was stationed with the British Army in Egypt. However, he began to write poetry seriously after the War of Independence in 1948. In the years following the War of Independence, Amichai studied Hebrew literature and the Bible (it

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may be mentioned that the terms “Biblical” and “Bible” are used by Amichai’s critics only to refer to the Judaic scriptures) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It was here that he published his first book of poetry *Now and in Other Days* (1955) with the encouragement of one of his professors.

In his entire poetic career that stretches over a period of about fifty years, Amichai has published eleven volumes of poetry in Hebrew, two novels, and a book of short stories. His works have been translated into over a score of languages. His collections of poetry available in English include *Poems*, 1968; *Selected Poems*, 1971; *Songs of Jerusalem and Myself*, 1973; *Amen*, 1977; *Travels of a Latter-Day Benjamin of Tudela*, 1977; *Time*, 1977; *Love Poems*, 1979; *Great Tranquility: Questions and Answers*, 1983; *The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*, 1986; *Poems of Jerusalem*, 1987; *Even a Fist Was Once an Open Palm with Fingers*, 1991; and *Open Eyes Land*, 1992. In 1982, Amichai received the Israeli Prize for poetry and he became a foreign honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1986. He died of cancer in Jerusalem on 15 September 2000 at the age of seventy six.

Amichai’s poetry emphasizes the individual who is conscious and integrally part of the “collective memory,” (Eshel, 151) from which, according to Eril Astrid and Ann Rigney, cultural memory has evolved. The turmoil of living in a country that is frequently at war and the conflicting memory of the blessed childhood and the terrible holocaust have always been a major impact on Amichai as a poet. Although the holocaust is not the thematic centre of Amichai’s poetry, he does continually reflect upon this decisive caesura of Jewish history. Amir Eshel says, “His metaphors often connote the timeless spirit along the lines of cultural memory’s eternal present, the spirit that links the remains of ancient times to those of the recent traumatic past and to the present” (152).

Over the last twenty years, the relationship between culture and memory has emerged in many parts of the world as a key issue of interdisciplinary research, involving fields as diverse as history, sociology, art, literary and media studies, philosophy, theology, psychology, and the neurosciences, and thus bringing together the humanities, social studies, and the natural sciences in a unique way. The importance of the notion of cultural memory is not only documented by the rapid growth, since the late 1980s, of publications on specific national, social, religious, or family memories, but also by a more recent trend that attempts to provide overviews of the state

of the art in this emerging field and synthesize different research traditions.

The concept of cultural memory is originally derived from archaeological studies, first introduced by an Egyptologist, Jan Assman in his book *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1992) (Cornelius Holtorf). According to Assman it was the sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs and the art historian, Aby Warburg, who first dismissed “attempts to conceive collective memory in biological terms as an inheritable or ‘racial memory’” (Czaplicka, 125) and instead shifted the discourse concerning collective knowledge into a cultural one. Elaborating upon this, Assman says, that the specific character that a person derives from belonging to a distinct society and culture is not seen to maintain itself for generations as a result of phylogenetic evolution but rather as the result of socialization and custom. Cultural memory therefore, is seen as a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of a society which is repeated through generations in societal practice and initiation.

Jan Assman and Aleida Assman define the concept of cultural memory through a double delimitation that distinguishes it from what is called ‘communicative’ or ‘Everyday memory’ which they think lack cultural characteristic. Just as the communicative memory is characterized by its proximity to the everyday, cultural memory, the Assmans maintain, is characterized by its distance from the everyday:

Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). (Czaplicka, 129)

Maurice Halbwachs thematises the nexus between memory and group (261) and Warburg thematises the one between the language and cultural forms (Gombrich, 323). Aleida and Jan Assman however, relate to all these three poles that is, memory (the contemporized past), culture and the group (society) they also stress upon certain characteristics which contribute to their explanation of cultural memory as a concept that comprises “the body of reusable texts images, and specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image” (Assman and Czaplicka, 132).

