

Strong Opposition under Hegemonic Poetics: One Comment on the Poetry of Ronny Someck

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Ronny Someck was born in 1951 and has so far published ten books of poetry. Someck is one of the most popular and beloved poets living in Israel today,¹ if not the most popular and beloved. There are many reasons for the popularity he enjoys, some of which involve external parameters, such as a personality willing to take part in many cultural projects, a commitment to spreading poetry to a wide audience, and a certain kind of poetic quality characteristic of his poetics, an unusual communicativity that has broad appeal among the people.

Someck's poetry is much more of the people than the poetry of Natan Zach or Meir Wieseltier, and much more accessible than the poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch or Avot Yeshurun. This is not a recent effect; since its inception (1976), Someck's poetry has had both hegemonic and popular status.

Poetry that is loved by the masses and by the critics is "suspect" of actually being the voice of the consensus, poetry that is "easily digestible," which mainly deals in the poetical spokespersonship of the personal experiences of the individual— love, relationships, aging, parenting, childhood, joy and sadness— and therefore is universalistic by nature.

However, despite the deceptive surfaces of Someck's poetry, it contains a disturbing and unruly reverberation that digs a path of resistance through the hegemony precisely because it is neither idiosyncratic nor enigmatic, its messages are easily absorbed, and its field of influence wide. Someck is not classified as a

¹ In the November 2011 edition of the Israeli women's magazine *At*, Ronny Someck has a poetry column. It is difficult to think of another Israeli poet who has such a natural connection with a popular audience.

“political poet” (as is Yitzhak Laor, for example), so his poetry is not subject to immediate disqualification by those who oppose it.

Someck's poetry is, to my mind, political poetry in its broadest sense, poetry that is not always shouting out in protest against a concrete injustice. This is political poetry not necessarily because it wants to be, but because it poses a challenge to the fully packed basket of models of thought and modes of representation that replicate themselves on a daily basis.

This poetic feature of a poetic “performance in the field,” which is very personal and intimate, colorful, and spectacular, alongside extremely barbed messages is, in my opinion, the whispering, characterizing core of Someck’s poetry. This is a unique form of journeying into the world, a kind of poetic mode I will call “the encryption of transgression” or “the surprise of transgression.” This specific poetics of Someck’s is *sui generis* in contemporary Israeli poetry.

There are those who see in this unique poetic fashion an over-suppression of the political message. Mati Shmuelof, in his critique of Someck’s latest book of poems, *Algiers* (2009), and in his analysis of the poem for which the collection is named, writes: “Many read Someck’s poetry without seeing its frayed edges, its revolutionary nature, and its radical ideas. It is easy to pass by the structure/the exciting and thrilling metaphorical acrobatic performance and ignore the danger – death lying in wait for the acrobat.”²

The poem “Algiers” is indeed a paradigmatic example of this characterization: “If I had another daughter/I'd call her Algeria/and you would doff your colonial hats to me/and call me ‘Abu Algeria.’/In the morning, when she opened her chocolate eyes/I would say: ‘Now Africa is waking up,’/and she would

² <http://www.hahotem.com/Page.asp?MenuID=142&PageID=951>

caress the blonde on her sister's head/certain that she had rediscovered gold./The grains on the seashore would be her sandbox/and in the footprints of the French who fled from there/she would hide the dates that dropped from the trees./'Algeria,' I would clasp the railing of the balcony and call to her:/'Algeria, come home, and see how I'm painting the eastern wall/with the brush of the Sun.'" (Translated by Vivian Eden)

Under the blossoming pastoral of a magical family scene, cloaked in humor ("Africa wakes up"), Someck draws our attention to a maximal proximity to the East, to an Arab country, which becomes his daughter, and therefore ours as well. This is a protest against the stereotypes of "hostility" and primitiveness that are common in the field of representation regarding "Arabness." In the Israeli Jewish space, in actual reality, it would be unthinkable to call a Jewish girl by such a name.³

Where in our Jewish Israeli culture can we find this thought that brings people together, this warm feeling, toward Algeria? (Almost⁴) solely in Someck's poetics. Haim Luski writes that:

[t]ransgression is not a series of negations, but an echo, a simulacrum of the thing itself, the re-establishment of it in the flickering of the blink of an eye like a pain that splits the body in order to remind and mark the body itself and gives a name to the unknown and split organ, a pain that comes and goes when the darkness takes control again, when it is charged with its sign, which does not signify.⁵

³ See, for example, existing first names such as Eilat, Yerushalyim, and Asia.

