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Poetry, Messianism, and *Literatoyre* in Aaron Zeitlin's *Keter*

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The *Shtik Kabole* Niger Couldn't Digest: Poetry, Messianism, and *Literatoyre* in Aaron Zeitlin's *Keter*

Nathan Wolski

Abstract: *This study presents a translation and analysis of Aaron Zeitlin's (1898-1973) poem "Keter: Fragmenten fun a rapsodye," published in 1923, at the height of the Warsaw expressionist explosion of the early twenties. The poem belongs to the same "neo-kabbalistic" phase in Zeitlin's writings as his book-length poem Metatron: Apokaliptishe poema of the previous year. Unlike Metatron, which was very favorably received by Shmuel Niger, who saw in it an illustration of the power of modern myth, "Keter" was summarily dismissed by the critic as "a shtik kabole I couldn't digest." Zeitlin's kabbalistic poetics offer a stunning, yet difficult, fusion of Yiddish expressionism and futurism on the one hand, and mystical and messianic thought on the other. Uncovering his kabbalistic and hasidic sources reveals the depth of his poetic quest: the desire to transcend history, time, and duality. I conclude with some reflections on the critical failure of his project, which I explore through comparisons with Peretz's neo-hasidism, and through the under-theorized, yet rich, term "literatoyre."*

Introduction: The Yiddish Poet of Kabbalah

Judged strictly from the point of view of its reception, Aaron Zeitlin's (1898-1973) 1923 poem "Keter: Fragments of a Rhapsody" was a complete failure. If one mark of a poem's success is its capacity to inspire more poetry, then not only did this poem generate no discernible response, its critical failure led the poet to cease publishing poetry for many years. Indeed, it was Shmuel Niger's (the preeminent literary critic of the time) curt dismissal of the long and complex poem as "a shtik kabole vos ikh hob nisht gekent

tsekayen” (“a piece of Kabbalah I couldn’t digest”)¹ that so devastated the young Zeitlin and led him to abandon his neo-kabbalistic poetic project in favor of dramas. Were Zeitlin’s poem an aesthetic failure, or merely not compelling and unoriginal, one could perhaps chalk up Niger’s response to the subjectivity of readers. But when compared with other modernist and avant-garde Yiddish works penned in the early 1920’s, Zeitlin’s poem at the very least holds its own—which makes Niger’s dismissal so surprising and interesting. Moreover, only one year earlier, Niger was quite receptive to the young Zeitlin’s first “great” work, *Metatron: An Apocalyptic Poem*, noting that in *Metatron*, Yiddish literature had encountered something new:

But before one wants to enter deeper into the world of *Metatron*, one must know that one needs to be prepared. He who has never been close to the *pardes* of Kabbalah, he who has never tasted the taste of holy names and combinations which fill the air of the *Zohar* and other similar books will stand before many parts of the poem like before a door with a secret lock. He will sense the rhythm and the general philosophical poetic sense...but many essential details will be lost to him. The symbolism and syntax of the poem are built on the foundation of our old mystical literature. Already prior to Aaron Zeitlin, individual writers of ours have drawn from the roots of the Kabbalah—Peretz, Berdyczewski, Hillel Zeitlin, Nister, and in part Leivick, but no one has yet drawn so close to the mysterious well as Aaron Zeitlin, and by no one has sprouted such a new and modern branch from the old root like the poem *Metatron*.²

Niger’s response to “Keter” raises questions about the viability of Zeitlin’s early poetic project, what he called his “neo-kabbalism”: the unique and masterful fusion of Kabbalah and poetry. Given the literary-cultural context in which he was writing—secular Yiddish modernism, more often than not politically and ideologically motivated—could his kabbalistic-poetic project have ever succeeded? And if not, why not?

Zeitlin’s kabbalistic poetics—by which I mean not merely his use of kabbalistic terminology and re-presentations of kabbalistic themes and concepts, but, more broadly, his mystical-poetic quest—inform much of his work from his “breakthrough” years of 1922-1926³ until his death. Writing in 1948, Abraham Joshua Heschel, who

^{1*} My thanks to David Roskies, the folks at *In geveb*, and the two insightful reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this work. Unless stated, all translations are my own. All *Zohar* translations are from the *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Stanford University Press, 2004-2017.

