

Of Epos and Kitsch in Ronny Someck's Poetry

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Epos and pathos have long ago existed in a dangerous proximity; the manipulative essence of the pathos forever threatens the patience required from the epos, especially as those characteristics – the emotional extortion and the deep breath – are in themselves culture, space and time dependent. In Someck's post-modern world, it seems that the question of the existence of that “deep breath” – the last relic of the epic golden age – becomes of further importance. Is it so in our world, which is saturated with ideological, theological and gender “schizophrenia” – a world that smashed all types of canon and left us among heaps of ruins? How could epos appear in this world?

Every epos needs a hero, and every hero – according to the poet Octavio Paz – has a genealogy that is bound to lead to the divine; the hero is super-human by his very nature. Has the time of the epic hero gone from the world? Seemingly, a man of the new world can never perceive Achilles, Gilgamesh and El-Cid as they were perceived by the men of the ancient or the medieval worlds. And indeed, in many instances the hero has vanished from the modern poetic epic. The immortal hero was replaced in general by three typical expressions of a poetic epic. One expression is the T.S. Eliot style of impersonality, meaning the literary-existential fusion of languages and quotations, which testifies to the disintegration of their subjects. That “fusion of languages”, as it spreads across many lines and pages, becomes a cohesion that accumulates new powers and qualities. Another manner of the expression of a poetic epic is the rendering of independent life to quotes, snippets of facts and fragments of existence, which may appear in the poetic sphere in a concise and dense manner, and without palpable connections between one “fact of existence” to another. Guillaume Apollinaire's “Lundy rue christine” may be the most typical example of that: a non-random collection of random phrases that the poet's ear heard on that street. Not coincidentally, this way leads to the collage – with Apollinaire it was, of course, the calligram, the medieval picture poem, that was granted a new development, and that was expressed in the visual aspects of the poem. A third way to express a poetic epos

¹ Translated by Shir Freibach.

characterizes poets who differ from one another such as Saint-John Perse, Hart Crane, Dylan Thomas, Ted Hughes, Seamus Heaney, Octavio Paz, Derek Walcott and others – in their poems the epic spirit derives from the personal mythology, whose seed, in most instances, is clear and identified. That mythology is closely bound to the birthplace of those writers and to their travels as exiles to and from it. Those travels, towards the personal-mythic past and from within it, may present themselves as the direct or the imagined continuation of the ancient epos – as in Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* – or to indicate the non-feasibility of such a continuous tradition, as in Allen Ginsberg's "A Supermarket in California".

Throughout its history, Hebrew poetry knew various kinds of epos – ditty, balladic, macabre, even fascistic. From the second half of the 20th century, fascinating forms of epos grew within it, and yet one of the most interesting and impressive expressions of epic writing in Hebrew – the poetic world of Ronny Someck – is nothing but a new kind of epos; the short poem epos.

In his 1976 essay about the extensive poem ("Telling and Singing: On the Extensive Poem", in: *The Other Voice*, 1992, pp. 7–30), Octavio Paz set out two principals for defining that poetic genre: variation within the boundaries of unity and a combination of repetition and surprise. Surprisingly, those two principals exist in most of Someck's poems: his poetry manages to design an intense aesthetic experience, which fastens the collage's diversity within hermetic boundaries. That intensity is achieved mainly through that poetry's routine raw materials, which confront the sweet with the violent, the nostalgic with the futuristic, the harmonious and homogenous with the fragmented and the frenetic. According to Paz, the symbolic poem attributed the aesthetics of the short poem to the extensive poem, and similarly in Someck's poetry, the epos of the extensive poem transmigrated into a post-modern character by its intention – that of the short poem.

The kind of reality that is experienced through that poetry, and which is enabled by its prominent characteristic – the game of intermingling semantic fields – is designed to cope with a fragmented realism that may be called post-modern, and manages to break through towards an experience of unity and cohesion. In this context, it should be emphasized that writing in the first person – the appearance of the speaker in the

poem – that is not rare for Someck, invites the reader into its aggregated world, as it wraps the collage of similes and quotations with the intimacy of the human voice. This is also the feeling of the potential reader of Someck's poetry, who is once again becoming a hero within it, a reader who participates in the intimate game of reading the poem, whose familiar materials serve initially to invite him to partake. In addition, the complexity of the treatment of those materials is supposed to evoke within the reader the memory of the existence of the epic breathing space, that is revealed beyond the collage-like appearance.