⁴ The Israeli rock group "Algiers," which integrates eastern elements into the music that it creates, must be noted as an exception that proves the rule.

⁵ Haim Luski, Introduction to *Filosofia alpnei hashetah* (Philosophy on the Surface) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007),175. (translated by Hannah Adelman Komy Ofir).

The word “Israel” is not mentioned at all in Someck’s poem, but it seems to hover over it, flickering for a moment. Someck “reestablishes” Israel as having a familial closeness to Algiers, a proximity of souls. He instantly creates a simulacrum of a different Israel than the one we are familiar with, without rejecting the current Israel in any way. We feel pain at the end of the poem, not only because of this emotional longing for the father of another daughter, but because of the missed political opportunity that echoes in it— Algeria is not part of our family. Someck frequently use this tactic, which produces a layered poem, in which the political is found not in its primary layer, but secreted in a verbal crypt.

“His political nature is concealed because he is not willing to make superficial use of typical narrative patterns that may confront the periphery with the center, the poor with the rich, and certainly not *Mizrahim* with *Ashkenazim*,”⁶ writes Yochai Oppenheimer of Ronni Someck’s poetics. Someck confronts the current situation with what might have been, and does not set population groups against one another. As an example of a kind of poetics that stands in radical contrast to Someck’s, I will quote from a poem by Sami Shalom Chetrit, “Poems in Ashdodian”: “I am writing poems for you/in the Ashdodian tongue /*cus em emhem/cla dahr bukum/* so you don’t understand a word / ----”.⁷

But even the much softer poetry of Natan Zach is blatantly contrarian: “Hebrew Book Week. All the books became silent / and there are no taxis to Tel Aviv. Speaker / Naomi Shemer is on the speaker, this time without a lively smile / - --”.⁸ Someck’s poem, on the other hand, does not raise any objections in its

⁶ Yochai Oppenheimer, *Shira Mizrahit Beisrael* (Mizrahi Poetry in Israel) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2012), 94. (translated by Hannah Adelman Komy Ofir).

⁷ Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Shirim beashdodit* (Poems in Ashdodian) (Tel Aviv: Andalus, 2003), 22. Translated by Hannah Komy Ofir.

⁸ Natan Zach, *Anti-Mechikon* (Anti-Eraser) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 1984), 55. Translated by Hannah Komy Ofir.

reader. On the contrary. We feel an intuitive identification with the father who longs for another child. The political message is so enveloped and swaddled in the wrappings of personal intimacy that only upon a second or third reading do we feel the invasive, stinging barb. In his article "When B.G. encountered Umm - 12 Reflections on East and West," Someck wrote: "I'm not looking for roots. I never lost them. Baghdad is the East and it is planted in the garden of the mind next to the tree of the West. Two trees that are two languages, which the mixer of my mouth has turned into one language."⁹ Someck's article is charged with the tension between the Arab heritage and culture with which he, his parents, and his grandfather lived naturally and the way in which this legacy is perceived in the eyes of society at large. In the third section of the article, he writes:

February 1991. The third time. I'm sitting in the room with the gas mask next to me and I see on television the American General Schwarzkopf directing a pointer to a photograph of one of the bridges over the Tigris. Next to him I draw my baby carriage, the smear of lipstick on my mother's lips, and my father's hand slipping over the brilliantine in his hair. In the next photo the bridge has been bombed and has collapsed. For Schwarzkopf, this is another feather in the cap of his air force. For me this is photo-murder.¹⁰