Shmuel Niger, “On a tsenter,” *Di tsukunft*, May 1924, 329.

² Shmuel Niger, “A mistishe poeme,” *Der tog*, September 3, 1922, 6.

³ It was in these years, which coincide with the high-point of avant-garde and modernist Yiddish poetry and drama, that Zeitlin composed *Metatron* (1922), “Keter: Fragments of a Rhapsody” (1923), “Man, Woman and Serpent” (1924), “Yosef della Reina” (1926), “The Cult of Nothingness and Art as it Should Be” (1926), as well as his first play, *Jacob Frank* (1926, published in 1929). *Metatron: Apokaliptishe poeme* (Warsaw: Alt-Yung, 1922); “Keser: Fragmentn fun a rapsodye” in *Varshever almanakh* (Warsaw: Beletristn-Fareynikung, 1923), 1-19; “Man, froy un shlang,” *Ilustrirte vokh* (Warsaw) 25 and 27, June 26 and July 10, 1924, 14-15, 15; “Der kult fun gornisht un di kunst vi zi darf zayn: Protest un ani-mamin,” in

drew much inspiration from Aaron's father, Hillel,⁴ the famed mystic-scholar-writer-journalist of Warsaw, noted that nearly alone among the Yiddish moderns, "Aaron Zeitlin is one of the few individuals in whom thoughts of Jewish mysticism have become part of his inner essence, an element of his imagination, with which he approaches life, from which he forms his poetic vessels... The *sefirot* of the Kabbalah are as intelligible to him as modern sociology is to others."⁵ Briefly stated, Zeitlin's Yiddish Kabbalistic poetic project, his "Yidish-kaboledik,"⁶ sought nothing less

Varshever shriftn (Warsaw: Literatn-klub baym fareyn fun yidishe literatn un zhurnalstn in Varshe, 1926-27), 1-9; "Yoysef Dele-Reyne," in *Varshever shriftn*, 1-32; *Yankev Frank* (Vilna: Kletskin, 1929). Yechiel Szeintuch remains the only scholar to have devoted attention to this important period in Zeitlin's oeuvre, which tends to be overshadowed (understandably) by his Holocaust poetry. See Yechiel Szeintuch, "Between Literature and Vision: The Warsaw Period in the Bi-Lingual Work of Aaron Zeitlin" ["Ben sifrut le-hazon: tequfat Varsha be-yetsirato ha-duleshonit shel Aharon Tseitlin"] in *Studies on Polish Jewry: Paul Glickson Memorial Volume*, eds. Ezra Mendelson and Chone Shmeruk (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1987), 117-142. For detailed information on Zeitlin's biography, see the *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (online). Most of Zeitlin's Yiddish poems can be found in the two volume collection, Aaron Zeitlin, *Lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn* (New York: Bergen Belsen Memorial Press, 1967 and 1970). A small English selection is available in Morris Faienstein, *Poems of the Holocaust and Poems of Faith* (New York: Iuniverse, 2007). Three of his plays have been translated into Hebrew. See Yechiel Szeintuch (ed.), *Brener, Esterke and Weiztman the Second* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993). For a detailed bibliography of Zeitlin's works, see Yechiel Szeintuch, *Aaron Zeitlin and Yiddish Literature in Interwar Poland, [Be-reshut ha-rabim u-be-reshut ha-yahid: Aaron Tseitlin ve-sifrut yiddish]* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), 335-36, and the entry for him in the online *Lexicon of New Hebrew Literature (Lexicon ha-sifrut ha-ivrit ha-hadashah)*. The best scholarship on Zeitlin is to be found in Yechiel Szeintuch's numerous studies. See, by way of example, "Between Literature and Vision: The Warsaw Period in the Bi-Lingual Work of Aaron Zeitlin," 117-142. See also Isidoro Niborski, *Mysticisme et Écriture: l'Œuvre et la Pensée d'Aaron Zeitlin* (Thèse de Doctorat, Sorbonne, 1992); Miriam Trinh, "Anticipation of the Holocaust in the Poetic Works of Aaron Zeitlin" ["Hatramat ha-shoah be-shirato shel Aharon Tseitlin"], *Khulyot* 6 (2000): 141-185; for a general overview, see Emanuel S. Goldsmith, "Aaron Zeitlin" in *Holocaust Literature: An Encyclopedia of Writers and Their Work*, ed. S. Lillian Kremer (New York: Routledge, 2002), vol. 2, 1352-1359. As for my own research, see Nathan Wolski, "The Secret of Yiddish: Zoharic Composition in the Poetry of Aaron Zeitlin," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 20 (2009): 147-180; idem, "Aaron Zeitlin's Yosef della Reina: A Modern Sabbatean Tragedy," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 38 (2017): 7-52; Aaron Zeitlin, "My Father." Translated by Nathan Wolski. *In geveb* (January 2017); "Man, Woman, and Serpent: Kabbalah and High Modernity in the Early Writings of Aaron Zeitlin," *In geveb* (November, 2018).

