

Caged Vulture: Ibn Gabirol's Poetic Manifesto

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רָאָה נָא בְּעֵמֶל עֶבְדְּךָ וְעֵנִי / וְכִי נִפְשׁוּ כְמוֹ דָּאָה יְקוּשָׁה׃

If Judah Halevi's characteristic bird is the dove, Ibn Gabirol's is an unclean bird of prey. In the painful poem of complaint quoted as this article's epigraph he calls himself a דָּאָה. Elsewhere, he identifies himself with a whole list of unclean birds, when he has an interlocutor say of him, וְהֵייתָ כְּעֵזְנִית, // וְפָרְסוּ אֶפְדָּךְ רְחֵם וּפְרָסוּ // וְהֵייתָ כְּעֵזְנִית, "As if your face were that of a bustard, vulture, or Azazel's black vulture; you are like the desert pelican or the little owl".² Had he called himself an eagle, he might have been laying claim to a certain nobility, but he seems to prefer to identify himself with these more discomfiting species, a totem both unexpected and repellent.³

In general, the persona that Ibn Gabirol cultivated of himself in his poetry is decidedly harsh, even ugly. It is insistently self-pitying, aggressively hostile, and negative toward everything but his own quest for wisdom. This persona conflicts with the conventions of an age when poets usually presented themselves as heroic or sensitive when at their best, and as merely unfortunate or put-upon when at their worst. Ibn Gabirol is far from the only poet to write poetry of complaint and anger, but he is the only one to make these themes central to his self-presentation.

Such themes are so characteristic of Ibn Gabirol that Moses Ibn Ezra summed up his personality by saying that "though he was a philosopher by nature and

1 *Solomon Ibn Gabirol: Secular Poems* [in Hebrew], H. Brody and H. Schirman (eds.), Jerusalem 1974, p. 146, line 8. The translations are my own.

2 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 85, lines 6-7.

3 The word דָּאָה was identified variously by medieval commentators and lexicographers as vulture, eagle, falcon, or hawk; there is no way to know exactly what species Ibn Gabirol had in mind or how clearly he differentiated the species in his mind. For the purposes of this paragraph, I have mostly followed the identifications found in the Jewish Publication Society translation of the Bible (1985). Another unclean bird, the עֵיט, appears prominently in Ibn Gabirol's poem קְרָא הַצִּיר (Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 57, line 16), the poem that will be discussed at length later in this paper. On the dove in Judah Halevi's poetry, see my "The Song of the Silent Dove," Kathryn F. Kravitz and Diane M. Sharon (eds.), *Bringing the Hidden to Light: Studies in Honor of Stephen A. Geller*, Winona Lake, IN 2007, pp. 217-235.

learning, his irascible soul had a power over his rational soul that he could not control and a demon that he could not restrain."⁴ Moses Ibn Ezra could not have known Ibn Gabirol personally;⁵ very likely, his impression of the man is grounded in the impression made by the poetry. This identification of personality and persona appears naïve to readers such as ourselves, accustomed as we are to distinguishing between a writer's actual self and the self that he projects onto a first-person speaker. But though we have little confidence in our ability to know what Ibn Gabirol was like as a person on the basis of his poetry, we can fruitfully explore his persona and try to explain why he shaped it to be so contrary to the ideals of the age.

No medieval Hebrew poet put more effort into explaining himself and his ambitions than did Ibn Gabirol. Many of his poems contain passages in which he seeks to explain himself and his life project, the dual quest for wisdom and worldly recognition. In some of these passages, he speaks about his poetry—not only boasting about it but hinting at the principles of his artistic vision. Familiar as these passages are to students of medieval Hebrew poetry, I do not believe that they have ever been studied together and used in the interpretation of Ibn Gabirol's literary career.

The most striking of these programmatic passages is the conclusion of לו היתה
נפשי מעט שואלת:⁶

אוֹלֵי אֱלֹהִים שָׁם בְּפִי דָבָר כְּמוֹ / אֶבֶן יָקָרָה וְתֵהִי גִחְלִית
כְּשִׁיר אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁר וִירַח אֶף אָנוּשׁ / מִבֵּין אֲמָרָיו חֶלְבָּנָה וְשִׁלְחַת
לוֹ כְּצָרֵי הַזֶּה בְּבַיִת לוֹט יִדְעוּ / אֲנָשֵׁי סֹדֶם הַתְּדַפְּקוּ עַל דַּלַּת

I sometimes think God put a thing into my mouth—
a jewel when He put it there,
but once in place it turned into a coal,
or maybe something like a song, which, sung,
reeks with a mix of fragrance and decay.
If Sodom's men had sniffed such scent
coming from Lot's house,
surely they'd have broken down the door.

4 *Kitab al-muḥāḍara wa l-mudhākara*, A. S. Halkin (ed.), Jerusalem 1975, p. 70.

5 It is now generally accepted, based on contemporary testimony, that Ibn Gabirol died in 1058; Moses Ibn Ezra was born c. 1055.

6 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 54, lines 15-17.

The passage draws on the famous legend of Moses' infancy. The child was confronted by Pharaoh with gold or jewels (depending on the version) and live coals. An angel guided the child's hand to the coals, and Moses put them into his mouth. Had he chosen the precious items, Pharaoh intended to kill him, so it is a story of a miraculous escape. But the legend also explains how Moses acquired his speech impediment, and it incidentally prefigures his life of spiritual, as opposed to worldly, attainment.