Assman is of the opinion that, “cultural memory is no mere metaphorical extension of individual memory. Cultural memory is born of collective identity,

constitutes it in time, and in turn serves it, though usually not in straight forwardly instrumentalist ways. As such, Assman's theory provides a correction to the presenter's implications with which Maurice Halbwachs founded the contemporary study of "collective memory," as early as 1925 (Olick K. Jeffrey, 06). Though Assman seems to overemphasize the opposition of his "cultural" understanding of memory to Halbwach's more sociological emphasis, the difference could be traced through a reading of Sigmund Freud. On the same note that Freud dwells, Assman and a number of others have sought to show that there are many "unconscious" elements in cultures as well as in individuals and thus to theorise the "unconscious" aspect of memory at the level of the collective is to theorise "unconscious" dimensions of memory at a level that supersedes the individual. According to Jeffrey, Assman's theory seems to offer us a corrective approach much more than Halbwach's sociological approach.

However, certain concepts of cultural memory, arguments about its multiple roles and its importance in shaping human society need to be reconsidered before making any further assumption. The widespread impact that cultural memory has made as a tool of preserving culture and tradition is carried on the wings of time. Freud's concept of cultural memory goes beyond the boundaries of any prescribed tradition; his assumption is more of preservation rather than an influence. According to Freud, "What has been deleted or altered in the written version might quite well have been preserved uninjured in the tradition. Tradition", he notes, "was the complement and at the same time the contradiction of the written history" (Olick K. Jeffrey, 06). This arises perhaps because of the ensuing flexibility of the spoken or oral tradition and the aftermath of such conflicting poles that purport cultural memory is the suppression of many of the organic historical facts which have not been lost with time. He also takes into account the cogency of the suggestive ways of imitation and repetition incorporated and inscribed in cultural memory. This according to the Assman is Collective memory which includes much more than what can be explicitly acknowledged in the record or lore of a people because they believe that memories are deep and primal as well as manifest and contemporary.

Cultural memory in Amichai's poetry is not only related to the three poles but also to this body of reusable materials, which make it possible for his poetry not only to create "...new texts to be remembered but also recover suppressed knowledge, revives obsolete knowledge and reincorporates formerly rejected unofficial or arcane traditions of knowledge (Lanchmann,

173). Elaborating upon this Eshel maintains that cultural memory in Amichai's poetry implies the thread of cultural continuity. This continuity manifests itself through the most decisive mode of transmission found in a community's cultural archives: language. The continuity as Amichai himself has stated is the language:

This language exists as long as the same language (Hebrew) is being written and used. Even if it is a language that tries new ways, that criticizes and goes against the stream. Actually it [this language] continues. A continuation which is not simply copying older forms. Real continuation is dialectic. Every Israeli and Jewish writer represents the continuation of Jewish culture. (Amichai, *Interview* by Yaakov Malkin, 23)

This cultural continuation serves as a foundation for the community and that is what Amichai's poetry is all about: personal documentation, a living museum in which the poet eternalizes his life.

Cultural memory as observed by Eiril Astrid and Ann Rigney, "has recently emerged as a useful umbrella term to describe the complex ways in which societies remember their past" (111). This cultural memory has evolved from "collective memory" (*ibid*), which has a thematic focus and which is concerned above all with identifying the "sites of memory" (*ibid*). Essentially it involves the memories that one shares within generations and across generations, which is the product of public acts of remembrance using a variety of media like stories, images, museums and monuments which all work together in creating a sustaining site of memory. Literature is one memorial medium of contributing to the larger discussion of the ways in which societies recollect their past.

In the same way, Amichai has been striving to relocate the site of memory using poetry as a network in which the past and all of time are closely knitted into one moment, the present. His poetry, though circulated at later points in time, provides an important bridge between generations by making remembrance observable and by establishing a memory of its own. Reflecting upon the epistemology, ethics and the working of collective memory, Amichai's poetry confronts the readers with unsettling emotions and compels them to see:

I have many times, like many watches
On the walls of a clock shop, each one shows a different time.
My memories are scattered over the earth
Like the ashes of a person who willed before his death
To burn his body

And scatter his ashes over seven seas. ("Like the Streams in the Negev," *A Life of Poetry 1948-1994*, 10-15)

Referring back to the cultural memory of the Jews, Amichai shows that there is a unique combination of the profane and the sacred. According to Amir Eshel, "the crisis of Jewish identity at the onset of modernity, the rise of Jewish national movements and especially the holocaust seems to have only deepened the notion that every single event in the past remains a determining factor in the face of the present" (143). Amichai's poetry illustrates how all generations are fused as one and how they are involved in the ensuing material, spiritual, and even secular continuation. In the collection, *Time* (1978) he writes:

Here on the ancient beach of Tantura I sit
 In the sand with my sons and my son's sons not yet born
 But they are assembled with me in my crouched squatting.
 The happiness of the water equals the happiness of Heaven,
 And the wave's foam penetrates my mind and becomes
 Clear here.