⁴ The literature on Hillel Zeitlin is vast. See by way of example, Arthur Green, "Three Warsaw Mystics," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 13 (1996):1-58; idem, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012); Schraga Bar-Sella, "Hillel Zeitlin's Prophetic-Messianic Approach to Judaism," *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 26 (1991):109-124 [Hebrew]; Jonathan Meir, "Ha-hasidut she-le-atid lavo": Neo-romatica, hasidut ve-kissufei meshiah be-kitvei Hillel Zeitlin' in *Rabbi Nahman me-Bratslav: Tzaar ha-olam ve-kissufei meshiah – shtei masot me-et Hillel Zeitlin*, *Yeriot* 5, eds. Gideon Efrat, Elhanan Rainer and Israel Ta-Shema (Jerusalem, 2006), 9-39; idem, "Hithavuto ve-gilgulav shel mifal tirkum ve-biur sefer ha-zohar le-Hillel Zeitlin", *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 10 (2004): 119-157.

⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, "Nokh Maydanek (Vegn Arn Tseytlins naye lider)," *Yidisher kemfer* 29, no. 771 (1948): 28-29. Cited in Jeffrey Shandler, "Heschel and Yiddish: A Struggle with Signification," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2, 2 (1993): 268.

⁶ Interview by A. Tabatshnik, 'Fun a shmues mit Arn Tseytlin', *Di goldene keyt* 65 (1969), 17-33. Reproduced in Aaron Zeitlin, *Literarishe un filosofishe eseyen* (New York: alveltlekher yidisher kultur-kongres, 1980), 385.

than to make Yiddish the bearer of the divine mystery and a new link in the chain of the Jewish esoteric tradition, and for that tradition to shed light on the present—to pour the old Torah of the Kabbalah into the new vessel of modern verse (“dos alte tsfas vil naye gas, / der alter vayn zukht dos naye fas.”)⁷ Again, judging from the perspective of his reception, his poetic project, his deeply Jewish “intervention” in secular Yiddish poetry, was not successful. Holocaust poetry aside, who today among Yiddish scholars and readers would concur with Bashevis’ assessment that Zeitlin was “the greatest Yiddish poet”?⁸ From the vantage point of a Yiddish-reading *Zohar* scholar, Zeitlin’s reception generally, and Niger’s response to “Keter” specifically, point to the limits of avant-garde Yiddish poetry and Yiddish modernism (perhaps also contemporary Yiddish scholarship?) which could never find a clear place for the messianic certainty of the mystic, even when (or perhaps precisely because) his compositions attained supernal heights.

In this study I present an analysis and translation of Zeitlin’s poem “Keter: Fragments of a Rhapsody,” published in the *Varshever almanakh* of 1923—the very *shtik kabole* that Niger couldn’t chew. Like *Metatron*, this long and difficult poem (which has received only the scantest attention by contemporary scholars)⁹ offers an original and stunning fusion of Yiddish expressionism and futurism on the one hand, and Zeitlin’s mystical and messianic thought on the other. As will become clear upon reading the poem, Zeitlin’s neo-kabbalistic works (which, like much of his poetry, remain opaque to scholars because of their detailed kabbalistic referents) have much to offer scholars of Yiddish literature interested in modernism and the avant-garde, apocalyptic themes, and “secular” transformations of messianism, as well as scholars of Kabbalah interested in its modern manifestations. His poem reminds us of the need to overcome the divisions that mark Jewish academia (religion vs. literature), and, more importantly, it provides a glimpse of a literature that could never really be—*literatoyre* in its deepest sense.