The poem alters the legend a bit in order to put it to a rather different use. The allusion to the legend occurs at the climax of a poem that is precisely about Ibn Gabirol's demand for worldly recognition, honors, and distinction. "If the world will not make me its chief," the speaker says in verse 12, "the world does not know what love is!" (or: "who her lover is," depending on the reading), thus making Ibn Gabirol yearn for the worldly things rejected by the infant Moses. Further, according to the poem, the jewels were placed into the poet's mouth by God, and turned to coals of their own accord. The claim is that the poet was destined from infancy for worldly success and that he has been denied his birthright; and his tongue—the instrument of poetry through which he was to attain such distinction—has been seared. As a result, his speech—his poetry, his message—is distorted and harsh, unintelligible and unlovable.⁷

7 The versions of the legend speak of Moses being presented, alongside the coals, with jewels, as in *Divrei hayamim shel moshe rabeinu*, in Adolph Jellinek, *Bet hamidrash*, vol. 2 (3rd ed.), Jerusalem 1967 [1853], pp. 3-4, and in the version of the story transmitted in Arabic by the Muslim historian al-Tabari (839-923), *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa l-mulak*, M. J. de Goeje (ed.), vol. 1, Leiden 1879-81, p. 446. In other versions, he is presented with a gold coin, as in *Shemot rabbah* 1:26, *Leqah tov* on Exod. 4:10, "Midrash vayosha'," in Jellinek, *Bet hamidrash*, vol. 1, p. 41, and Bahya ben Asher, commentary on Exod. 4:10. In yet others, the precious item is an onyx stone, as in the version of *Divrei hayamim shel moshe rabeinu* in Avigdor Shinan, *Hasifrut* 24 (1977), pp. 100-116; Yalqut Exodus, sec. 166, near the end; and Yosef Dan, *Sefer ha-Yashar*, Jerusalem 1986, pp. 290-291.

Sarah Katz, attempting to determine which of the versions known to her could have been Ibn Gabirol's source and, troubled by the fact that those versions speak not of a precious stone but of an onyx stone or a gold coin, attempts to explain the precious stone by referring to a parable in *Devarim rabbah* 1:8 involving a precious stone, a live coal, and Moses; see Sarah Katz, *Pituḥim petuḥim va'aṭurim*, Jerusalem 1992, pp. 86-111. But the parable does not seem to have a significant connection to the poem, and the precious stones do appear in one Hebrew source, as pointed out above.

Hayyim N. Bialik and Y. H. Rawnitzki (*Shirei Shelomo ben Yehuda ibn Gabirol*, vol. 1, Tel Aviv 1923, p. 32 of the commentary section) miss the allusion to the Moses story; they interpret *וַתֵּה* not as "becomes" but as "is," so that the two phrases *אֲבֵן יִקְרָה וַתֵּה גִזְלֵת* are complementary—the stone is at once precious and gleams like a coal. Katz, also, apparently taking the verb as meaning "is," interprets the passage as meaning that Ibn Gabirol views his poetry as a prophecy from God that is sometimes favorable, and therefore delightful to his hearers; and sometimes unfavorable, therefore causing them sorrow. This interpretation, too, seems to fall short of the expectations aroused by the allusion to the midrash. Yisrael Levin (*Shirei Shelomo ibn Gabirol*, Tel Aviv 2007, p. 18) explains

By saying that God Himself put the jewels into his mouth, Ibn Gabirol suggests that his speech is prophecy. Yet as a prophet, he resembles less a Moses than a Balaam,⁸ for the words of his prophecy were changed even as he spoke them: what they proclaim is the opposite of his intention, and the voice in which he proclaims them is not his natural voice. It is an amazing example of conflict; he seems to be saying that all he ever wanted was to speak conventionally beautiful words that would gain the esteem of his fellow men and the rewards that would follow, but that God or fate had made him a *poète maudit* in spite of himself.⁹

From speaking of himself as a prophet, the poet shifts to speaking of himself as a Levite. The Levites were another kind of religious functionary whose craft involved speech, for they sang in the Temple when sacrifices were offered; their song was believed to be the psalms found today in the biblical book of Psalms. While they were singing, incense was offered (Mishnah, Tamid 7:3), and the poet compares his work to two of the aromatic ingredients of the incense—*הלבנה* and *שחלת*. But when he says that his song is redolent of these ingredients, he does not mean that his song is sweet, for the rabbinic tradition claims that the smell of *הלבנה* is fetid (B. Kereitot 6b). Thus a second time, the poet compares his poetry both to sacred speech and to something ugly. Not only is it ugly, but also depraved, for in the last line, the poet asserts that the fragrance of such verse as his would draw the wicked men of Sodom to the door. A weird kind of prophecy, indeed, and a weird kind of poet, who professes to speak perverse speech of divine origin.

When we survey Ibn Gabirol's poetic works, we find, interspersed among his limpid religious lyrics and his sensitive, witty, and sometimes lovely secular poetry, a goodly number of poems—largely his first-person poems—in which he is true

the coal as an allusion to Isaiah's inaugural vision (Isa. 6:7) and interprets it here as purifying the poet's lips for prophetic speech. This is certainly a useful, though partial, contribution to the verse's interpretation.

Schirmann, troubled by the apparent lack of continuity between lines 15 and 16, conjectured that something is missing in between and that lines 16-17 are an attack on one of Ibn Gabirol's opponents; see Hayyim Schirmann, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and Provence* [in Hebrew], vol. 1 (2nd ed.), Jerusalem 1960/61, p. 188. I believe that my interpretation in the body of the paper eliminates any perceived gap and makes the fullest use of the possibilities afforded by the wording of these verses.

