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## GOLGOTHA AND THE GALILEE LAKE IN THE CONTEMPORARY ISRAELI POETRY – ON THE EXAMPLE OF THE SELECTED POEMS OF HEZY LESKLY AND AMIR OR

**Key words:** Israeli poetry, motifs of Golgotha and the Galilee Lake in literature, poetry of Hezy Leskly, poetry of Amir Or

The contemporary Israeli poetry – created by both the older generation of poets (Avraham Ben Yitzchak, Pinchas Sade) and those who began their careers within the last decades of the twentieth century – has explored Christological issues to a large extent. References to Jesus's life and death appear, among others, in the works of Hezy Leskly (1952–1994) and Amir Or (born 1956) who already, at the time of their debuts, were regarded as the most important poets of the younger generation<sup>1</sup>. Their strong position in the Israeli poetry was further confirmed by their subsequent achievements. Or is an author of ten volumes of poetry which were enthusiastically accepted by critics<sup>2</sup>, while the works of Leskly, one of the most promising Hebrew poets, have been acknowledged after his third book and discovered anew after his premature death<sup>3</sup>. What links the writings of both poets, labelled by some critics as Postmodernist<sup>4</sup>, are the references to New

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<sup>1</sup> A. Hirschfeld, *The Return of the Divine. Hebrew Poetry in the 1990s*, The Modern Hebrew Literature. The Magazine of the Translation Institute 1993, Autumn/Winter, No. 11.

<sup>2</sup> See [online] <<http://www.amiror.co.il>>, retrieved on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2011.

<sup>3</sup> See: G. Maayan, *Sheva shanim lemoto shel hameshorer* [*Seven Years after the Poet's Death*], Dag Anonimi 2001, No. 6, p. 20; R. Furstenberg, *Israeli Culture*, in: *American Jewish Year Book 1995*, p. 87, [online] <[http://ajcarchives.org/AJC\\_DATA/Files/1995\\_12\\_Israel.pdf](http://ajcarchives.org/AJC_DATA/Files/1995_12_Israel.pdf)>, retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

<sup>4</sup> See: S. Dotan, *Makom leshira belev ha'ir – meshorer hahodesh* [*The Place for Poetry in the Heart of City – the Poet of a Month*], [review: H. Leskly, *Ha'ahbarim veLea Goldberg. Shirim 1989–1987*], [online] <[www.poetryplace.org/laskli.about.html](http://www.poetryplace.org/laskli.about.html)>, retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2009; R. Furstenberg, op. cit., p. 87; A. Alters, *Hamishpaha hameta* [*The Dead Family*], Maariv 1992, 21<sup>st</sup> August, p. 4, 6; A. Hirschfeld, *Letaer et ha'esh velagaat behashmal* [*To Describe Fire, to Touch Electricity*], Ha'arec 1992,

Testament and the originality of their poetry which is unusual even against the background of very diversified and emerging from many sources poetry of Israel.

One of the most interesting examples of a motif of Golgotha is Leskly's poem *The Crucified* [*Hatzaluv*], published in his posthumous volume *Dear Perverts* [*Sotim yekarim*], in 1994:

What image has more truth, wisdom, beauty  
than the Crucified Christ in churches, cathedrals, museums,  
books on art?  
And the image  
of the real Christ on the real Golgotha  
what does it have  
?  
Flies, stench, sweat and urine.  
No parable will grow here –  
at best some rank, stupid weeds.  
O my Lord, my Lord!

הַצְלוּב

הַיֵּשׁ מִרְאָה נֶכּוֹן יוֹתֵר, יָפֵה יוֹתֵר, חָכֵם יוֹתֵר

מֵאִשֵּׁר

יֵשׁוּ הַצְלוּב בְּכִנְסִיּוֹת, בְּקִתְדְרָלוֹת, בְּמוֹזִיאוֹנִים, בְּסִפְרֵי

הָאֲמֵנוֹת?

לְעֵמֶת זֹאת,

תְּמוּנַת הַצְלוּב הָאֲמֵתִי בְּגִלְגֻלְתָּא הָאֲמֵתִית,

מַה יֵּשׁ בָּהּ

?

זְבוּבִים, סְרַחוֹן, זַעֲהָ, שְׂמֵן.