Contextualising Keter

To appreciate Zeitlin’s poem it is necessary to understand its location both in Zeitlin’s emerging poetic quest, and in its broader Yiddish literary-cultural moment. With

⁷ From “Tsfas un ikh” in *Lider* 2:98.

⁸ Isaac Bashevis Singer, “Arn Tseytlins eseyen,” in Aaron Zeitlin, *Literarische un filosofische eseyen*, 4.

⁹ As far as I am aware Yechiel Szeintuch is the only contemporary scholar to have commented on this poem. See “Between Literature and Vision,” 129-132. Somewhat strangely, Avraham Novershtern ignores it completely in *The Lure of Twilight: Apocalypse and Messianism in Yiddish Literature* [*Kesem ha-dimdumim: Apokalipsah ve-meshiḥiut be-sifrut yiddish*] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003). It is noteworthy that “Keter” was not republished by Zeitlin in his three volume post-war *Gezamlte lider* (New York: Farlag Matones, 1947-1957.) It also does not appear in the two published volumes of *Lider fun khurbn un lider fun gloybn*, though the projected third volume never appeared. Might this has been intentional? And if so, why? I am not sure. Certainly, his 1926 poem “Yosef della Reina” is considerably more “scandalous” and “erotic” and was republished twice. Whatever the case, the post-war general Yiddish reader did not have access to “Keter.”

regards to the former, “Keter” belongs to the same project as his long apocalyptic poem *Metatron* and shares that work’s express desire to transcend the tumult of history and the duality of existence. Indeed, in many ways “Keter” is a postscript to *Metatron*, published in the preceding year, in the same way perhaps that Greenberg’s “Velt barg-arop” is the postscript to his longer work *Mephisto*. Zeitlin himself understood both works as belonging to the same phase in his thought, as is clear from a 1923 letter he wrote to Shmuel Niger. Writing about “Keter,” before he would have read Niger’s cool response to the work, he noted:

I strive there (as I have done partially in *Metatron*) to exchange the dynamic-mechanical of Futurism for the dynamic-conscious (more accurately: the dynamic-divine) of what I call cosmic thought, and what I would rather call—if I did not so fear “isms”: neo-kabbalism. (By the way: I know of no other true-Jewish, abstract-Jewish [art], on a par with world art, other than the art and the truth of the Kabbalah.) The true futurism, the grand European [futurism]—not to be confused with our lame, childish quasi-futurism!—has, in my opinion, so much virtue, because it has opened everyone’s eyes to the dynamical and accentuated it. Only it is too gentile and not humane, and rather than leading to sunny paths of joy and revelation, it leads further into the dark caves of elegy—the same elegy and “weltschmerz,” such that the beyond-human—the fountain of all delights—is hidden and concealed from it.¹⁰

Elsewhere I have documented the centrality of the Kabbalah, and the *Zohar* in particular, in Zeitlin’s poetics. My concern here is merely to note the unity of *Metatron* and “Keter,” and their alignment with futurism, which in Yiddish circles was often used as a name for modernisms of various kinds. Although Zeitlin recoils from the term “neo-kabbalism,” his comments here point to the dynamic of “creative betrayal” articulated by David Roskies.¹¹ Both *Metatron* and “Keter” are bold reappropriations of Kabbalah in the name of literary modernism, modelled in part on Peretz’s neo-hasidism, and composed precisely at the same time that his father was involved in his own “neo-hasidic” engagement with the *Zohar*.¹²

As for the Yiddish literary moment, the poem was published in the very heart (both temporally and geographically) of Yiddish expressionism, with its new linguistic modes and bombastic manifestoes. These were the years of Peretz Markish’s “Di kupe” and “Veyland,” of Greenberg’s *Mephisto* and “Velt barg-arop,” of the *Khalyastre* (the Gang) and *Albatros*. It is enough to cite a few lines from the gang of three’s various proclamations to sense their agitated orientation and their call for new modes of poetic expression in line with the revolutionary times:

¹⁰ Szeintuch, *Aaron Zeitlin and Yiddish Literature*, 105.