Despite the light tone, Someck chooses to set up a narrative different from the hegemonic one, and in his own way he goes against the public opinion that

⁹ Roni Someck. *Kesheh Beegee Pagash et Umm: Shnaim Asar Hirhurim al Mizrah Umaarav* (When B.G. Met Umm: 12 Reflections on East and West). *Kolot Mizrahiim: Likrat Siach Mizrahi Hadash al Hahevra Vehatarbut Beisrael* (Eastern Voices: Towards a new Mizrahi Discourse on Society and Culture in Israel). Guy Abutbul, Lev Greenberg, and Penina Mutzafi-Haler, (Eds). (Tel Aviv: Masada, 2005), 54-60.

¹⁰ Ibid.

encouraged the war in Iraq and supported the vigorous American fighting as one coalition. Against the backdrop of the landscapes of the Iraq war, Someck projects the subject matter of his childhood, chock full of emotional and nostalgic depth, and is not afraid to communicate his ambivalent feelings to his readers. This is poetry whose subversive nature is inherent in its subject matter, which carries out a transgression in the space of reality under a personal emotional poetic mantle.

Someck's poem "Baghdad, February 1991" also marks Baghdad as a region of longing to which he clings with unconcealed nostalgia:

Along these bombed-out streets I was pushed in a baby carriage/
Babylonian girls pinched my cheeks and waved palm fronds/ over my
blond down/ What's left from then became very black like Baghdad/
and the baby carriage we removed from the shelter/ the days we
waited for another war/ Oh Tigris, oh Euphrates, pet snakes in the first
map of my life/ how you shed your skin and became vipers.¹¹

Someck mourns for Baghdad from a place of intimacy and love, without scorn. The lament for the city also conceals within itself a personal lament for his lost memories, for the transformation of Baghdad into an enemy city with which there is no close contact. The poem was saved from being "nostalgic" or "folkloristic" exactly due to the fact that it takes place against the background of a patently Eurocentric reality and discourse.

War merely radicalizes the permanent state in which Israel seeks to separate itself from its surroundings. The plot of the poem's pain is not limited by the rigid and narrow coordinates of time and place. It is clear to us that even

¹¹ Ronny Someck, *Gan Eden Leorez* (Rice Paradise) (Or Yehudah: Zmora Bitan, 2006), 111. Translated by Barbara Goldberg with Moshe Dor.

without the war it would not have been possible for Someck to take a trip to Iraq to “return to his roots.” Someck's poem attempts to produce a different geographic mental map, on which Baghdad is part of the continuous present and not the limited past, to shatter the supremacy of the current reality in which the poem was written, and to point it out as defective. A similar tactic is found in Someck's poem “In Response to the Question: When did your Peace Begin?”. The poem contains within it, with humor and a smile, in a comic guise, criticism of the impossibility of Umm Kulthum and Ben-Gurion being a “match made in heaven” in the State of Israel today:

On the wall of the cafe by the immigrants' township
Ben Gurion's hair blowing in the wind
hung by the sweet doughball face of Oum Kulthoum
in the same kind of frame.
This was in 1955 or '6, and I thought if they hang
a man and a woman side by side
they must be a bride and groom.¹²

Peace, according to a Someck, lies in utilizing the potential of those who are “accidentally” placed next to one another. However, the proximity of the photos references the geographical proximity between Israel and Egypt, a geographical proximity that does not involve a union of the heart, as the poem demonstrates. The poem's title is loaded with irony. Should peace begin only now, since the “official powers” proclaimed it? The people who lived in the transit camp simultaneously contained Umm Kulthum and Ben-Gurion, the poem hints,

¹² Ronny Someck, *Gan Eden Leorez*. Translated by Vivien Eden.

protesting against the common stereotype that links dark nationalism with marked ethnicity and low status.¹³