21<sup>st</sup> August; H. Hofman, *Shira al saf hatehom* [*On the Edge of a Precipice*], Yediyot Ahronot 1992, 4<sup>th</sup> September, p. 19; G. Aldor, *Hezy Leskly veharikud* [*Hezy Leskly and Dance*], Rehov 1994, No. 1, p. 89–91; N. Calderon, *Hezy Leskly – harikud shenimszach bli harakdan* [*A Dance Goes On without a Dancer*], in: *Yom sheni. Hashira veharok belsrael achrei Yona Wallach* [*Monday. Poetry and Rock in Israel after Yona Wallach*], Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hameuchad 2009. See: I. Shenfeld, *Panim vemasehot* [*Faces and Masks*], Al Hamishmar 1991, 10<sup>th</sup> May, p. 20; H. Amit-Kochavi, *Panim o masehot* [*Faces or Masks*], Davar 1991, 6<sup>th</sup> December, p. 26; D. Armon, *Pidyon hamet* [*Ransoming the Dead*], Ha'arec 1994, 27<sup>th</sup> May, p. 8; R. Somek, *Hashir vesimaney hamors shel hanefesh* [*Poem and Spiritual Signs of "Mors"*], Hamoznayim 1997, 27<sup>th</sup> August, Vol. 71, No. 10, p. 40; A. Levi, *Likro bli liftoah et hasefer* [*Reading without Opening a Book*], Kol ha'ir 1997, 30<sup>th</sup> May, p. 65; A. Revach, *Zman atid bezman avar* [*The Future Tense in the Past Tense*], Iton 77 1999, No. 20, p. 16; A. Reich, *Maasei hayom – yom kevria mehudeshet* [*Everyday Creating the World from the Scratch*], Ha'arec 1999, 10<sup>th</sup> November, p. 15.

מִשָּׁל לֹא יִצְמַח כָּאֵן,  
 אֲוִלִי אֵיזוֹ יִבְלִית מִטְּמֵמָת.  
 הוּ אֲלִי, אֲלִי!<sup>5</sup>

The discursive nature of the poem does not obscure references to spatial categories. It may be assumed that the poem is characterized by axiological spatial juxtaposition of “up” and “down” reflecting the feud between spirituality and materialism, culture and nature, sacrum and profanum. Traditionally positive emotional associations of the “upward” concepts refer here to those works of art which participate in the “sacred”. The “downward” concepts, on the other hand, represent here “the real Golgotha” understood as the background for the “real” drama rather than as the Christian holy place<sup>6</sup>.

The poem takes on the character of a rational reasoning: whereas the answer to the first, a bit ironic, question: “What image has more truth, wisdom, beauty / than the Crucified Christ in churches, cathedrals, museums, / books [...]?” seems to be obvious, the answer to the latter one: “And the image / of the real Christ on the real Golgotha / what does it have / ?” has been preceded by silence that signifies transcendental emptiness. This question indicates the lack of connection between the empirical world and its projection in literature and art, between what is signified and signifié, mortal Jesus and a-historical, kerygmatic Christ. The next lines which are a kind of a commentary of the lyrical subject evoke “the testimony” of incompatibility of the images embedded in Christian tradition with the real act of crucifixion. The vision of martyred Christ emerging from countless pictures seems to be – as it is implied by the mode of reasoning of the lyrical subject – distant from an attempt to show what actually had happened on the cross<sup>7</sup>. According to Leskly, numerous interpretations with which the Christian art has been encapsulating Jesus’s death seeing in it, among others, an act of God and a symbol of salvation and the sublime beauty, distort the essence of being. The dramatized composition, the beauty of winding lines, the refined colours and the depth of symbolic meanings are juxtaposed in Leskly’s poem with the pejorative unworthy issues of sacrum, that cannot be reflected in the sacral literature and art.

<sup>5</sup> H. Leskly, *Sotim yekarim*, Tel Aviv, Bitan Publishers Ltd. 1994, p. 15 (transl. by E. Dargiewicz and B. Tarnowska).

<sup>6</sup> As Mircea Eliade writes, “For the Christians, Golgotha was located in the middle of the world: it was regarded both as a peak of the cosmic mountain and a place where Adam had been created and buried” (M. Eliade, *Traktat o historii religii*, transl. by J. Wierusz-Kowalski, Warszawa, Książka i Wiedza 1966, p. 369).

<sup>7</sup> The lack of realism, typical of the art of the early Middle Ages, which showed the Crucifixion in a symbolic way, was related both to an inclination of this epoch to an allegoric presenting of reality and to the fact that at first the Christians “were repelled – as Władysław Kopaliński writes – by an ignominy of this cruel punishment and general contempt for those who were crucified – criminals and slaves. The representations of Christ suffering on the cross appeared as late as in the sixth century” (W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa, Wiedza Powszechna 1990, p. 175); compare: M. Lurker, *Die Botschaft der Symbole. In Mythen, Kulturen und Religionen*, München, Kösel 1990.