- 8 Allusions in this passage to Balaam were pointed out by Dov Jarden (in his commentary to *Ibn Gabirol: Secular Poems* [in Hebrew], Jerusalem, 1974/75), who calls attention to Num. 23:16; and by Katz, note 7 above, p. 102, who points to Num. 22:38.
- 9 All the more astonishing that David Kaufmann, a perspicacious and sensitive interpreter of medieval Jewish writers, could have referred to him (admittedly, in a different context) as "Ibn Gabirol ... in dem kein Misston Zerrissenheit und inner Spaltung verräth." See David Kaufmann, *Studien über Salomon Ibn Gabirol*, Jerusalem 1971 [1899], p. 63.

to that part of this manifesto that proclaims the ugliness of his message. He is a famously cranky writer who seethes with negativity. He laments his illnesses, his lack of sympathetic friends, and his lack of recognition; he boasts of his intellectual superiority and heaps contempt on his countrymen and fellow poets; he denounces a world that denies him recognition but that loads honors on others. He claims to have dedicated his life to the quest for wisdom but bewails its unattainability despite the sacrifice of his youth and worldly pleasures. Some of these poems are so self-indulgent as to make the reader squirm with discomfort.

More to the point, Ibn Gabirol may have the distinction of having written some of the ugliest poems of the Golden Age. *הלא אצרק באמרי כי אמריו*¹⁰ contains a description of the sores on his legs that is almost nauseating to read and is thus different in tone from *רביבי דמעך*¹¹ and the other poems in which he merely complains about his illnesses. Reading this poem, we feel that Ibn Gabirol has let out the rhetorical stops in order to make the reader metaphorically as uncomfortable as he was literally.¹²

Similar is the astonishing poem describing a dish containing flowers, *קרא הצייר על אחי שלומות*,¹³ which will be examined more closely below. Flower description is one of the most standardized genres cultivated by medieval Arabic and Hebrew poets, but this poem is a complete break from the Arabic literary traditions of flower poetry, beginning with the fact that Arabic flower poetry is about flowers in gardens, not about cut flowers.¹⁴ Verse after verse shocks the reader by comparing the flowers to boys whose fathers have slapped them in the face, to women who have had been stripped and beaten, to ghastly creatures whose bones have rotted away beneath the skin, and to other less off-putting but equally unexpected images.

10 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 111.

11 Brody and Schirman, p. 87.

12 Remarking that it embodies "a kind of cult of the hideous" (פולחן הביעור), Schirman described the poem's imagery as quite alien to modern readers; see Hayyim Schirman, "A Study of the Life of Solomon Ibn Gabirol," *A History of Hebrew Poetry and Drama* [in Hebrew], vol. 1, Jerusalem 1979, pp. 216-233, esp. 229. For this judgment, Schirman was rightly taken to task by Tsur, who noted that the poem's grotesque theme and imagery have plenty of analogues in modern poetry and drama and who pointed out that medieval audiences may have resembled modern ones in being divided between those who respond to such works with delight and those who respond with defensive aversion. See Reuven Tsur, *Medieval Hebrew Poetry: A Double Perspective* [in Hebrew], Tel Aviv 1987, pp. 176-194, esp. 177-178.

13 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, pp. 56-57.

14 To judge from the comprehensive work by Gregor Schoeler, *Arabische Naturdichtung*, Beirut 1974, and the chapter on flower poetry in Henri Pérès, *La poésie andalouse en arabe classique au xie siècle*, Paris 1953, pp. 166-183.

The theme of violence to a woman reappears, astonishingly, in a poem generally classified as a love poem, אמנון אני חולה,¹⁵ where the speaker denotes himself and his beloved as Amnon and Tamar and asks his friends to contrive a situation similar to the one that resulted in Amnon's rape of Tamar.¹⁶ In another love poem, ישרוני ועפעפיו כחולה,¹⁷ the conventional motif of the heartless beloved spilling the lover's blood is exaggerated to the point of the macabre.¹⁸

Though the number of complete poems of this disturbing type in Ibn Gabirol's oeuvre is small, it is reinforced by stray images scattered throughout the *dīwān*. In an otherwise charming poem describing a garden in the rain, we read: בראות צמחיו אָמרו כָּסוּ וְלֹא כָּסוּ בִּירְקוֹן וְלֹא דִלְקַת, "When they saw its plants, they said: they are covered—but they are not covered—with mildew and inflammation."¹⁹ Thus, the garden is depicted as covered with the symptoms of diseases from among those listed in the terrifying imprecation in Deut. 28:22; other images in this poem are of Aaron sprinkling blood on the altar (line 6, a cloud sprinkling the garden with raindrops) and a tattoo (line 7, the flower buds dotting the vegetation). In another poem, describing an apple,²⁰ Ibn Gabirol says, כְּמוֹ חוּלָה בִּירְקוֹן, וְדִלְקַת, "she changes, like a sick woman, with mildew and inflammation," that is, green and red, referring to the same diseases as in the garden description just quoted. In a poem describing a gift of a bunch of pens, he describes the uses of writing in the exercise of power by means of a sinister hyperbolic metaphor: וְחָרְקוּ שֵׁן חָרָק, וְהֶאֱגָרָת רֶק פְּתָנִים מְלַעֲיטִים, "They gnash their teeth and gorge a letter with serpents' venom".²¹

In describing his own writing, Ibn Gabirol constantly calls attention to his hostility. As he says, describing his own verses, יַעַת הֶמָּה דְּבֶשׁ נִפְתַּ וְצוּפִים / יַעַת הֵם נִשְׁכִּים כְּנִשְׁךְ

15 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 61.

