Foreword to the 2013 Edition

Good, better, best; great, greater, greatest: the ranking of poets is a notoriously dubious activity, because no matter how laudatory or derogatory a judgment might be, it can be accused of ultimately being subjective. Yet there are certain poets who rise out of all this into a category of their own, whose work generates a new aesthetic identity and a new imaginative voice for their nation, and who incorporate in their poems so many of that country's passions, tragedies, terrors, triumphs, and affections that its culture becomes more substantial, more *real* to their readers.

Yehuda Amichai is one of this select, singular group.

I should admit that it seems odd to be saying this about a man with whom I dined, drank coffee, and heard read his poems aloud. Something in me keeps asking for more distance, more room for the awe that surely should be felt for such a poet. Shouldn't there be a discrepancy between the mind that brought forth the sublime work, and the ordinary, or nearly ordinary human being the poet himself of necessity was?

I'm hardly alone in feeling this. My wife and I happened to be in Jerusalem on the occasion of Amichai's seventieth birthday, which turned out to be something like a national celebration. We sat in an auditorium marveling as banks of television cameras—those primitive probes that pretend to enhance our reality with cathode alchemizations of it—scanned the face of the poet, then scanned it again, until it seemed Amichai would be turned before our eyes from a person to a monument. . . . Or not a monument, a repository rather, as though all the phalanxes of poems Amichai had brought forth might be made visible in his person if the cameras and the audience and the nation attending could only gaze with sufficient vigilance at his by then somewhat abashed countenance.

Amichai, of course, wasn't a monument; above all he was a poet, and we have to start there. He began writing young, was soon accomplished, but he was an experimental poet his whole career, bringing influences from American, English, and German poetry into his work, and into the wider spectrum of Israeli poetry, which had been mostly grounded until then in the early modernist Russians. His early work had a formal elegance and simplicity, influenced by the great (and nearly untranslatable) Rachel—usually called in

Israel “Rachel the Poet”—and by the medieval Hebrew, Shmuel HaNagid. The work of the first was intimate, wistful, and tragic, the other’s robust, wide-ranging, dexterous. Amichai’s poems from the start incorporated both tendencies.

Then, in the nineteen fifties, inspired, he remarked on several occasions, by Eliot, Auden, Dylan Thomas, Rilke, and later Lowell and Berryman, he, along with a few others, notably Nathan Zach and Dahlia Ravikovitch, devised a new voice for their work, and for Hebrew poetry itself. It was a voice that incorporated the natural speech rhythms of vernacular Hebrew while never sacrificing the textures and grand resonance of the language of the Bible, a language which in a sense they were lowering, discovering new tonalities for, and ironizing—Amichai in particular, perhaps taking his cue from Auden, remained an ironist all his life.

Thematically, too, Amichai was always questing, testing, scouring history and myth for sources to widen his perspective. Perhaps every word any of us write or say or think is consciously or unconsciously conditioned by a particular relationship to time, yet some poets, like Amichai, demand a kind of satisfaction from time, past, present, and future, and they cast their utterances into eternity’s void not merely to refer to the unsayables of history, but to embody it, bring it in all its complexity into their work. In Amichai’s poems, time becomes a substance as malleable, as elastic as consciousness itself; the texture of his recall, both personal and communal, is detailed, meticulous, comprehensive.

Yet, if Amichai’s memory was prodigious, it was not in itself sufficient to his purposes. Although on the surface his work is forthright, often apparently plain, his decision to create, or accept, a poetic self that would fuse his country’s historical identity with his own life was a wager, daring, valiant, mostly unheard of in even the most socially conscious poets. The poetic personality he devised was expansive, courageous, and, not surprisingly, charged with contradiction.

Amichai’s poems are obsessed with history, the history of his country, his world, his self in relation to world. But what is most crucial is how he writes poignantly, sensually, and in intricate detail about the substance of the present moment of the person in the poems, his thoughts, ideas, grand passions, fleeting emotions, resignations, and irritations. And that already vivid present is constantly informed by the past, by the present moments of that past, its vanished or vanishing personages. The poems evoke the lives and deaths of friends—friends living and friends dead and lost. There are enemies in the poems too, enemies in war, enemies in love; and strangers, glimpsed, acknowledged, actual, insisting that personal experience not be measured by war, terror, political upheaval, and despair, those large events that often confiscate our modes of expression. In Amichai’s work it is the intimate aspects

of existence that come first, and which determine the quality of our response.

Amichai had a traditional religious upbringing, and he remained all his life a man in constant if sometimes unspoken dialogue with the divine; his presentation of his god is personal, and sympathetic but challenging. He questioned god, and questioned him again, sometimes beseechingly, sometimes with exasperation and impatience. As Chana Boch's foreword to this volume points out, there is a constant reference in the poems to the religious past, to the historical-religious as it is evoked in the Bible, the Talmud, and the Jewish liturgical tradition. Yet what Amichai does with these sources is often subversive: the sacred is made profane, and vice versa; there is an irreverence in the poems, a playfulness, a sometimes absurd juxtaposition of the biblical and the modern.

At the same time, the physical body of the poet, his senses and his sensual memory, are essential to the poems' weavings. That body is concrete, and it is sensitive: it aches, suffers, exalts, eats, makes love, or doesn't. Amichai was an unabashedly erotic poet—has there ever in fact been any poet who wrote more voluptuously and delightedly about sex? Not merely sex as a device of allegory, as a path to spiritual knowledge or wisdom, not sex as noble abstraction, but sex as sex, as an inevitable component of love, as adoration of the body, both the loved one's and one's own—sex as the unique rapture of union common to us all.

In Israel, Amichai's work is cherished for being accessible to a wide audience, for being "popular" in the best sense, which surely has its origins in his insistence on the particular, the individual, the seemingly trivial detail that in fact is anything but. Yet his work also continues to receive serious critical attention, no doubt because its complexities are so subtle, so well incorporated into the surface of the poems. These more technical matters are also well represented by Bloch and Mitchell's selection: the deftness of the plotting, the verse music, the cunning syntactical patterns, and, most notable for me, the figuration—metaphors, similes, and the rest. Amichai was one of those wildly talented poets in whose work metaphors constantly erupt, flash, signal, shine: everything else, emotion, thought, experience, is intensified, transfigured, and exalted by that enviable, finally inexplicable gift.

When speaking of Amichai, Israelis invariably refer to the richness of his language, the chromatics he evokes in the music of his verse, the way the ancient and the modern effortlessly come together in his work. Hebrew, that ever old, ever young language, has changed over the course of Israeli history. Yet one of the reasons Amichai is so celebrated in Israel is because his poems have not dated, they maintain their unique power despite many of them having been composed generations ago.

One longs to be able to hear all those over- and undertones in the poems in English. We never can, but despite Amichai's persistent rooting of his work

in his own language, culture, and history, reading him in translation is never, as reading translations can be, like eavesdropping on a conversation in which we can't really participate. His poems when translated as sympathetically and inspiringly as they are in this volume come into English with force and grandeur.

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