As aforementioned, the epos is closely tied to the pathos, and indeed, at the gate of the two main characteristics of the extensive poem as defined by Paz, lurk two essential attributes of the kitsch phenomenon, as defined by Walther Killy (in his *Deutscher Kitsch*, 1962). The constant variety, which safeguards the liveliness and character of the epos, is tangential to the kitsch principal of accumulated stimulation, and the principal of repetition is relevant to them both – in the epos it is a motif-esque repetition, whereas with kitsch it is literally a constant replication. It is appropriate to examine the foundations of Someck's poetry against the backdrop of those dangers, as the epic itself – and even more so when his world is open to the enchanting, the lyrical and the romantic – walks on a thin rope above an abyss. Moreover, the deliberate lingering of Someck's epos in the twilight zone that constantly confronts “high” and “low” materials, and his vast usage of mass-culture references – present a further danger in the face of this poetry; that twilight zone is the living space of the sophisticated kitsch, which Eco and others called Midcult, which makes manipulative usage in the materials of “high” culture, by converting the quality of the higher aesthetic experience to an appearance of elitism.

How does Someck's poetry react to those dangers? Hereinafter is a discussion of the three ways in which this poetry copes with the traps of pathos and the obstacles of kitsch: usage of effect and the creation of a poetic collage, designing poetic stimuli and the creation of a spatial logic. The combination of those three components will clarify the meaning of the epic spirit of Someck's poetry and its methods of designing an epos.

1. The usage of effect and the creation of a poetic collage

It seems that the greatest sacrifice of Someck's poetry, which is out-rightly guided by the Yehuda Amichai-inspired ideal of “taking poetry down to the street”, lies in its need for an **effect**. This is undoubtedly a conscious sacrifice. It is possible to perceive the “taking poetry down to the street” as one way of rebelling against Nathan Zach's introverted poetry or, alternatively, a continuation of a trend that began before him – the open-to-the-world poetry in the spirit of Yehuda Amichai and Amir Gilboa. In any event it is as a descent for the sake of an ascent – the ascent of the readers for whom reading poetry is not obvious. It is a poetic perception that assumes that the mentality of the potential reader may be subject to change, and aspires to instigate such a change. Its uniqueness – as well as its charm – lies in knowing how to dismantle kitsch into its components and tackle it on its own ground with its own weapon – first and foremost through its unique usage of effect.

In Someck's poetry, an effect may be created, for example, by a surprising integration of a quotation from a known ditty, like the one in “Love Poem with a Ceiling Fan”: “If loving you is wrong, / I don't want to be right” (*Bloody Mary*, 1994) or by using a character that is between the mythic and the stereotypical, such as Johnny Weissmuller, who famously played Tarzan. At times a Someck poem concludes with a linguistic brilliancy, such as in “Hawadja Bialik”: “And from faraway the muezzin's call / is slung like a frayed rug over a donkey / at the end of its rope” (*Bloody Mary*), and at other times a poem opens with one such as this: “Stiletos were invented by a girl / who always got kissed on the forehead” (*The Revolution Drummer*, 2001). Sometimes the effect is manifested through a dazzling role play between the poetic likening and the likened, which does not cease until the poem's refined ending, as in “Poem from the Umbilical Cord” (*Bloody Mary*) or in the ars-poetic poem “Bloody Mary”.

An interesting use of effect is found in the following poem, which reflects a thorough and quiet treatment – already evident in the poem's title – of the subject of “The Other Germany”:

Tractors

The sons of Doctor Mengele sell tractors
On the road between Munich and Stuttgart,

Whoever buys them will plow the land,
 Water a tree,
 Paint his roof tiles red,
 And during Oktoberfest will watch the band
 March in the square like tin soldiers in a shop window.