“Flies, stench, sweat and urine” belong thus to another, lower world – the sphere of death and posthumous punishment. In the same semantic field there remains and is identified with “down” animalized grass – a material, uncreative element of the universe. Though grass, especially green, is often positively marked in the biblical tradition, as a synonym of a pasture of a messianic aspect<sup>8</sup> (see: Isaiah 65, 10; Ezekiel 34, 14n; Psalm 22; 94)<sup>9</sup>, however in Leskly’s poem “some rank, stupid weeds” mean simply grass – the biblical symbol of vanity, worthlessness and sin (“when the wicked spring up as the grass, and when all the workers of iniquity do flourish, it is that they shall be destroyed for ever” (Psalm 92, 7; compare: Psalm 90, 5nn; Isaiah 33, 11)<sup>10</sup>. A conclusion that “no parable will grow here” makes someone think of Christ’s explanation of a parable on a weed: “He answered and said unto them, »He that soweth the good seed is the Son of Man. / The field is the world, the good seed are the children of the Kingdom, but the tares are the children of the wicked one” (Matthew 13, 37–38).

The vitality of the wild grass – *pars pro toto* of a self-regenerating nature, deprived of the spiritual dimension but concrete, alive, plainly immortal – seems to ironically juxtapose itself with the idea of Resurrection. Contrary to the belief of the Christians who in the mystery of the cross find the beginning of a new life and the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven, the place of the crucifixion remains here a barren wasteland, both in the material and spiritual sense. Moreover, it evokes the ancient literature concept of *locum horridum*, that is “a terrible place”, the most suitable appropriate background for sad and tragic events. One of the traits of these *loci horridi* referring to *kathabasis*, or the descent to the posthumous punishment sphere, was the scarcity of the verdant. As Teresa Michałowska writes,

Nature, if present, was manifesting itself in all its menace: among the most common images we find a stormy sea or a rocky wilderness<sup>11</sup>.

The New Testament is teeming with clues as for the look and location of the site of Jesus’s torment. According to the synoptic gospels, the hilltop called Golgotha, or Skull (Hebrew *gulgolet*, Arameic *gulgultha*, Latin *calva* or *calvaria*), was in an uninhabited area (Mark 15, 21; Luke 23, 26; John 19, 17), but close to a town (Mark 15, 21; Luke 23, 26; John 19, 17), a busy road (Mark 15, 29) and near a garden with graves (John 19, 41; 20, 15). This place, in Jesus’s times “deserted, desolate and resembling a garbage dump”, “walled in from the west by

<sup>8</sup> T. Hergsel, *Jezus cudotwórca*, Katowice, Księgarnia św. Jacka 1987, p. 159.

<sup>9</sup> All quotations from the Bible (see: 21<sup>st</sup> Century King James Version), available [online] <[www.biblegateway.com/](http://www.biblegateway.com/)>, retrieved on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Compare: M. Lurker, *Słownik obrazów i symboli biblijnych*, transl. K. Romaniuk, Poznań, Pallotinum 1989, p. 247–248. A grass is also a biblical symbol of a transitory nature of a human life as well blind chance (see: Isaiah 40, 8).

<sup>11</sup> See: T. Michałowska, *Poetyka i poezja. Studia i szkice staropolskie*, Warszawa, PWN 1982, p. 302–303.

vertical rocks in which the graves had been dug”<sup>12</sup> functions in Leskly’s poem as an equivalent to the eschatological despair. The exclamation that the poem ends with: “O my Lord, my Lord!” is not only an echo of the words of a lamenting psalmist (Psalm 22, 2), or the words of Jesus dying on the cross (Mark 15, 34; Matthew 27, 46), but it also conveys the violent feelings of the lyrical subject – the author’s *alter ego* (it should be additionally stressed that Jesus has been transformed here from the subject of the description into the lyrical “you”). The uncompromising stance of the artist who rejects, in the name of beauty and truth, all of the traditional conventions and meanings, are expressed here through the lament on Jesus’s suffering and probable futility of his sacrifice<sup>13</sup>. As Or notices:

Leskly refers to art, and Jesus is for him just a symbol. I think he doesn’t see him in any religious light, but rather as a psycho-historical figure. Both of us don’t think of him as pure spirit though, nor separate the elements that as far as I’m concerned, create the drama of Jesus as an aware spirit in this aching mortal body<sup>14</sup>.

*The Hour of Why* [*Sheat halama*], from the poetic cycle *Hours*, from a volume *The Mice and Leah Goldberg. Poems 1989–1987* [*Ha’ahbarim veLea Goldberg. Shirim 1989–1987*] which was published in 1992, is the poem where the readable allusion to the biblical verse “Eli, eli lama azavtani” (Psalm 22, 2), in the Christian tradition treated also as the words of Jesus on the cross, became a pretext for demonstrating a psychological situation of spurning and the lack of contact with another human being. The desperate question posed by the lyrical “ego” and repeated many times, remains unanswered since there is nobody at the other end:

Why? Why? He asks,  
but doesn’t know  
that he is asking.  
He thinks that he is saying:  
hello, hello.