“Ronny Someck wrote about Arabic music, recognizing its antagonistic position, which also reflects the political context in which the words were written. He did not give up on his wish to link Israeliness and Arab culture, out of confidence in the fact that no fundamental conflict between them is inevitable,” wrote Yochai Oppenheimer about the poem.¹⁴

Someck’s poetic perspective comes from a clear political perspective. This is a perspective that positions, in a certain sense, the Jewish-Palestinian conflict as an internal Arab conflict, a horizon of possibility of Israeliness that remains blocked despite the huge potential for de-dramatization inherent in it for the two rival parties. This “inter-Arabness” found in Someck’s poetry is also characteristic of other *Mizrahi* poets.

This is apparent, for example, the act of “adopting” Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who serves for many *Mizrahi* poets as an admired poetical father, and not, for example, canonical poets such as Natan Alterman, Natan Zach, or Meir Wieseltier. The multiple quotations, dedications, and direct and indirect references to Mahmoud Darwish create a new symbolic map of poetry, in which Darwish’s figure stands out as a clear and significant source of inspiration. The dialogue with Mahmoud Darwish is a theme that winds from the poetry of veteran poets such as Sami Shalom Chetrit and Moise Ben Harosh to the poetry of young poets such as Mati Shmuelof and Almog Behar, who refers to Darwish as “My

¹³ See in this context Anat Rimon Or’s article “*Mimot Haaravi ad Mavet Laaravim*” (From the Death of the Arab to Death to the Arabs), *Theory and Criticism* 20 (2002), 23-57.

¹⁴ Yochai Oppenheimer. *Shira Mizrahit Beyisrael*, 181.

brother Mahmoud Darwish.”¹⁵ Sami Shalom Chetrit writes under the poem “Painting without a Wall,”¹⁶ a phrase which is itself a tribute to Darwish's last book of poems, “Mural”¹⁷ which is a gesture to Mahmoud Darwish.

Shalom Chetrit points to the “divided self,” who sips Arab coffee and also reads Darwish’s poems, but is not an Arab at all when circumstances do not allow it: “Write it down / I was born a Jew from within your death, your Arab death in me,” and makes us attend to the dichotomy that splits the *Mizrahi* individual. In the poem “*Lifnei Hamatzor Veaharav*” (Before the Siege and After it) (referring to the title of Darwish’s book *State of Siege*) Behar writes: “[...] we have a common homeland full of sanctity, a wife much courted, / full of affectionate names, and we must share its holiness:/ Palestine and Zion, Elhalil and Hebron, Jerusalem and Al-Quds / Shchem and Nablus, Akko and Akka, Yaffo and Yaffa.”¹⁸

Someck’s poem “Transparent” hinges entirely upon its mention of Mahmoud Darwish:

Tayeb studies literature at Tel Aviv University. He has a bag with a grammar book and an essay

On Mahmoud Darwish.

The bag's transparent because this summer with a different bag,

In the x-ray eyes of every cop, he'd be marked

As hiding a bomb.

"Even this," says his father, "*Inshallah*,

Will soon wash off," and he hangs the laundry

Cleaned from stains of shame on Time's clothesline. But

¹⁵ Almog Behar. *Tzimaon Be'erot* (Well's Thirst) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008) 94.

¹⁶ Sami Shalom Chetrit. *Yehudim* (Jews). (Tel Aviv: Nahar, 2008), 13.

¹⁷ The opening page of the book in which the poem is found is called “Drawings of Jews.”

¹⁸ Almog Behar. *Tzimaon Be'erot*, 94. (translated by Hannah Adelman Komy Ofir)

Life still needs to go to the market, and Tayeb goes
With it to buy olives in spoken Arabic
And to write poems about it in literary Arabic.
For the time being, Tayeb has nothing to hide. The taut
Skin on his arms doesn't conceal bundles of muscles,
The flexible cartilage between bones
And the blood vessels, within which the swimmer of despair
Can swim in a frenzy towards the platform,
Upon which the lifeguards hung
A black flag.¹⁹

Someck's poem produces a subtle symbolic equivalence between the book of Mahmoud Darwish's poems and a hidden bomb, and it seems that by doing so, he also defines, in a reflexive manner, the kind of poetics that he himself produces: a well disguised poetical bomb, which requires an X-ray to reveal it. Someck's poem presents Arabic, Arabness, and Arabs, which are frequently present in the Israeli space, "For the time being, Tayeb has nothing to hide" and sees their being labeled as "Others" as a "mark of shame," a "black flag."