In the beauty salon of history, they know how to comb a forelock
 Even in the hair
 Of a monster. (*Bloody Mary*)

The emotional effect of the first three lines is immediate, yet this strong main point – the combining of a beauty salon and history, and therefore the combing of the forelock in the meaning of cleansing the atrocity – renders in the entire poem another dimension, which is experienced only upon re-reading it. That which at first is perceived as a sequence of objective facts – a kind of new history, laid out in rural tranquility far away from Doctor Mengele's atrocities – is now colored by the strong metaphor of the beauty salon, which in fact illustrates the essence of Nazi kitsch, by powerfully inserting this aesthetic into the realpolitik atmosphere of the poem.

In his book *Reflections of Nazism: an Essay on Kitsch and Death* (1984), Saul Friedländer indicates that nostalgia is the binding component between kitsch and Nazi romanticism within an ideological framework that perceives the “model of future society” as “a reflection of the past”. Through the nostalgic tinting of the “future society” landscape – that post-war calm, when all return to their daily activities, and soldiers are but tin soldiers – the landscape in this poem illustrates what Friedländer called “a remedy for digesting the past”. Yet after reading the last three lines of the poem, the combination of kitsch and death cries out from the landscape description that preceded them, whilst the words “man” [*adam*] and “blood” [*dam*] echo from “land” [*adama*] and “red” [*adom*], the square and the band are reminiscent of old squares and bands, march-pasts are also becoming threatening and so forth. Thus, in one stroke of the combing of a forelock, the poetic tranquility has been eclipsed by a pestering and tainted mood, and even more so – as the ending of the poem leaves the reader in the lap of the strong image of the monster seated in a beauty salon.

The mode of reception of the integration of the linguistic-visual fields and the surprising transitions from one semantic field to the next, is somewhat reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's fondness of the post-aortic cinematic medium, and of his aspiration to bring the masses closer to autonomous art through the heart-warming corners of a new kind of aesthetics. Whether Benjamin's attitude towards the mass culture of his time – and to the one widely spread after it – was right or not, one undebatable key element of his view is being realized in practice reading Someck's poetry: whomever was tempted to read the poems due to their attraction to the enchanting and the familiar, discovers that in order to fully comprehend them they are required to perform acts of artistic deciphering and judgment. The dismantling of the familiar associations related to the poetic object, meaning its removal from simple meaning, may end up in Someck's poetry in the amplification of the plain associations out of a new point of view, or alternatively in an entirely new experiential encounter. Either way, the reader is required to cope with an unusual something within seemingly familiar territories. That being the case, the collage-like fabric utilizes the mode of reception that has been instilled in the internet generation, the flashes and the flickering images, and tries to channel that reception to its needs – that is to say, encouragement of activation of an artistic judgment, which also includes a critical aspect.

In this poetry, not only are seemingly-understood works often found out to be, following their analysis, multi-layered – in many instances the deciphering of the poems exposes beyond the enchanting the existence of a highly violent reality. A meticulous examination reveals that the blood, the gun shot, the fist and the preying animal appear in Someck's poems no less than guitar strings, bras, trains of orgasm and boxes of sweets. Furthermore, those poems always have at their center an individual, whether it is the poet dubbing his own voice or whether it is a figure drawn from the crowd. The urban mass of a crowd of individuals yearning for entertainment and the amorphous aspirations of greatness of progress itself, forever surrender in this poetry to the living and the “authentic” – to “the technology of the camel” (*Bloody Mary*).

In many instances, the sensation of the photogenic intimacy that is seemingly created by the imagery collage and the materials of “pulp” culture, is intended to lead the eye

towards the flickering neon signs at the entrance of night clubs, to forlorn urban tunnels, to the dissatisfaction that becomes immanent in a city “that is drawn like a gun”, and to the streets that are thirsty for love – which are the real center of gravity of the poems.