16 The story is in 2 Samuel 13. The relationship between the poem and the biblical story has been given opposing interpretations. Yisrael Levin, *Me'il tashbeṣ* (2nd ed.), vol. 2, Tel Aviv 1995, p. 330, reads it as a lighthearted, ironic reworking of the story, which empties the biblical account of its serious dimension. Eddy M. Zemach, *Keshoresh 'eis* (2nd ed.), Tel Aviv 1973, pp. 135-140, reads it as tragedy. My own interpretation in *Wine, Women, and Death: Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life*, Philadelphia 1986, pp. 112-113, inclines in the direction of Zemach's reading but with more emphasis on the social background of both the poem and the story, with more attention to the Arabic literary background, and involving (what I believe is) a more tightly integrated reading of both the poem and the biblical account than either of the above.

17 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 42.

18 The poem was memorably analyzed by Zemach, note 16 above, pp. 161-169; see also Scheindlin, note 16 above, pp. 132-134.

19 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 113, line 9.

20 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 112, line 3.

21 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 33, line 18.

שָׂרָפִים , "Sometimes they are honey and honeycomb, at other times they bite like vipers."²² He has a whole poem on his own poetry that begins with the famous lines: *בְּפִי חֲרָבִי וּבִלְשׁוֹנִי חֲנִיתִי / וּמִגְנִי וְצַנְתִּי שִׁפְתֵי // וְשִׁירִי עַל לִבִּי שִׁמְעִיר כְּפִטְיִשׁ / יִפְצֹץ*: "My sword is in my mouth, my lance in my tongue, my shield and buckler are my lips. To the heart of my audience, my song is like a hammer smashing rock; I unleash it in my rage. I am like milk and honey to my friends, but serpents' venom to anyone who crosses me."²³ Threatening someone who did dare to cross him, he wrote: *יָרָא*: "Have a care of an arrow well-polished, well-sharpened, and beware of the flashing sword and spear."²⁴ In another poem, he speaks of being a bramble in the eyes and a thorn in the side of someone who did him wrong.²⁵ His poems of contempt for the people of his world, such as *נִבְחַר בְּקִרְאֵי גְרוּנִי*²⁶ and especially *נִבְחַר בְּקִרְאֵי גְרוּנִי*²⁷ are too familiar to need to be quoted here; even readers with but slight experience of Ibn Gabirol's poetry recall his striking turn, *קִלְשׁוֹנִי לְשׁוֹנִי*, "my tongue is my pitchfork," in the latter poem (line 28). And we should not forget his own repeated self-characterization as an unclean bird of prey, signaled in the title of this article.

So much for the part of Ibn Gabirol's manifesto that proclaims the ugliness of his message. As to the part that declares poetry to be a kind of prophecy, this theme is evident everywhere in his *diwān*.

In his well-known article on the poet as prophet in medieval Hebrew literature, Dan Pagis observed that the poets of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when boasting of their poetry, occasionally referred to it, by way of hyperbole, as prophecy.²⁸ Pagis's article is mostly concerned with a weightier use of the prophetic motif in Golden Age poetry. Starting from the dichotomy of a poetics based on an ideal of craftsmanship versus a poetics based on an ideal of inspiration (what he calls the "pseudo-Aristotelian poetics" versus the "poetics of the sublime"), Pagis points out that poets sometimes use biblical language of prophecy when presenting their poetry as inspired verse. But he cites only two examples, both being cases in which the poet claims the authority of prophecy to criticize the

22 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 102, line 4.

23 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 152, lines 1-2.

24 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 19, line 3.

25 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 78, line 25.

26 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, pp. 71-72.

27 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, pp. 67-69.

28 Dan Pagis, "The Poet as Prophet in Medieval Hebrew Literature," James L. Kugel (ed.), *Poetry and Prophecy: The Beginnings of a Literary Tradition*, Ithaca, NY 1990, pp. 140-150. See also Yosef Tobi, *Between Arabic and Hebrew Poetry: Studies in Spanish Medieval Poetry*, Leiden 2010, p. 400.

Jewish people for neglecting the Hebrew language and presents a writing of his own as a model and guide for the veneration of the language. The two texts are Ibn Gabirol's *ענק מהברת הענק*²⁹ and al-Ḥarizi's *Tahkemoni*.

Interesting and suggestive as these two examples are, Ibn Gabirol's poetry contains a great many passages in which he associates his poetry with wisdom and divine mysteries.³⁰ In such passages, "wisdom" (his typical words are *דעת, בינה, חכמה, מזמה* and *מוסר*)³¹ sometimes becomes "Wisdom," the personified object of his adoration and the source of his speech.³² Ibn Gabirol's special relationship with wisdom may not be prophecy in the biblical sense in which God selects a human messenger to whom to reveal His will so that the messenger can pass it on to the people; but it might have been a reasonable metaphor for prophecy in Ibn Gabirol's Neoplatonic milieu. The blending of philosophy and prophecy was commonplace among Ibn Gabirol's Neoplatonic predecessors, as attested on the Islamic side by the *Ikhwān al-ṣafā* and, on the Jewish side, by Isaac Israeli and Dunash Ibn Tamim, who saw philosopher and prophet, if not as identical, at least as kindred spirits.³³

Ibn Gabirol's constant association of his poetry with his pursuit of wisdom suggests that he wanted to represent his poetry not merely as a product of the skillful manipulation of words but as being linked, through wisdom, with the divine realm and, in that sense, inspired. *לְשִׁירֵי שְׁחָרֵי דַעַת פָּנוּ נָא / וּבִינֵנוּ בְעָרִים בְּעָם*. "Turn to my poetry, O you who seek wisdom," he proclaims. "And you who are foolish among the people,

29 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, pp. 169-172.