Someck's poems and Darwish's poems share a common thematic space, which naturally positions symbols of Eastern and Western culture next to one another and grants them equal importance. Thus, for example, Mahmoud Darwish writes:

He finds time for song:
Waiting for you, I cannot wait
I cannot read Dostoyevsky

¹⁹ In Ronny Someck's *Be'et Barzel* (With an Iron Pen) Ed., Tal Nitzan (Tel Aviv: Xargol, 2005), 77. (This poem was translated by Robert Manaster and Hana Inbar.)

nor listen to Umm Kalthum, Maria Callas or another.

Waiting for you, the hands of the watch go from right

to left

to a time without a place.

Waiting for you, I didn't wait for you.

I waited for eternity.²⁰

Here Umm Kulthum is found side by side with Maria Callas and Dostoevsky. But while these names produce a natural sequence for Darwish, and only serve only as the background of a love poem, in Someck's poem, the juxtaposition of a Jewish icon like Ben-Gurion and an Arab icon is in itself subversive. In the poem "Transparent," Someck positions Darwish himself as a classic taught in universities and someone about whom papers are written. It should be remembered that the poem was written before the translation of Darwish's books into Hebrew, prior to his death, when he was catalogued in the Israeli experience under belittling categories.

Someck is very aware not only of the problematic existence of Arabs in a space marked as clearly Jewish—Tel Aviv University, but also of the situation in which Israeli Arabs are required in high school to study the poetry of Bialik, which is far from their own culture. Here is the poem "Hawadja Bialik," whose title is in itself an oxymoron:

An Arab girl sings a poem by Bialik

on a bus whose wings shade the olive trees

along the curves of Wadi Ara.

²⁰ Mahmoud Darwish. *State of Siege*. <http://www.arabworldbooks.com/Literature/poetry4.html>. Translated by Ramsis Amun.

No mother, no sister and her eyes
roll from eyelid to eyelid the duplicity
of Hawadja Bialik's stars.
I once read the first sign of a star
on the brink of extinction
is a noticeable swelling and reddening rim.
A red carpet lays over the hill
of her lips and the poem's heels click *do*, click *la*.
It takes millions of years before a star collapses
into a white fireball. Whatever heat
is left radiates into the empty rooms
of a house still under construction.
The sun singed by its own flame spots
the workers' blue undershirts with sweat
and the faraway sound of the muezzin's call
is slung like a frayed rug over a donkey
at the end of its rope. (Translation: Barbara Goldberg with Moshe Dor)

In a manner typical of his poetics, which always looks "from below," from the position of the people, here Someck chooses to focus his poetic lens on an Arab girl. We should note the symbolic displacement carried out by the poem, which suggests that "the Palestinians are the Jews now," or "the Palestinians are the Jews in Israel," a statement with undeniable political power. The poem is studded with phrases that shout out the deprivation and discrimination to which the Arabs in

Israel are subjected: “at the end of its rope,” “the duplicity of Hawadja Bialik’s stars,” meaning that Israel is leading them astray, and they themselves are a star that has gone out.