But at the other end  
there’s no Ronit  
and there’s no Shuki  
and there’s no Yochai  
and there’s no Orna.  
There is only:  
Why? Why?  
Only:  
Why have you forsaken me?  
Why have you left me  
all alone?

<sup>12</sup> *Hebraica – Wielki Post. Na Golgotę*, [online] <<http://biblia.wiara.pl>>, retrieved on 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>13</sup> According to Amir Or, “I don’t take it that Jesus wanted to sacrifice himself at all. For what? He had enough work to do by staying in his body. I think it was a later Christian idea. The whole story seems to be rather distorted. However, in the given circumstances, I wouldn’t call his choice futile in terms of personal integrity” (from a letter by Or to the author of this article, dated 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

שַׁעַת הַלְמָה

לְמָה ? לְמָה ? שׁוֹאֵל הוּא

אָבֵל הוּא אֵינּוּ יוֹדֵעַ

זאת.

נִדְמָה לוֹ שֶׁהוּא אוֹמֵר הֵלּוּ הֵלּוּ.

וּמַעֲבָרוּ הַשָּׁנִי שֶׁל הַקּוֹ

אֵין רוֹנִית

וְאֵין שׁוֹקִי

וְאֵין יוֹחֵאֵי

וְאֵין אוֹרְנָה

כִּי

יֵשׁ

רַק:

לְמָה ? לְמָה ?

יֵשׁ רַק:

לְמָה, לְמָה

עֲזִיבְתִנִּי,

לְמָה הַשְּׂאֲרֵתִנִּי לְבַד ?<sup>15</sup>

This poem expresses a mistrust of the poet towards the words that are a kind of cipher hiding the double meanings. As the Israeli critic Shai Dotan notices, “»halo« takes the mask off and turns out to be a question »why«. The banal sound of the phone ringing, so mundane, becomes a cry for help, a painful expression of defeat”. Since, as Dotan continues, “the words can’t console, create a hermetic

<sup>15</sup> H. Leskly, *Ha'ahbarim veLea Goldberg. Shirim 1989–1987*, Tel Aviv, Bitan Publisher Ltd 1992, p. 89 (transl. by E. Dargiewicz and B. Tarnowska).

world of beauty nor substitute human relationships” thus, the words in Leskly’s poetry “regain their basic function which in poetry is expressing feelings”<sup>16</sup>.

The picture of Golgotha – shown in the context of aesthetic problematic – appears also in the English poem of Amir Or *The Right View*, in the volume *The Museum of Time* (2006). The Hebrew version of this poem was published in *Muzeion Hazman* [*The Museum of Time*] that appeared a year later:

And if I would have portrayed for you  
 this soft bluish light  
 the tremulous reflection of the poplar in the water  
 when a convoy of ducks is crossing the pond  
 and beyond the circular shore line  
 the bushes and the bay and the green mountain  
 melting into the cloud-sky in the rain –  
  
 wouldn't you search my eyes with a praying searchlight  
 shoot a duck or two down between the lines  
 and pray for the monster to emerge from the sea  
 and gape open upon your flesh a sky-high mouth  
 to redeem you  
  
 from this divine dullness?

But there's no need. Here, I'm sketching it for you –  
 the cross and the nails the convulsions the pain  
 wave after wave in his butterfly's wings –  
 your glowing faces the landscape  
 and finally his wonderful cry  
 the pleasure-strike hitting into your flesh  
 the quivering thrill –  
 Just one more minute. Patience. I'm almost  
 finished<sup>17</sup>.

הַנּוֹף הַנּוֹכַח  
 הַיְיִתִּי מִתְאָר לְכֶם וְאֵלּוֹ  
 אֶת הָאוֹר הַכֹּחֵלְחֵל הַרֵךְ הַזֶּה  
 אֶת בְּבוֹאֵת הַדֶּלֶב הַרוֹעֵדֶת בַּמַּיִם  
 הַבְּרוֹזִים כְּשֵׁשִׁינֵת חוֹצָה אֶת הַבְּרֵכָה  
 וּמַעְבָּר לְקוֹ הַגְּדָה הַמְעֻגֵל –  
 אֶת הַשִּׁיחִים וְהַמְפָרֵץ וְהַהַרִים הַיְרֻקִים  
 הַנְּמוּגִים בְּגֶשֶׁם אֵל עֲנֹן הַשָּׁמַיִם –

<sup>16</sup> S. Dotan, op. cit., p. 4 (transl. by R. Jabłońska and B. Tarnowska).

