

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND YEHUDA AMICHAÏ'S POETRY

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyze how Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000), a national poet of Israel, manages to create a national and cultural identity. Poets help create the nationalist mythology of a country and people. They are part of what makes a nation as an imagined community, according to Anderson's views. Yehuda Amichai combines personal experience with national historical feeling. He experiences history on a personal level. He also combines the use of irony with very serious subjects, patriotic feeling included. This feature in his poetry can be due to the fact that there was a general tendency for the poetry of nationalism after World War I to limit its militarist tendencies (Aberbach 2003).

Keywords: culture, universality, war, religion, perception.

The state of Israel was founded in 1948 and Hebrew literature played a major role in its construction. Hebrew writers perceive themselves as part of the “national aspirations... of the Jewish people”, and as prophets (Gluzman 2012). A specific trait of national poet Yehuda Amichai is that he is universal in his poetry, and that he can be easily translated into the English language. The purpose of this paper is to find out why his poetry features universality. The main hypothesis is that these universal features could be to promote the image of the Jewish nation outside of its national borders. After all, until the founding of the Israel national state, they did not have a state of their own, but lived dispersed throughout the world. This could be a general feature of the Jewish identity and culture. The problem of a home has been a topic which had been actual for years. This problem is reflected in an interview (Poetry Foundation) and in relation to language by Amichai: “I grew up in a very religious household... So the prayers, the language of prayer itself became a kind of natural language for me... I don't try—like sometimes poets do—to ‘enrich’ poetry by getting more cultural material or more ethnic material into it. It comes very naturally.” Amichai has been a soldier and has fought in wars since the state of Israel was founded. The image of a universal national poet for the Jewish nation could be chosen as well as for as to promote the national image of the state of Israel throughout the world and to make other cultures aware of the Jewish spirit.

Amichai was born in Germany, in Würzburg. His family was Jewish and Orthodox by religion. Together with his family he immigrated to Palestine at the age of 12 years old, and then they moved to Jerusalem. His first job was that of teaching physical education. He fought in World War II, as he was a member of the British Army Jewish Brigade, and he also fought on the southern front in Negev during the Israeli War of Independence. His first attempts at writing appeared when he was part of the British army in Egypt, where he read through an anthology of modern British poetry. He was captivated by the poems of Dylan Thomas, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden. He will draw his inspiration from these authors. He started writing when he was ages twenty-two. He started studying the Bible and Hebrew literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem after the War of Independence. He fought in the Sinai War in 1956, and in the Yom Kippur War in 1973. He also became an advocate of peace and reconciliation in his area.

Starting with the 60s, Yehuda Amichai has been considered the most prominent modern Israeli poet. His poetry centers on the issues of everyday life, and also includes philosophical references regarding life and death. He has a delicate sense of irony, and at some point he struggles with faith and religion. He has been considered representative for his nation due to the fact that he has the skill to transform personal situations of love into collective experiences, including happy and unhappy moments, making them universal. Sometimes he is more innovative, for example when he was accused of sacrilege due to his describing God in a poem as a car mechanic, lying under the earth globe, trying in vain to fix it. In another poem, God is described as a tourist guide. As he was raised in a religious household, Amichai believes that he has managed to keep his simplicity of expression. His poems are simple, apparently, but they also have a deep meaning. Through his poetry, he tries to combine his biographical person, the typical Israeli man, the man of the twentieth century and his human condition. He also later criticized social and political institutions, as means of enslaving the life and happiness of the individual.

Through the translation of his poems into English, Amichai was recognized at an international level to represent the national identity of Israel. Of course, critics have argued that through translation, specific aspects of the Hebrew language are lost. However, Amichai knew the English language and he collaborated with his translators.

By looking at a few examples of Amichai's poems translated into English, we can see how his personal life mingles with feelings of national identity. He has a poem about his father, which could be regarded as universal:

My Father

The memory of my father is wrapped up in
white paper, like sandwiches taken for a day at work.

Just as a magician takes towers and rabbits
out of his hat, he drew love from his small body,

and the rivers of his hands
overflowed with good deeds.

It is a poem which combines concrete with abstract images. His emotions are completed by very concrete elements of daily life. The memories which are vague and include in fact several memories, are put next to elements of everyday life, elements which we overlook and which are not considered important, such as the paper that wraps up sandwiches taken to work. The image of the magician suggests how special the memories of his father are to him and his perception as a child of his father as being able to perform magic. As a child, he might have seen his father as all-powerful, protective and able to do things which looked impressive.