30 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, As formulated by Bregman, "Ibn Gabirol does not make a sharp division between wisdom and poetry; he sees both as interconnected, flowing from a single source"; see Dvora Bregman, "Šenefat ḥur: Moṭiv beshirei haḥol shel shelomo ibn gabriol," *Meḥqerei Yerushalayim be-Sifrut 'Ivrit* 10-11 (1986/87-1987/88), p. 453.

31 Ibn Gabirol sometimes uses *מוסר* not as the equivalent of the Arabic *adab*, as is usual among medieval Hebrew writers, but as a synonym for wisdom; see note 1 above, p. 116, line 6 and p. 18, line 13.

32 E.g., *בשורי העליה* (Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 70, lines 1-11), which was recently highlighted in Tobi, note 28 above, pp. 245-246; and *התלאה מנשוא* (Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 139, lines 7-10), also discussed in Tobi, pp. 250-251.

33 Alexander Altmann and Samuel M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century*, London 1958, pp. 209 ff.; see Colette Sirat, *Les théories des visions surnaturelles dans la pensée juive du Moyen-âge*, Leiden 1969, p. 61, who takes for granted that Ibn Gabirol identified prophecy and philosophy. See also *The Microcosm of Joseph ibn Ṣaddiq*, Jacob Haberman (ed. and trans.), Madison, NJ 2003, p. 77, and the Hebrew text of Ibn Ṣaddiq's treatise *Sefer ha'olam haqaṭan*, edited by Saul Horowitz and incorporated into Haberman's book, p. 21.

learn wisdom; it will teach you the mysteries of the intellect (צפוני התבונות) ,and it will guide you to every esoteric thing."³⁴

Moreover, such passages sometimes make use of language traditionally associated with prophecy or specific prophets. Thus, Ibn Gabirol represents a friend as urging him to return to writing poetry after a period of silence with the remonstrance: *זָכֹר מֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר הָיָה כְּבֹד פֹּה / וְעַל כֵּן אֶהְרֵן הָיָה נְבִיאֹ* "Remember Moses, who was hard of speech, and so Aaron became his prophet."³⁵ Elsewhere, identifying his poetry itself with Moses, he says *וְקֶרֶן עוֹר פְּנֵי שִׁירֵי* "The skin of my verse's face emits rays."³⁶

Uncharacteristically praising another person's poetry, Ibn Gabirol rewrites the story of Jacob's meeting with Esau and his encounter with angels before and after that meeting: *וּבְמַחְנֵימִים פָּגְעוּ בּוֹ מִלְאֲכֵי / הָאֵל בְּטָרֵם כִּי יְהִי פִגְעַע / פְּנִיִם בְּפְנִיִם עֵת* "In Mahanayim, angels of God met him before he met me./ [Then,] when I saw him face-to-face, my life was saved, though before that I was perishing. / But after I passed Penuel and the sun rose over me, I was limping."³⁷ The passage is based on the end of the biblical story (Genesis 32) of Jacob's encounter with the angels before meeting Esau. Ibn Gabirol's conceit is that the unnamed poet had encountered angels, then met the speaker, who had been languishing but is now revived. After the speaker's encounter with the poet, he found himself, like biblical Jacob, limping as a result of the encounter, that is, realizing that his verse was inferior by comparison—an extraordinary compliment to a fellow poet. But though Ibn Gabirol is praising someone else's poetry here, the passage certainly demonstrates his readiness to associate poetry with a revelation from the divine world.

Even more suggestive are passages in which Ibn Gabirol refers to the prophecies of Balaam as a model, such as the one in which he says, *וְאֵדַע מִזְמַנִּי אַחֲרֵיתוֹ / כְּאֵלוֹ כֵּן*, "I know the outcome of my Time / as if Balaam were my prophet" (2:5). In his famous night-storm poem, when the moon, his mentor in wisdom, has become obscured, he imagines the clouds weeping over it "as the people of Aram wept for Balaam".³⁸ In yet another poem, he compares God's grace

34 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 61, lines 1-2.

35 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 5, line 20.

36 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 133, line 33, cf. Ex. 34:29-35.

37 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 88, lines 16-18.

38 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 117, line 18. The correct reading seems to be אַרַם, which is found in all the manuscripts but one, though Brody and Schirmann preferred the isolated reading אַרְיִם (= אַרַם). It seems more likely that Ibn Gabirol is referring to the Arameans' weeping over the

in elevating some men's speech to putting speech into the mouth of Balaam's donkey;³⁹ speaking of his own poetry in the same poem,⁴⁰ he applies to himself Balaam's characterization of the power of his own speech and even goes beyond it: "What do I damn that is not damned! What do I doom that is not doomed!" (cf. Num. 23:8: "How can I damn what God has not damned? How doom when the Lord has not doomed?").⁴¹