<sup>17</sup> A. Or, *The Museum of Time*, Dublin, Dedalus Press 2006, p. 5.

הָאֵם לֹא הָיִיתֶם  
 מְאִירִים אֶת עֵינֵי בְּזֻרְקוֹר חֲקָרְנִי  
 מִפִּילִים בֵּין הַשּׁוּרוֹת בְּרִזּוֹ אוֹ שְׁנִים  
 וּמִתְפַּלְלִים לְמַפְלָצַת שְׁתַּעֲלֶה מִן הַנֶּם  
 וְתִפְעֶר עֲלֵיכֶם לְגֹאֵל אֶתְכֶם  
 מִן הַשְּׂמִמּוֹן הָאֱלֹהֵי הַזֶּה ?

אִין צָרָד. הִנֵּה אֲנִי רוֹשֵׁם לְכֶם  
 אֶת הַמְּסַמְרִים וְהַצֵּלֵב הַעֲוִיתוֹת הַכָּאֵב  
 גַּל אַחַר גַּל בְּכַנְפֵי הַפְּרָפֶר –  
 אֶת פְּנִיכֶם הַקּוֹרְנוֹת אֶת הַנוֹף  
 וּלְבִסוּף אֶת זַעְקוֹתוֹ הַנִּפְלְאָה  
 אֶת מִכַּת הַעֲנֹג בְּבִשְׂרָכֶם  
 אֶת הַרְעֵד –

עוֹד רָגַע, סִבְלָנוֹת. אֲנִי כָּבֵר  
 מִסִּים.<sup>18</sup>

In Or's poem the landscape worthy of the brush of the most outstanding landscapists is juxtaposed with a fragmentary image of the site of Jesus's martyrdom. Whereas the first stanza of a poem, of a tight form, shows the space that is continuous and emanating peace, the rest of the poem contains only details that are building the tension and indirectly create the picture of Golgotha as an amorphous and desert land. The subject's attention is focused on the recipient who "here and now" accompanies an act of creation of a poem and simultaneously represents timeless type of a consumer of culture, whose preferences are well-defined. This consumer might be for example an enthusiast of video films, a thrill-seeker or one of spectators taking part in a "spectacular" execution of Jesus on Golgotha. It is worth adding that

because of its effect on the audience, [Golgotha] was for the ancient Romans simply an ideal place for slaying. Its character and location guaranteed a desirable and large public. The hill of a flat top with the crosses above, lying by well-travelled departure rout to Yava and Cesarea, was a perfect repellent sign – in weekdays for a few and during holidays for several dozen thousands people<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> A. Or, *Muzeion Hazman*, Tel Aviv, Hakibbutz Hameuchad 2007, p. 8. See: [online] <<http://www.amiror.co.il/>>, retrieved on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>19</sup> *Hebraica – Wielki Post...*

The ironic title of the poem refers both to the place that is chosen by an intratextual recipient (*locum horridum* as a symbol of cruelty, violence and self-destructive urge instead of *locum amoeni*) and his view on art. As the lyrical “ego” claims, the sublime art, despite its force to express the harmony and order of being, is not able to be a source of amusement, so it seems to be dreadfully boring. According to Or, the poem

is about people’s refusal to beauty, serenity, nature – in life and even more so in contemporary art. The destructive powers have so much more appeal, that people don’t care to pay even the price of eventual self destruction that this attitude entails. The monster can be a bizarre and sensational *epatez le bourgeois*, can be mass-media and TV culture, drugs, or Jonah’s whale. Anything that serves this destructive urge<sup>20</sup>.

In the poem which puts forward questions concerning the role of art and the place of an artist in society, the hilltop of Golgotha is a negatively valorized background of the biblical drama, and simultaneously a spatial equivalent for a self-destructive urge, cruelty and spiritual deprivation of the human kind<sup>21</sup>.

Whereas the cross of torment on Golgotha – the main symbol of Christianity<sup>22</sup> – was reflected in countless paintings, sculptures and literary works, the portrait of Jesus who walks on the water – an obvious sign of his divine nature – has not had so many representations. One of the examples of a polemical approach to the Christian glorification of suffering is the statement of the Israeli writer Oz:

I ask myself many times why Christianity did choose the cross for its symbol? Why did it choose an object that is an instrument of suffering? Finally I was worried by the Crucified himself – a portrait of a man who is dying in great pain. Why didn’t the Christians choose a man who walks on the water as their symbol [...] There are so many wonderful symbols in Christianity. But this religion chose the worst and the most tragic among them<sup>23</sup>.