In this context it is worthwhile noting the moving poem “Secret”, a love poem to the poet's mother, who wept when hearing Abd el-Wahab's “Cleopatra”, a poem that copes – in its own words – with the memory of a tear: “Maybe I shouldn't tell this / about my mother, but she wept whenever she heard / “Cleopatra” [...] It's a long time since I crowded together the words *nostalgia*, / *tears*, or *memories*, but these words are the teeth of a comb / with which I, not some Egyptian handmaid, run through your hair” (*The Revolution Drummer*). The coping with the kitsch is conscious and up front. In this poem, depicting the mother weeping upon hearing “Cleopatra” effectively cancels out the false authenticity of the work; that is to say, something reminiscent of the other culture – which “Cleopatra”, as a 'pulp' product masquerading as autonomous work, represents – and shifts – by developing the Pharaoh-esque metaphor (“but these words are the teeth of a comb / with which I, not some Egyptian handmaid, run through your hair”) – to the regions of real pain. Kitsch, which appropriated the mother's experiences, suddenly lays down its pretension, and loses its kitsch aspiration. In its new poetic context, “Cleopatra” becomes part of the existential aspiration of an artistic whole that has the power to convey through kitsch, and in effect from within it, that which was once swallowed up in the kitsch nostalgia.

2. Designing poetic stimuli

The poetic stimuli of Someck's poetry – in complete contrast to those bound by the rules of “commodity fetishism” – are not **interchangeable**, and with that they celebrate their triumph over kitsch. A typical example is found in the poem “For Marilyn Monroe”, taken from Someck's first book, *Exile* (1976):

For Marilyn Monroe

So many sleeping pills spill from Marilyn's torn-out eyes.
They speed past the barrier of her red lips
like boxcars, dissolve like gravel
under the tracks at her body's hot stops.

Only her breasts remain, discarded on the sidewalk
 like ticket stubs punched out
 in places conductors from long ago used to love.

If we were to swap “Marilyn's torn-out eyes” for example with “Madonna's torn-out eyes” – the poem would lose all its meaning. This is a poem that utilizes the pop-art halo that encompassed the starlet – and especially her act of suicide, which became the symbol of the transformation of the goddess of the masses into the entire imagery of herself. This tension between the human and its commercialization is expressed in the poem through never ending analogies between the parts of the body, which undergoes a decentralization process (eyes, lips, breasts, hot body stations) and fetishization, and the motion of the train – perhaps the mechanical motion of mass production, a motion onset by an accident (that is intuitively demonstrated by the scattered pills, the torn-out eyes and the red of the lips that melt like blood). It is a poem that points at a chronicle of a death foretold, which is the outcome of the encounter of a human being with the human being as his own imagery – an encounter that is brilliantly illustrated by the integration of two semantic fields: the human, in which it is possible to describe only body parts rather than a whole body, and the mechanical, according to which the beginning of the train's motion is in the torn-out eyes – in the static death.

It is possible to address this imagery whirlpool of body parts and train motion as the movement of the gaze of those observing the “hot stops” – the gaze of the public, which is the one tearing apart the body and separating it into its parts. As the body had already become an imagery of a body, those “conductors” who yearn for the nipple will find none but “punched out” breasts, breasts that were caressed by the fetish, lacking a real nipple. Within that, we must also observe the epic aspect the poem equates to that worshipping of the starlet, which is also the worshipping of a starlet's death – an aspect that is manifested through the repetition of phrases such as “a long journey” or “from long ago”, in the depiction of the journey itself and in the inner rhyming of the couplet that closes the poem: “like ticket stubs punched out / in places conductors from long ago used to love”.

Those stimuli in Someck's poetry – including, on the one hand, the use of words taken from the epic dictionary, such as names of heroes of modern myths, and on the other

hand in nouns with clear spatial connotations such as god, wind and border – indicates at times the poetry and magic of the world, that are still obtainable, even within the boundaries of realism. The existential fragmentation – that which was “torn out of the body”, as in the poem “A Pirate Love Poem” – is also the source of longings that have always accompanied Someck's poetry, starting with the first poem in the book *Exile*, “Poem of Longing”. Alongside the plucked feathers that are longing for the body, or the shoes that dream of the animal skin torn from it, appears the trigger that awaits the digital pulp of the finger to pull it. In one way this fragmentation is written about as: “Celluloid and handcuffs. **You can make romance out of anything**, / even out of a love that hangs on a washing line” (*Panther*, 1989); and in another way it must be declared: “Let there be no mistake: I am **a defector from the army of nostalgia**” (*Asphalt*, 1984). Those are the two ends of Someck's poetry, and probably also its poetic boundaries. From the urban and Israeli end, the “celluloid of romance” is revealed to the eye – anything that appears as it is along a time section that bleaches out, for the sake of its own daily survival, the remnants of gun powder. And in the desert, universal end, in which “the nostalgia poker” (*The Revolution Drummer*) deceives the actors of memory, stands the defector, the exile, who smokes a cigarette below his Marlboro hat, while knowing he is not really a cowboy: “And I speak Bedouin with a Tel-Aviv accent” (*Solo*, 1980).