As a non-Jew who had prophetic powers, a speaker of inspired and powerful verse over which he had no control, Balaam must have been a figure of particular interest to Ibn Gabirol: his lack of control over his message makes him a perfect model for poetic inspiration. However Balaam's relationship to prophecy was understood (a number of different interpretations were maintained by medieval Jewish thinkers), all agreed that he had access to divine mysteries. He was sometimes understood as a philosopher—one who, though not Jewish, was capable of achieving philosophical illumination through reason alone.⁴² As a philosopher-poet whose life goal was presumably Plotinian ecstasy (*Fons vitae*, 3:56–57)⁴³ with the power of special vision that that would confer, Ibn Gabirol must have found Balaam a congenial spirit. We have noted the indirect allusion to him in the manifesto with which we began.⁴⁴

But even when Ibn Gabirol does not use biblical language associated with prophecy, his constant linking of poetry with divine mysteries gives him the aura of divine inspiration. This linkage is elaborately developed in his long poem עטה הור,⁴⁵ a panegyric prefaced by a lengthy tirade against his rivals. Verses 11–15 are about Ibn Gabirol's own devotion to wisdom; they include the famous line ,אני הבן אשר טרם יילד / לָכְבוּ בֶן כָּלֵב בֶּן הַשְּׁמָנִים, "I am the youth who, before he was

death of Balaam ben Be'or than that he is referring to the weeping of the Edomites over their king Bela the son of Be'or (Gen. 36:32-33). In his own anthology, *Hebrew Poetry in Spain and Provence* (note 7 above), Schirman adopted the majority reading.

39 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, note 1 above, p. 95, line 2.

40 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p. 96, line 18.

41 This is the excellent wording in the Jewish Publication Society translation of 1985.

42 Although rabbinic opinion mostly considers Balaam to be a wicked Gentile, some of the ancient rabbis held that, though a non-Jew, he had genuine access to divine wisdom. One rabbinic source calls him a philosopher; see *Bereshit rabbah* 65:20. Petrus Alfonsi counts him among such ancient philosophers as Enoch and Socrates; see John Tolan, *Petrus Alfonsi and his Medieval Readers*, Gainesville, FL 1993, p. 76.

43 The Arabic original of this passage is extant and was published by Paul B. Fenton, *Philosophie et exégèse dans Le Jardin de la métaphore de Moïse Ibn 'Ezra*, Leiden 1997, pp. 399-400.

44 For Baalam in Ibn Gabirol's poetry and the link between him and Laban as sorcerers, see the important article by Bregman, note 30 above, pp. 448-449.

45 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p 82.

born, had a heart as penetrating as a man of eighty" (line 11), in which he makes himself sound like Jeremiah, but with mental activity replacing biblical prophecy. He goes on to attack his rivals, explicitly connecting the ability to write poetry with the quest for wisdom, in verses 42–43: **אָנִי אֶחְקֹר צְפוּנֵי הַמְּלִיצָה / וְאֶפְתַּח שַׁעְרֵי**: **וְאֶלְקַט מִפְּזוּרֵיהָ פְּנִינִים / וְאֶקְבֹּץ מִנְּפֹצֵיהָ חֲרוּזִים // דַּעַת וּבִינִים**, "I delve into the mysteries of eloquence and open the gates of knowledge and intellect; I assemble strings from its scattered parts and gather pearls from its dispersed bits."

The expression **צְפוּנֵי הַמְּלִיצוֹת** is analogous to **צְפוּנֵי תְּעִלּוּמוֹת**, an expression that Ibn Gabirol often uses to denote the object of his intellectual quest. Wittily exploiting the commonplace dualism of matter and spirit that was taken for granted in his intellectual world, he attributes the weakness of his rivals' verse to the fact that "their souls are formed out of soil" and his own successful verse to the fact that "my soul is of sublime substance."⁴⁶ A knowledge of Hebrew sufficient to permit writing excellent poetry is also a divine mystery, **בִּינָה מִפְּלִיאֵי הַתְּבוּנוֹת** (line 66): "Its comprehension is among the most arcane of sciences." Threatening his rivals, he says that "the mouths of those who speak falsehood will be dammed up," neatly reversing the cliché **מִיטֵב הַשִּׁיר כֹּזֵב**, which declares that the best part of poetry is precisely its falsehood; Ibn Gabirol insists, rather, that there is a positive relationship between poetry and truth. Knowing Hebrew, according to lines 65–67, is also a matter of wisdom, perhaps even esoteric wisdom.

Similarly, **כְּשׁוֹרֵשׁ עֵץ**,⁴⁷ a poem that is largely devoted to the frustrations of his quest for divine wisdom, links his intellectual achievement with his poetry: **וְלִבִּי פְּתוּחִי / וְשִׁירֵי לְטָשׁוֹ שְׁבַע הַעֲרֵירִי**, "The gates of my intellect are always open, / and the razors of my poetry have been seven times honed" (line 34). Interestingly, in this self-defining passage, the feature of Ibn Gabirol's poetry that he singles out to boast of is its lethal quality. This quotation brings us back to the dual manifesto with which we began, in which he defines his poetry as prophetic and harsh.

46 The Hebrew word **פְּנִינָה** is often used by medieval Hebrew poets as an attribute of the soul. According to Schirman, *A History of Hebrew Poetry in Muslim Spain* [in Hebrew], Ezra Fleischer (ed.), Jerusalem 1995, p. 291, this usage appears first in the work of Ibn Gabirol; it is a calque of the Arabic *jawhariyya*, an adjective deriving from the Arabic word *jawhar* (pearl) and therefore sometimes used to mean simply "white." The *jawhar* of a thing is its essence, but as a philosophical term, *jawhar* means "substance." Ibn Gabirol seems to use the adjective *jawhariyya* / **פְּנִינָה** to capture the two connotations of preciousness and purity; "sublime" would thus appear to be a near English parallel. Cf. his **כָּרַר מַלְכוּת**, sec. 25, describing the souls that have achieved beatitude; and, in Arabic, *Kitāb iṣlāḥ al-akhḫāq*, describing man as *dhū nafsin nāṭiqatin jawhariyyatin, hakmatin, khalidatin*, "possessor of a rational, sublime, sapient, eternal soul." But the historical source of the image of pearl for soul is gnosticism; see Alexander Altmann, "The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism," *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism*, Plainview, NY 1969, p. 38.