The miracles that are ascribed by the tradition of The New Testament to the Sea of Galilee (Kinneret) – the first feeding of the multitude, and fishes, and

<sup>20</sup> From a letter by Amir Or to the author of this article, dated 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2007.

<sup>21</sup> “A society that failed in the field of art and literature is a society that has become mentally fossilized and harmed its own abilities of self renewal and rejuvenation” (*Interview with Amir Or for “Literatura na Świecie” by Beata Tarnowska*, p. 5, available [online] <[http://www.amiror.co.il/PDF/ENGLISH/Interviews\\_and\\_Critics](http://www.amiror.co.il/PDF/ENGLISH/Interviews_and_Critics)>, retrieved on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>22</sup> “Jesus is walking on the water towards his pupils »at 4 a.m.« (v. 48). In the biblical tradition this time is a moment of special activity of God. The time determined in verse 48 may be an allusion to The Old Testament, according to which the moment of overcoming the darkness of the night by the light of the rising sun is an exceptionally appropriate time for the activity of God. [...] The moment of struggling between the day and the night is often a time of Epiphany. In this perspective Jesus’s walk on the water points indirectly to His divinity” (M. Rosik, *Jezus a judaizm w świetle Ewangelii według św. Marka*, Warszawa, Vocatio 2004, p. 571).

<sup>23</sup> Oz continues: “I hate pain. [...] I don’t feel any attachment to the Christians’ hatred toward their own bodies. I want my body to be my friend. [...] A body is not a sinner. And a body is not a source of evil. Evil [...] does not come from the body” (*Śmierć nie ma zapachu. Z Amosem Ozem rozmawia Zbigniew Mikolejko*, Literatura na Świecie 1995, No. 1–2, p. 351).

Jesus's walking on the water<sup>24</sup> – are the subject of Or's poem *Miracle* [*Nes*], in the volume *Faces* [*Panim*], 1991:

A moon ripens in the boughs of the poplar.  
 Dawn wounds the eyes of the fishermen,  
 their arms ripple –  
 swifts of blood  
 struggling to fly out.  
 Dawn wounds their mouths.  
 A radio.  
 If they catch even one fish  
 there's the possibility of a miracle.

Jesus walks on the water,  
 his nipples brushed by a holy wind<sup>25</sup>,  
 the holy spirit  
 blows on his translucent grieving phallus.

The water has a life of its own.  
 Nuns, round stones,  
 step down to bathe among the doves.  
 The birds tend their nakedness.  
 The morning is pure.

A wine-stain spreads on the lake,  
 morsels of bread float.  
 The morning is pure.

גס

יָרַח מִבְּשִׁיל בְּעֵנְפֵי הַצִּפְצָפָה.  
 שֶׁחַר פּוֹצֵעַ בְּעֵינֵי דִגְגִים, בִּיזְרוּעוֹתֵיהֶם  
 מִתְחַבְּטוֹת לְצֵאת  
 סְנוּנֵיּוֹת שֶׁל דָּם.  
 שֶׁחַר פּוֹצֵעַ פִּיהֶם.  
 רְדִיו.

<sup>24</sup> Compare: “And Simon answering said unto Him, »Master, we have toiled all the night and have taken nothing. Nevertheless, at Thy word I will let down the net«. / And when they had done this, they enclosed a great multitude of fishes, and their net began to break” (Luke 5, 5); “And Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, He distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to those who were sitting down; and likewise of the fishes, as much as they wanted” (John 6, 11).

<sup>25</sup> In Hebrew the expression “holy wind” and “holy spirit” are identically conveyed by the same word *ruah*.

לו היו תופסים ולו דג אחד  
היה מתרחש אפשר  
גס.

ישוע פוסע על המים,  
רוח קדש על פטמותיו,  
קדש רוח  
נושפת על זכרותו השקופה המיבבת.

למים חיים משלחם.  
נזרות, אבנים עגלות,  
יורדות להטבל בין היונים.  
צפריים מעשבות את ערותן.  
הבקר טהור.