And past's future is here and now in my rest. (Untitled, 1-7,)

Here the perspective of the narrative "I" reaches beyond the boundary of his own existence and extends into the temporal realm of all generations that is to come. The "I" here signifies both the collective and the personal consciousness which encounters the simultaneous layering of both the opposing personal and collective forces pointing towards the endurance of oblivion in the era of the most devastating catastrophe.

For the Jews cultural memory is also the remembrance that has been preserved in the scriptures. This sacred literature has been treated with reverence not only because it chronicles the origin and gives direction and identity to the Jews, but most importantly because it is the medium through which cultural memory is transmitted. As far as Amichai's poetry is concerned there is a shift in the continuity from the biblical into the secular. The memory of his childhood is the only remembrance that is warm to his heart in the midst of the atrocities of the Jews:

He who remembers his childhood better
 Than others is the winner,
 If there are any winners at all. ("1924," *A Life of Poetry 1948-1994*, 20-22)

The events of the past are preserved in his mind. Therefore, cultural memory

remains potentially active in the present and it obliterates the conscious desires and interests in his poetic creativity. The essence of cultural memory in most cases emerges out of the transmissions from the recent past that is transmitted in his poetry in the shadow of 'Camouflage' as Professor Nilli Shaft Gold (*Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet*) puts it. The problem to identify with this particular feature in his poetry testifies the fact that no long-term cultural implication can be preserved or repressed over millennia.

Amichai's artistic proclivity, according to Ted Hughes, takes into account the unique intensity of Jewish religious feelings, the prophets, Biblical history, the supernatural world of Jewish mystical tradition, and the symbolic role of Israel itself, and in particular of Jerusalem. The accumulated inner strength and wealth of Jewish survival throughout the Diaspora, and the peculiar election, imposed on them by Hitler, constitutes the fact of the holocaust. It is clearly the drama of a war of survival on every level, the culmination of a long Jewish history of fighting for survival on every level of a garrisoned last-stand people (Amichai; *Time*) hence, the regeneration of a paradigmatic religion which grows from primal fear, guilt and repression.

The dynamics of remembering and the functions of collective memory in Amichai's poetry are also reflected in the conclusive use of the image of photography which captures the moment of time in the specific orbit of the frame. The simplest demonstration of such a graphic focus would call attention to the relationship between the concealed realities within his witticism; wherein lies the question of what constitutes an outline or look when one is gazing at another person. This forms a significant attribute that is central to the acceptance and rejection of the Jews over the centuries around the world:

How can we understand the origins of the physical, perceptual system that forms the basis for the face of horror, impurity, and shame that through the centuries has been attributed to the facial features and bodies of those who must be hated, assassinated, at all cost? (Mondzain Marie-Jose, 209)

According to Marie-Jose Mondzain, "that hideous moment in our history will for long exercise the minds of others who refuse to forget". And by further consideration of modest and simple texts and images his goal to demonstrate that strange complicity between science, fantasy, and sublimation in the structure of organized repulsion would additionally, and perhaps most importantly examine the ideological roots of those miserable, prejudiced graphics and their link to a more general history of caricature.