47 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, pp. 128-130.

The dual aspect of Ibn Gabirol's manifesto achieves its most elaborate expression in קרא הצייר,⁴⁸ his famous poem describing a gift of flowers that was mentioned briefly above.⁴⁹ The poem is nominally a *madīh*. The *nastb*, which is entirely devoted to description of the flowers, occupies lines 1–29; the *takhalluṣ*, lines 30–33; and the short panegyric overlapping slightly with the *takhalluṣ*, lines 33–38. The structure is very disproportionate, since the *takhalluṣ* occupies a full four verses and the *madīh* itself only five.⁵⁰

The poem's long opening is devoted to a lengthy parade of similes. The catalog seems at first random, as if the poet is attempting to convey through its very profusion a viewer's bewilderment at the sight of the flowers, a bewilderment that beset no Hebrew (and probably no Arabic) poet before Ibn Gabirol. Yet on rereading, the images sort themselves into groups defined by their shifting focus.

In verses 1–12, the focus is on the flowers, which are variously compared to a sick woman, a dream, a city surrounded by walls, a child slapped by his father, a group of virgins or adult women who have aroused their menfolks' anger, and the sun. In verses 13–16, the focus is on the viewer. His mental state as he contemplates the flowers is described by five similes crammed into the three verses: he is compared to a courtier surrounded by intrigues; to a person who has had a bad dream; to someone who has fallen and scrambles to get up; to a vulture in a trap; and to a Talmud student puzzled by his lesson. Verses 17–30 return the focus to the flowers. They are first compared to people vaguely recognized; then their colors are described; then their texture and fragrance; and finally, their marvelous properties. They have emotions, and they inspire a spiritual satisfaction similar to that of the pursuit of wisdom; they can make you forget your need to sleep—indeed, they can revive the dead.

48 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, pp. 56-57.

49 The poem has gotten some scholarly attention, but the only full discussion is Masha Itzhaki, "The Tormented Flowers of Solomon Ibn Gabirol" [in Hebrew], *Mehqerei Yerushalayim be-Sifrut 'Ivrit* 10-11 (1986/87-1987/88), pp. 567-575. Yehuda Ratshabi noted two Arabic parallels to one of the images in the poem; see his "Flowers in Our Poetry from Spain" [in Hebrew], Z. Malachi and H. Schirmann (eds.), *Be'orah mada'*, Lod 1986, p. 397. The pages by Reuven Tsur cited above in note 12, though not directly about our poem, bear significantly on its poetics.

50 The reader expects line 30 to be the *takhalluṣ*, as the *manduḥ* is mentioned in it (though only by title, השר); but the speaker continues to speak about the flowers, and only in line 33 does he begin to praise the *manduḥ*, and even then, he doesn't drop the flowers until line 35. Thus the *takhalluṣ* might be considered to stretch from line 30 to line 35, with the result that the part of the poem that is pure *madīh* consists of no more than three verses! In this way, קרא הצייר resembles לכה רעי (note 1 above pp. 134-135), which also concludes a long, lively, and original descriptive opening with a merely vestigial *madīh* section dedicated to an unnamed patron (called simply גביר).

The most persistent aspect of the description of the flowers is their indistinctness. They are both mixed up with one another and hidden behind one another. They are covered by their leaves and by one another, yet the coverings are torn so that they are partly visible underneath. An aura of sexual shame pervades the whole.

The five images depicting the viewer's bewilderment climax on the unprecedented image of a Talmud student bewildered by tractate Yevamot. I do not believe that tractate Yevamot was chosen at random or that it was chosen merely because it has traditionally been considered one of the most difficult tractates of the Talmud. I think that the reason the tractate is named is the particular nature of the difficulty it presents. Much of the tractate deals with determining what relationships create a duty to perform levirate marriage and what relationships prohibit its performance. At issue throughout is the need to balance the obligation of levirate marriage against the risk of incest and other prohibitions. Hypothetical cases are treated in which seemingly infinite variables of life span and marital, parental/filial, and priestly or non-priestly status create impenetrable mental tangles. When you get lost in tractate Yevamot, typically it is because of the difficulty of keeping straight how all the people in a given case are related to one another. In the weary mind, they merge into a tangle of unintelligible relationships colored by hints of incest and other sexual prohibitions. Indistinguishability tinged with sexual innuendo is just the impression conveyed by the multitudinous similes of the flower description.

Yet there is a larger theme that arches over and organizes all the descriptive material about the flowers, a theme that is named at the end of both passages describing the flowers. At the end of the first passage, between the description of the flowers and the description of the person who contemplates them (line 13) we read: *וַיִּרְאוּ נִפְלְאוֹת חֲכָמָה וּבִינָה / לְרֵאִימוֹ וְאִינִימוֹ חֲכָמוֹת*, "They show the wonders of wisdom and intelligence to their observer, though themselves not wise." And at the beginning of the *takhallus* (line 30), we read: *וַעֲתָ כִּי שִׁלְחָם הַשָּׂר לְפָנָי / חֲשַׁבְתִּים*, "And when the nobleman sent them to me, I thought they were sealed letters from a king."