קתם של יין מתפשט באגם,  
פסות של לחם צפות.  
הבקר טהור.<sup>26</sup>

The space evoked in the poem reminds the ancient *loci amoeni* or “the nice places” that – as Teresa Michałowska writes – “bathed in sunlight and transfused with brightness”, “created a sphere favourable for life”, and its charm “enhanced also other sensual sensations: the sweet fragrance accompanied by them or the subtle sounds”<sup>27</sup>. The sense of the idyllic gentleness is evoked here by accumulation of those elements of the landscape and of natural phenomena which suggest gentle sensual experiences such as the blow of the wind, the shapes of feminine

<sup>26</sup> A. Or, *Panim [Faces]*, Tel Aviv, Am Oved Publishers 1991, p. 49–50; reprinted in: idem, *Miracle. Translations from the Hebrew*, Dublin, Poetry Ireland 1998, p. 36–37. See also: A. Hirschfeld, *Miracle-Nes*, in: *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself*, ed. by S. Burnshaw, T. Carmi, S. Glassman, A. Hirschfeld, E. Spicehandler, Detroit, Wayne State University Press 2003, p. 295–297; the Polish version: A. Or, *Cud*, transl. by B. Tarnowska, in: *Przed i Za. Antologia literacka*, ed. by A. Bykowska-Salczyńska and Z. Chojnowski, Olsztyn, Stowarzyszenie Pisarzy Polskich 2007, p. 359.

<sup>27</sup> T. Michałowska, op. cit., p. 302.

bodies compared with the roundness of water-smoothed stones, the cooing of the doves<sup>28</sup> or the light of the dawn. Even the moon, which in the tradition of many cultures governs the world of the dead, takes on the shape and colour of a ripe fruit, and not a sickle that would be associated with the death.

The red colour is an important element that joins individual pictures. According to Wassily Kandinsky's theory of colour, a fiery and pulsing with life red colour evokes "the sense of power, dash, energy, joy and triumph", "is seen in our imagination as **a colour without limits** [underlined by B. T.], more or less material"<sup>29</sup>. The reddish light of dawn, as if inducing the horizontal movement, is not only reflecting the face of the moon, but is also thickening on the glassy surface of a lake. In the poetic world, which is governed here by the upheaval of metamorphosis, the light is not only associated with blood and wine, but it also turns into blood and wine itself. Similarly, morsels of bread floating in the water are simultaneously the remnants of fish bait and body of Christ – the guarantor of Unity (compare: I Corinthians 11, 25; 10, 16–17). The analogy is replaced here by the identity of a substance since – according to The Gospel of Thomas – "the source of being is one"<sup>30</sup>. However, the idyll is streaked with the wrestling of spirits and body which is visible in the fishermen's efforts and the sacrifice of the nuns' who in the name of faith are renouncing their sexual lives. As Ariel Hirschfeld writes,

The tension is acute between what is seen – light, birds, trees, fishermen – and what is sensed. All seems burdened with blood, fiercely yearning to burst the bounds of bodies and fuse with the world, as does the dawn's light that "breaks" (wounds) "eyes" and "mouth"<sup>31</sup>.

The subtle erotica of the poem, evoked by sensual and at the same time apparently deprived of the material representation of Jesus's body and also the stripping naked nuns, shows a conviction about the existence of Oneness in which body and spirits, masculine and feminine elements, day and night are uniting and complementing each other. Amir Or blurs a border between sacrum and profanum since – as he speaks –

the mystic and the erotic dictionaries borrowed heavily from each other, because in fact, in terms of totality they are relatives. Religions either used this or fought against it, ruling over people by dividing them against themselves, telling them that their sensual nature is sinful and contradictory to their spiritual nature. I see no contradiction here.

<sup>28</sup> The dove which is, as the wind, a Christian symbol of The Holy Spirit and a human soul, in this poem is a metaphor of love and hope. See also: M. Lurker, *Słownik obrazów i symboli...*, p. 60–61.

<sup>29</sup> See W. Kandinsky's book *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, published in 1912, after: M. Rzepińska, *Historia koloru w dziejach malarstwa europejskiego*, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Literackie 1983, p. 546.

<sup>30</sup> See: A. Or, *I am you*, Helicon 2005, No. 67, available [online] <<http://www.amiror.co.il/PDF/ENGLISH/Essays/I%20AM%20YOU%20-%20reading%20in%20the%20Gospel%20of%20Thomas.pdf>>, retrieved on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>31</sup> A. Hirschfeld, *Miracle-Nes*, p. 295–297.

“The profane” is profane only if you betray your potential and drive for growth and understanding. To me human experience as such is neither profane nor holy<sup>32</sup>.

Due to the unification of the opposites the sense of harmony and beauty arises and a refrain that appears in the fourth and fifth stanzas heightens the contemplative and mystical character of the poem.

Thus, the title of *Miracle* comprises a number of meanings: it is a supernatural character of the Jesus’s walk on the water, described in The New Testament, and also an epiphanic beauty of the landscape, accompanied by the Revelation, and the opposite of the Eucharistic metamorphosis. On the other hand, it is worth stressing that a rather mundane event – an act of successful fishing – is named, with some irony, as a miracle. However, the irony is overcome by the dominant sense of empathy and participation in an ageless mystery of a person of Jesus who remains present “beyond time, in the passion of the nuns, the fishermen”<sup>33</sup>.