In much the same situation, Freud's analysis of the description of the problem reveals the urgency:

Without the irrepressible, that is to say, only suppressible and, force and authority of this trans-generational memory... there would no longer be any essential history of culture, there would no longer be any question of memory and of archive, of patriarchive or matriarchive, and one would no longer even understand how an ancestor can speak within us, nor what sense there might be in us to speak to him or her, to speak in such an *unheimlich*, "uncanny" fashion, to his or her ghost. *With it*". (Olick K. Jeffrey, 08)

Similar to the unending interrogations that Amichai poses along the lines of his poetry, Mondzain's repeated questioning of the Jewish catastrophe kindles the fierce and inefaceable event on the face of history:

What are the indices that characterize the Jew's face? Where do they come from? Why do they form the intolerable portrait of a creature recognizable by its profile alone? Why can a Jew not have a face? Why are Jews unfit for a face-to-face encounter? How, according to their enemies, did their own God condemn them to this obliqueness, to this deprivation of the gaze, and is he too, perhaps, excluded from all frontality? All such questions are not only relevant to the viewfinder alone but to anyone who seeks to understand this supreme race of catastrophic consequences.

(Mondzain, Marie-Jose: *Image, Icon, Economy: the Byzantine origin of the contemporary Imaginary*, 210)

The strange and imperative meaning of Amichai's name itself speaks volume for the poetry that seeks to identify itself with the nation and its people. Professor Scharf in her biographical assumption of the poet mentions that Amichai and his Israeli lover Ruth intended to change his name from the German *Pfeuffer* to a sweet sounding Hebrew name that would match hers. In this attempt Ruth ended up uttering the patriotic Hebrew name 'Yehuda Amichai' which she insisted is more poetic and appropriate (*Yehuda Amichai: The Making of Israel's National Poet* 2-3). According to Joshua Cohen, the name "Yehuda Amichai" as the sound carries, should communicate more than identifying him as a person, a Jew or a poet. The name *Yehuda* which in Hebrew means *Judah*, associates him to the Lion of Judah; symbol of ancient Israelite military and political strength (also imperative of the promised Messiah) and *Amichai* combines *Ami*, which means "my nation" and *Chai*, meaning "life": ultimately forming "My nation lives" (*The Poet Who Invented Himself-<http://forward.com>*) is a subject of importance when studying the

personal attachment and commitments he had for his nation, people and culture is considered.

It also has to be acknowledged that throughout his poetic career he promoted nationalism and sung the praises of cosmopolitan militarism that impulsively inspired national unity and integrity. His aspiration and desire is focused on the disconcerted condition of the entire Jewish race at the birth of their independent state and also at the moment of frantic search for something that could keep them one and unified. It is also worth mentioning that he seeks to display through his poetry something that cradles the entire race that would ultimately recompense for the lost and diversion of their culture and heritage.

According to Mordecai M. Kaplan (*“Plant in Their Hearts a Love of Zion”* Report of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation Israel Policies Task Force Rosh Hashana 5765, September 15, 2004), the founder of deconstructionist Judaism, a civilization cannot exist with all of its cultural aspects, including language, history, traditions and art without a place in the world where that civilization is founded. A people cannot be challenged to create for itself an ethical nationhood if it is not autonomous and responsible for the fulfillment of the social, human and civil rights of the inhabitants of its land. For Amichai and the Jewish people, that primary place is Israel and ‘Jerusalem the cradle city that rocks’ (“Time: 52”, *A Life of Poetry*, 289) him, is its centre. This city therefore is the fulcrum of the songs of lamentation and praise. Much to the tone of the Psalmist who seeks in the favour of humanity to pray for the peace of Jerusalem (Psalm 122:6; Ezra 7: 15: the dwelling of God is in Jerusalem) are Amichai’s poems of Jerusalem. He indirectly satirises the ensuing conflict and tension over the city between the Jews and the Muslim communities. He also seeks to project his cherished love for this city of unrest and predicament through his eternal lines of poetry.

The nature of memory that Amichai deals with in his poetry may be equated with the imaginative faculty:

I once thought it could be resolved like this:
 People gather at a bus-stop at midnight
 For the last bus that won’t come,
 First a few, then more and more.
 It was a chance to be close to each other,
 To change everything and start together a new world.

(“An Hour of Grace”, *A Life of Poetry*, 343)

Memory itself being the facet of the imagination; the ability to recreate it in the mind is essentially one of the greatest gifts given to man. As far as Jewish history is concerned, this faculty of imagination is a double-edged sword, but when refined and structured by the creative mind it can assume a positive ontological power. The power that seeks to deliver, strengthen and re-establish the identity and cultural practices of the forerunners.

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