He also shares in his poems memories from the time he was in school, together with reflections related to learning. In the poem below, he mixes his personal experience with school, later philosophical reflections on life as an adult with a conclusion that surprises the reader. What was believed to be a universal experience proves to have as a setting Jerusalem, not just any country. In this poem, Amichai exemplifies his mixture of personal experience, which could be seen as universal, with his culture specificities, by the whole cultural background the word Jerusalem suggests. The poem below suggests a metaphor of life as a learning process:

The School Where I Studied

I passed by the school where I studied as a boy
and said in my heart: here I learned certain things
and didn't learn others. All my life I have loved in vain
the things I didn't learn. I am filled with knowledge,
I know all about the flowering of the tree of knowledge,
the shape of its leaves, the function of its root system, its pests and parasites.
I'm an expert on the botany of good and evil,
I'm still studying it, I'll go on studying till the day I die.
I stood near the school building and looked in. This is the room
where we sat and learned. The windows of a classroom always open
to the future, but in our innocence we thought it was only landscape
we were seeing from the window.
The schoolyard was narrow, paved with large stones.
I remember the brief tumult of the two of us
near the rickety steps, the tumult
that was the beginning of a first great love.
Now it outlives us, as if in a museum,
like everything else in Jerusalem.

The same combination of personal experience and Jewish culture can be seen in
Endless Poem:

Endless Poem

In a modern museum
In an old synagogue
In the synagogue
I
Within me
My heart
Within my heart
A museum
Within a museum
A synagogue
Within it
I
Within me
My heart
Within my heart
A museum

At the same time, the poem suggests the poetic persona's strong attachment to the Jewish culture, which is a part of him. By extension, the poet suggests the Jews' strong attachment to their national identity, which he views as a specific trait.

His poem about Jerusalem includes a combination of images from daily life, with details that belong to all life situations, with all small details that we notice as we go by through life. Jerusalem is presented as having a wide variety of images to offer, and experiences, from all perspectives, of tourists or of very religious persons:

Love of Jerusalem

There is a street where they sell only red meat
And there is a street where they sell only clothes and perfumes. And there
is a day when I see only cripples and the blind
And those covered with leprosy, and spastics and those with twisted lips.

Here they build a house and there they destroy
Here they dig into the earth
And there they dig into the sky,
Here they sit and there they walk
Here they hate and there they love.

But he who loves Jerusalem
By the tourist book or the prayer book
is like one who loves a women
By a manual of sex positions.

There are many perceptions of Jerusalem, and many sides to be explored and experienced, Amichai suggests in his poem.

The poem below could be universal, not attached to a specific culture, as the poet never makes any references to Jewish culture:

I Know A Man

I know a man
who photographed the view he saw
from the window of the room where he made love
and not the face of the woman he loved there.

The poem is in the form of a philosophical reflection on life, representing a universal experience. The same can be said about the following poem about the repetition of history, where, however, there are references to Jewish culture when the conflict between Arabs and Jews is mentioned:

I Don't Know if History Repeats Itself

I don't Know if history repeats itself
But I do know that you don't.

I remember that city was divided
Not only between Jews and Arabs,
But Between me and you,
When we were there together.

We made ourselves a womb of dangers
We built ourselves a house of deadening wars
Like men of far north
Who build themselves a safe warm house of deadening ice.

The city has been reunited
But we haven't been there together.
By now I know
That History doesn't repeat itself,
As I always knew that you wouldn't.

The references are to a specific culture and episodes of conflict, yet the poem also suggests a shared experience across cultures of history repeating itself.

The fact that the poet pays attention to details in everyday life in his poems is literally expressed in the poem below:

Try To Remember Some Details

Try to remember some details. Remember the clothing
of the one you love
so that on the day of loss you'll be able to say: last seen
wearing such-and-such, brown jacket, white hat.
Try to remember some details. For they have no face
and their soul is hidden and their crying
is the same as their laughter,
and their silence and their shouting rise to one height
and their body temperature is between 98 and 104 degrees
and they have no life outside this narrow space
and they have no graven image, no likeness, no memory
and they have paper cups on the day of their rejoicing
and paper cups that are used once only.

Try to remember some details. For the world
is filled with people who were torn from their sleep
with no one to mend the tear,
and unlike wild beasts they live
each in his lonely hiding place and they die
together on battlefields
and in hospitals.
And the earth will swallow all of them,
good and evil together, like the followers of Korah,
all of them in their rebellion against death,
their mouths open till the last moment,
praising and cursing in a single
howl. Try, try
to remember some details.

The poem above sounds like the teachings of an experienced poet, of a mentor to the readers. Poets fulfill various roles, and one of them is that of teaching the readers a different perception of the world. Amichai promotes his culture, which also includes universal elements. His poems can be regarded as an introduction into the spirit of the Jewish culture, where foreign readers find some familiar experiences to resonate with. Nowadays, with all the contact among cultures, we are suggested to become aware of the cultural differences and

specificities once we are about to step into a different culture. By gathering knowledge about the different culture, we will come to empathize with the persons belonging to it, and make our contact with them easier. We need to become aware of the differences and similarities. Knowing more about the habits and cultural frame of mind helps us avoid culture shock. Knowing about the similarities establishes some common ground of understanding, provides us with something familiar and makes our contact with members of a different culture smoother. We could use literature as a way to understand and empathize with a different culture, and Amichai's poems are a very good example, due to their mixture of familiar and specific references. The poetry of Amichai can be regarded as a cultural product of the Jewish culture, as it portrays their way of life, perception of personal relationships, and events which are landmarks in their history. We can use literature, and poetry in particular, to get better knowledge of the people we could get into contact with as tourists or if we establish an international collaboration in a certain domain, work or study abroad.

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