The picture of the places of the Revelation of Jesus’s divinity – Golgotha and the Sea of Galilee – in the poetry of Leskly and Or is a point of departure for the elucidation of the religious, metaphysical and aesthetic issues most notably on the notions of truth and beauty in art. The place in Leskly’s poems is monochromatic range of colours. It remains lifeless, barren (nothing but the wild stupid grass would grow here) and seems to be petrified by despair. So, the place is an equivalent of the metaphysical emptiness and the lack of the eschatological hope. The poet, who is not a believer of any religion, creates an autonomous, a bit surrealistic poetic world of compensatory function where the word is of greatest importance. However, focusing poet’s attention on the material of poetry is not tantamount to the autotelic notions in a narrow sense. Leskly is interested in the ontological status of the word that becomes – as in the Bible – a separate being-body and also its capabilities of expressing and hiding the meanings and emotions. The poet, who is desperately searching for the truth, love and sense, makes a cry of dying Jesus a camouflage of his own, most intimate experiences.

Whereas Leskly is interested mainly in the exploration of his own “ego”, as well in an aesthetic dimension of the work of art, Or is absorbed mainly in a super-personal reality in which the unity of the opposites and the lack of dualism become synonyms for the harmony of being. In his poems Or draws extensively, among others, on the pre-Judaic, Hindu and Greek traditions<sup>34</sup>, the polemics with a spirit-body was hidden. That polemics is characteristic especially of Christianity

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Amir Or for “Literatura na Świecie” by Beata Tarnowska, p. 7, available [online] <[http://www.amiror.co.il/PDF/ENGLISH/Interviews\\_and\\_Critics](http://www.amiror.co.il/PDF/ENGLISH/Interviews_and_Critics)>, retrieved on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>33</sup> From a letter by Amir Or to the author of this article, dated 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2007.

<sup>34</sup> According to Mike Scheidemann, “Amir Or is intensely curious about religion, and it certainly isn’t orientated around Judaism. For him, God is a presence, not an all-embracing Father. Or is equally drawn to paganism and the matriarchal religions of Egypt, ancient Greece and Rome, though organized religion is only of intellectual interest to him. He teaches comparative religion, but his real religion, his most complete commitment, is perhaps to poetry” (*Steeped in Tradition. Mike Scheidemann talks to Amir Or*, The Jerusalem Post 1996, 22<sup>nd</sup> August, p. 5).

though also present in Judaism. In the light of the poet's beliefs, Jesus – an enlightened master who “can't be called Jewish or Christian”, from the Gospel of Thomas – becomes an exponent of the faith in an immanent unity of the universe. As the poet shows, a truly spiritual dimension cannot be reduced to the notions that are typical of any institutionalized religion<sup>35</sup>.

### Summary

#### Golgotha and the Galilee Lake in the Contemporary Israeli Poetry – on the Example of the Selected Poems of Hezy Leskly and Amir Or

The article presents the motifs of Golgotha and the Galilee Lake in the modern Israeli poetry on the example of the selected poems of Hezy Leskly and Amir Or. Contrary to Christian tradition, Jesus is shown here as a man, an enlightened master who “can't be called Jewish or Christian” and a brother rather than God. The description of the places of the Revelation of Jesus's divinity is – in the poetry of Leskly and Or – a point of departure for the elucidation of the religious, metaphysical and aesthetic issues, most notably on the notions of truth and beauty in art. For Leskly, who was not a believer of any religion, Golgotha is an equivalent of the metaphysical emptiness and the lack of the eschatological hope. Whereas Leskly is interested mainly in the ontological status of the word that becomes – as in the Bible – a separate being-body and the exploration of his own “ego”, as well in an aesthetic dimension of the work of art, Or is absorbed mainly in a super-personal reality in which the unity of the opposites and the lack of dualism become synonyms for the harmony of being. In the light of the poet's beliefs, Jesus becomes an exponent of the faith in an immanent unity of the universe.

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<sup>35</sup> “As he's quoted in GT, we're all sons of God and ultimately we're all one, but Jesus was an enlightened master who experienced it and taught it. Yes, he was born and brought up a Jew, spoke to Jews with Jewish terminology and sense, but true spiritual insight can't be reduced to terms of organized religions, such as Judaism, Islam or... Christianity. He can't be called Jewish or Christian. He was neither. [...] I also think we live many lives, and some of us have been Christians, know the feelings etc” (from a letter by Amir Or to the author of this article, dated 31<sup>st</sup> July, 2007).