Someck’s poetry should be read in light of Michel de Certeau’s apt words on resistance: “an aesthetics of *tricks* (artists’ operations) and an ethics of *tenacity* (countless ways of refusing to accord the established order the status of law, meaning, or a decree of fate). Popular culture is precisely that...”²¹

Someck’s poems comprise “an aesthetics of *tricks*,” art that is always attempting to point out the possibility of deviating from the current reality. An additional space of knowledge in which clusters of profound social protest are found in Someck’s poetry is the socio-economic one. Someck was one of the first poets to draw attention to social distress in his poetry. Contrary to popular mediums such as popular music or entertainment cinema, poetry itself is seen as an elitist artistic practice whose audience is usually a satiated one. To give poetic expression to social distress, both from the past and from current life in Israel has always been unusual in Israeli poetry, where social protest poetry has not had a powerful presence. It was no coincidence, then, that Somek’s poem “Poverty Line” became perhaps the most quoted social poem and one that is taught in high schools as an integral part of the curriculum.

Here is the poem:

As if one could draw a line and say: under it
is poverty. Here’s the bread wearing cheap makeup
turning black

²¹ Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 26.

and here are the olives on a small plate
on the tablecloth.
In the air pigeons fly in salute
to the clanging bell from the kerosene vendor's red cart
and there is the squishing sound of rubber boots landing in mud.
I was a child, in a house called a shack,
in a neighborhood called transit camp for immigrants.
The only line I saw was the horizon, and under it everything seemed
poverty.²²

Somek chooses to talk about poverty as a component of the most intimate personal biography, not in any way from an external gaze. This poetic strategy creates empathetic identification, but we should not fail to notice its political aspect, which opposes the bureaucratic mechanisms of the state that define the "poverty line," as a cold concept, far away from any living reality. The background of the Independence Day aerial demonstration, meeting the sky, is contrasted to the landing of rubber boots on the muddy ground. The State seems far away, "busy with its affairs," closing its eyes to the plight of its citizens, who are moaning in the poor hut in the rain.

It is no accident that the title of Somek's first book of, published in 1976, is *Gola* (Exile). Exile-in-the-country is multi-dimensional exile, an exile that carries the baggage of class otherness, but also of ethnic otherness. Eli Hirsch wrote the following:

Israeli poetry, like the Zionist poetry that preceded it, was born as
Ashkenazi poetry. Everyone, from Bialik and Rachel to Uri Tzvi

²² Ronny Somek, *Gan Eden Leorez*, 75. Translated by Barbara Goldberg with Moshe Dor.

Greenberg and Alterman through Amichai, Avidan, Ravikovitch, or Wallach, was Ashkenazi. One of the first to break through that barrier and achieve great success as an Israeli poet is Ronny Someck ... He assembled his Mizrahiness on the huge wave of pop culture that lifted its head and swept the world beginning in the nineteen sixties ... He drew a straight line, not to be taken for granted and because of this so sharp and surprising, between the Israeli province, its **pain and insults** and the language of the new world—language that is essentially American, young, and belongs to rock and roll. In retrospect, it seems that the role of this combination was to sweeten the sting, and precisely in this way to **keep it sharp and wounding**. The *Mizrahi* poetry of the last several decades is divided into two trends, both important and necessary, either suppressing or softening the tension between the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi in Israeli poetry, or sharpening and highlighting it. Someck knew how do both of these things at once. He dissolved the pain and challenges that permeated his poetry into a glowing foam of pop images, but **the pain did not disappear**; thanks to the wonderful, soft, gentle, frothy Someck touch, almost waning, it infiltrates, light and dark together, into the bloodstream of Israeli poetry" (emphasis mine).²³

Hirsch chose the loaded word "infiltrates" to describe the natural intertwining of Someck's poetics into the canon of Israeli poetry, and in fact claims that the "soft, gentle, frothy" touch was what facilitated Someck's reception. That

²³ Eli Hirsch, *Ronny Someck , Algir, Yediot Ahronot. Shiva Yamim (Seven Days)Supplement.17.4.09* (translated by Hannah Adelman Komy Ofir)

is, a poetics biting on its surface, with radical content (like the poetry of Yona Wallach, Meir Wieseltier, or Natan Zach) would not have been received into the heart of the canon from a Mizrahi poet. To strongly object, and simultaneously to gain both the love of the masses and critical appreciation—this requires real talent.