This last quotation is the key to the poem. The phrase "sealed letters from a king" comes from the Talmud, *חלמא דלא מפשר כאגרתא דלא מקרייא*, "A dream that goes uninterpreted is like a letter that is not read" (Ber. 55a). A dream is a kind of prophecy (*חלום*, Ber. 57b)⁵¹ but an indistinct one—you

51 Lit., "a dream is a sixtieth part of prophecy"; cf. *גובלת נבואה חלום*, "A dream is the dropped fruit of prophecy," J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck (eds.), *Bereshit rabbah*, vol. 1, Jerusalem 1965, sec. 17, pp. 156-157.

need to be half a prophet to interpret it. Likewise, the flowers described in our poem are a letter from God, but it takes a person with special gifts to understand their message and to make it plain to others. The flowers are, in other words, an instrument of divine wisdom, and the poet-observer is the person who has the key to unlock their mysteries.

These references to divine wisdom go together well with the last part of the flower description, in which their spiritual and magical properties are emphasized. The flowers seem to have almost no substance. וְאָכַל הַזְּמַן עוֹרָם עָרִי דַק / וְכָלָה מִבְּשָׂרָם. וְנָבַר מִבְּלֵי פִצְעֵ בְשָׂרָם / כְּמוֹ נֶפֶשׁ נִבְרָה מֵאַשְׁמוֹת הָעֵצָמוֹת // הָעֵצָמוֹת, "Time has eaten away their skin, so that it has become thin; it has consumed the bones from their flesh. / It has gnawed their flesh without making a wound, like a soul that has been purified of sin" (lines 21–22).⁵² As a result, their colors retreat from the poem's foreground, to be replaced by their fragrance. This may be their least substantial part, yet it has miraculous powers. They are a pleasure not to the sensualist but to the spiritual person, as is said in verse 25: וְנִפְשׁ הָאָנוּשׁ תִּשְׂמַח בְּרִיחָם / כְּלֵב חָכָם / בְּמִצְאוֹ תֵּעָלְמוֹת, "A person's soul rejoices in their fragrance like the heart of a wise man when he uncovers mysteries."

The last word is, of course, one of Ibn Gabirol's key words, the one that most expresses the lifelong quest of his personal poetry. It occurs prominently in one of his greatest, and rhetorically harshest, lines: וְדַע כִּי לֹא יִגְלֶה עַד יִכְלֶה / צְפוּנֵי תְעֵלּוֹמוֹת / אִישׁ שֶׁאָרוֹ, "Know that no man can uncover gnosis' mysteries until he consumes his own flesh".⁵³ The very thing that Ibn Gabirol tells us in his other poems that he has been striving for is exactly what he sees in the flowers: their flesh has been eaten away, and all that remains of them is the raw, spiritual core.

The flowers' spirituality is the reason that וַיִּנְדְּרוּ לְאַנְחָתָם / וַיִּנְדְּרוּ מִכְּלוֹת עֵינַי אִישׁ אֲלֵיהֶם / הַנִּשְׁמוֹת, "the gaze of men embarrasses them, but they sympathize with the sighing of men's souls" (line 24). They are in harmony with those who attend to their fragrance, their elusive spiritual essence. Their spiritual perfection lends the flowers power over the material world, enabling them to reverse the course of nature: to enable people to do without sleep and to revive the dead.

I think that this effort to locate the flowers' spiritual core explains the grotesqueness of the descriptions in the first part of the poem. The sensualist and the conventional

52 The first occurrence of נָבַר in the verse might mean "it has become purified," like the second occurrence, but I have translated on the assumption that Ibn Gabirol has in mind the rabbinic Hebrew root *n-b-r* rather than the biblical root *b-r-r*.

53 Brody and Schirman, note 1 above, p.116., line 7. Cf. p. 54, line 3.

poet see the flowers as merely beautiful. The spiritual viewer, the poet, sees the mystery that they conceal. To him, their pretty petals are merely flesh, and, as such, they are as much a distraction from spiritual truths as is his own flesh, as are other worldly desires. Ordinary gazers see the flowers' surface beauty; the ordinary poet, their spokesman, writes elegant trifles about that beauty to amuse them. But the poet-prophet is disgusted by their easy appreciation, their casual fluency. To him, the gaze of the ordinary viewer is an assault, a humiliation, and he is ashamed on the flowers' behalf.

This view of things is not merely that of a moralist. The moralist might see the beautiful flowers and think of their imminent decay, as he looks at a sunset and sees a prefiguration of death, or at his beloved and sees a receptacle of blood and filth. Nor is it even the vision of the average Platonist who permits himself to enjoy the contemplation of physical beauty as the step on the ladder of the intellect leading to love of God/truth. Ibn Gabirol presents us with a new aesthetic: focus on the divine wisdom hidden deep within things. This vision is completely at odds with conventional ideas of beauty and therefore completely at odds with the poetic conventions by which it is described. To the viewer who looks through the skin of things, who plunges down into the soul of man and reaches up to celestial realms accessible only to intellectual contemplation, obvious beauty is trivial; conventional poetry, empty; and those who cultivate it, Philistines.

The flower poem is the fullest realization of the program enunciated by Ibn Gabirol in the lines of manifesto with which we began. A poet with such a vision who has to make his way through life amid a crowd of ordinary consumers of flowers and poetry, controlling his rage as he struggles to pursue his lonely philosophical quest, could well characterize himself as he does in the lines with which we began, as a vulture in a cage.

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