3. The creation of a spatial logic

Alongside the use of a collage technique and poetic stimuli, Someck's world demonstrates a spatial logic, which renders the act of collage combination and the compilation of fragments their epic character. This character is the breathing space that enables the creation of an intense unification experience, a sequence of temporalities in which the reader may immerse themselves. This experience encourages the act of cognitive mapping that Someck's reader can transpose onto their surrounding reality, through the unique usage that these poems make of the materials or expositions of the multinational capital space, and in particular of the materials of the culture industry.

The demilitarized, differential self, so typical to post-modern poetry and thought, is exposed here to a principal possibility for a social status and political definition of

their place in the world. Understandably, these poems are but the first stage on the road to such a definition, yet through their unique perception of “the relationship between culture and pedagogy” (in the writings of Fredric Jameson) – between a world that needs poetry and a poetry that needs the world – and by means of the attributes of that poetry, the reader makes their first emancipatory step.

It is interesting to note in this context two poems by Someck that correspond with Yona Wallach. Although Wallach's influence on this poetry merits a separate study, it seems that a fundamental element in Someck's world could definitely have derived from her poetry. Meaning, the manner of coping with that same differentiation of the self. With Wallach the split – the existential, gender, linguistic – lies with the speaking subject, whereas Someck's poetry assumes the existence of such a differentiation in its readers, as if it has internalized the split into the core of its poetic foundations. It may be that the act of fusing quotations, linguistic registers and different semantic fields in Someck's poems is a kind of reaction to the never-ceasing transformation of Wallach's subject. Already in his first book, Someck turned this fragmented subject into a whole subject: “Pigeons, / now pigeons, / the tiles lusting in the fence of her house are painted the color of a postcard / from San Marco, / bordeaux colored clouds / an electrocuted segment of sky / and at the end of the square more than a thousand pigeons are screwed in like nightlights. // Whoever covered in her belly feather after feather did a nice job” (*Exile*). Apart from the act of the stitching together of the feathers we should note the similarity between the thousand pigeons that are screwed in like nightlights and the effect of a line like “Marilyn's torn-out eyes”. In both instances it is a reference to the fragmentation of the self – in the poem for Marilyn Monroe its tragic split was described, whereas here the description is of the act of its stitching together. From a later poem, which corresponds with Wallach more openly – “Indian Yona” – we may learn how Someck's poetry turns fragmentation into epos. Similarly to the poem about Marilyn Monroe, this poem deals with a chronicle of a death foretold, which involves the confronting of a man with his self imagery. However, Wallach's marks of transformative states – the snow in Kiryat Ono, the grizzly she-bear and the birds that talk from different throats and a princess's delusions of kingdom – are rendered in this poem with a new meaning through the unifying title “Indian Yona”. Once it is crowned with this title, the tortured self becomes a part of the Winnetou stories. In the

place of Wallach's great yearnings for a wholeness beyond identity and gender – and, as an outcome, also beyond language – Someck's poetry positions a world that widens the boundaries of the self, a world that has pre-decided to “not behave as a part, / behave as a whole”. Through this spatial-epic logic, this poetry declares that everything which rages, which is wounded and which celebrates within its poetic boundaries – the flyovers, the victims, the carnivals – is a demonstration of freedom at the affirmation square.

The unity of experience and existence, and its consequent definition of the place of a human being in the world – that poetry reader who becomes a hero – are the typical epic elements of this poetry. This epic poetry does not look back, but rather around. The whole and unified world that is constructed each time within the tiny boundaries of another poem, is made possible due to its inherent openness to the living, and to its motivating will to involve the reader whoever they are in the poetic game, to afford them the breathing space that seemed to have been lost from the world. Whomever is not deaf to the alarm sirens of their existence; whomever's days conspired with them among bricks, cranes and tractors; whomever chose to bravely scout the love deserts of their life – all those will find in Someck's poetry something that can ignite their dreams with jet fuel.