¹¹ On “creative betrayal” see David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1-19, 275.

¹² In addition to the works cited in n. 4, see also Arthur Green, “Hillel Zeitlin and Neo-Hasidic Readings of the Zohar,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 22 (2010): 59-78.

First from Markish's "Di estetik fun kamf in der moderner dikhtung" (The Aesthetics of Struggle in Modern Poetry):¹³

If we contemplate the last ten years of war, destruction and revolution which have led the tempo of the time to an apotheosis of speed and feverishness, it becomes clear why the artistic forms have transformed so quickly, feverishly and morbidly.¹⁴

We are now experiencing the bloody dawn of a concrete-and-iron epoch. The devilish gallop and uproar of our insane everyday life has changed the forms of life and to the same extent affected our psyche, the way we react and grasp [the world.]¹⁵

Greenberg expresses similar sentiments in his inimitable style:

Renewal. Upheaval. Revolution of the spirit. Exaltation—and more. Of course. So it goes. With them and with us. All the literatures have been overrun in their classical stagnation. Idyllic daydreams and the poet's elegiac quietude have been devastated by a whirlwind: WHAM! A roar issued forth from the gaping-mouthed Colossus-Man with a million heads....The fate of the old books—the fate of the Gothic churches and Roman towers: petrified pasthoods. Horrible to behold...¹⁶

Melech Ravitch's manifesto, "Di naye, di nakete dikhtung" (The New Naked Poetry)¹⁷ lays bare the ideological orientation and call for new poetic forms:

When a new world is being born, when it is chaos, *tohu va-vohu*, element fuses with element, water with fire, earth with gold, word with earth, word with blood, bits of blood with bits of word, going together in a single stream. When a new generation is being born its poets are mad and formless. When lightning strikes the trunk of the word, the bark which accumulated throughout its tranquil years, falls off and it stands naked. Everything becomes poetry, for poetry is then mixed with all.¹⁸

Markish's concluding *ani ma'amin* is also brimming with the word "naked" in one form or another, indicative of the young movement's desire for a post-romantic and raw encounter with reality.¹⁹ It is not difficult to concur with Rachel Ertel's poetic

¹³ Peretz Markish, "Estetik fun kamf in der moderner dikhtung," *Ringel* 101 (1922): 35-41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁶ Uri Zvi Greenberg, "Proklamirung," *Albatros* 1 (1922): 3. Translation from David Roskies, "Uri Tsvi Greenberg: Proclamation," *Prooftexts* 15, no. 1 (1995): 110.

¹⁷ Melech Ravitch, "Di naye, di nakete dikhtung: Zibn tezis," *Albatros* 1 (1922): 15-16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

¹⁹ See Karolina Szymaniak, "The Language of Dispersion and Confusion: Peretz Markish's Manifestoes from the Khalyastre Period" in *A Captive of the Dawn: The Life and Works of Peretz Markish (1895-1952)*, eds. Joseph Sherman, Gennady Estraiikh, Jordan Finkin, and David Shneer (London: Legenda, 2011), 70-71.

characterisation of the *Khalyastre*, which as we shall presently see, finds many echoes in Zeitlin's early "neo-kabbalistic" work:

Warsaw's Jewish intelligentsia...launches its revolution in apocalyptic terms, in the rhythms and images of war, chaos, flows of volcanic lava, explosions of shells, electric thunder and lightning, decomposed bodies. Paroxysms of heights—'Himalayas'—and of depths—marine depths, abysses of the human spirit in the madness of time. The horrors of this violence are a fascination for the new man—Atlas-man, Prometheus-man on whose shoulders the world rests.²⁰

Although Zeitlin's own 1926 manifesto "Der kult fun gornisht un di kunst vi zi darf zayn" (The Cult of Nothingness and Art as it Should Be) was still some years off and would have a very different agenda, another letter to Niger, this time from 1922, also reveals some of his shared interests with the gang. Writing about *Metatron* and the changing times he exclaimed:

The cosmos has transformed.... Now, you might say: The world-sense has transformed. But that's the same thing. It's hard to express in words. A different cosmos, different times; a different man is approaching. With every step the God of hosts can be felt. World-end-eve.... The ancient until now—beautiful or ugly, good or bad—will not return. Finished.... The veil of deception is dispersing...the words are flying away empty, and soon nothing will remain, other than God and Man! All our phrases will lose their validity, our literature, our art—go to waste, the world will become naked, and oh how I wish that it would already stand completely naked!...as for the poet...Finished! Who needs him, the tiresome colorful-tomcatish-gussied-up presenter? No more shall he be a presenter, but rather—a herald. Not an exposé, but a discloser. And even copying the inner world—also no! No and no! Anything but mimesis! Proclaim and pronounce and be on guard to the tenth generation, you, who wishes to be a poet in our time of times, in our years beyond years! Renewal of the work of creation. Innovation of innovations. What is a poet to me? God's instrument of song. To conquer the eternal fortresses of spirit...God and Man—beyond that, nothing! Without partitions!²¹

Again, we find the call for a new kind of literature, again a call for a naked encounter, but this time with God. I shall return to this theme of nakedness and tearing down the partitions, a theme which receives a new and deeply kabbalistic twist in "Keter." Before doing so, however, it is important to make clear that though Zeitlin shared many concerns with the great Yiddish expressionists (among them a rejection of mimesis), his alignment with them extended only so far. I am not merely referring to his deep spirituality and kabbalistic beliefs, but also to his departure from their pessimism and

²⁰ Rachel Ertel, "Khaliastrea et la modernité européenne," in *Khaliastrea. La bande* (Paris: Lachenal & Ritter, 1989), 294. Cited in and translation by Szymaniak, "The Language," 74.

²¹ Szeintuch, *Aaron Zeitlin and Yiddish Literature*, 101; see also idem, "Between Literature and Vision," 128-129.

nihilism. To be sure, Zeitlin shares their angst and is sensitive to the darkness of the world, but, like his father, he believed with all his being that there was always hope.

In fact, Hillel Zeitlin's critique of the new Yiddish poetry (largely directed at Markish), published in a series of articles in *Der moment* between February and May 1922, is particularly instructive in seeking to understand the younger Zeitlin's orientation. Hillel's tirade was not directed at either poetry or at skepticism. He rejected the expressionists on aesthetic grounds, because of their banality, their puffed up sense of "I," and for the lack of hope they offered the young Jewish intellectual. In one article, "The Crippled Aesthetic and Commerce with Art," he wrote:

You have been convinced that all of this is high poetry and that in all of these works is great depth (*sodey soydes*), real mysteries of Torah (*mamesh sisrey toyre*), that all of this is a song from the future, that it is a new "ism"... "poetry of the revolution" or "the revolution of poetry" etc... Let us be honest enough to proclaim, like that simpleton in Andersen's story: "The emperor has no clothes!"²²

While in another, a review of Greenberg's Yiddish oeuvre, he comments:

The first thing that a person must do—I am speaking about a man who struggles and searches for the highest in life—is to return to the highest root. The path to God is a distant, belated work. Uri Zvi Greenberg knows that he has gone away from himself, he suffers from this very intensely. He believes, however, as many today do, that it's hopeless and that we can only mourn it, lament it... [that] we can long for it but we cannot attain it.²³

Hillel's critique led Melech Ravitch to produce his pamphlet "Pro-Peretz Markish." It also no doubt influenced his son, who though not sharing the same rejectionist stance towards the new poetry as his father, did share his deep messianic belief. The following passage penned by Hillel in 1910 from "Di benkshaft nokh sheynhayt" (The Longing for Beauty) is paradigmatic:

But there is another place where that secret future-light is hidden... Everything bespeaks profound holiness and eternal goodness, unending happiness and peace. Great secrets; distant, distant worlds of the brilliant future! See! The city will fall. Everything false, defiled, and impure will vanish. Pettiness, narrowness, and dullness will have no place. All will be free and filled with light, great and holy. In the distant future not only will all wars and acts of violence be ended, but also money, business, and property. Deep, deep future! All of life will become a brilliant light, an eternal song, an eternal dance of the righteous. God and humans will be

²² Hillel Zeitlin, "Di farkriplte estetik un der handl mit kunst," *Der moment* 30.2.1922, p. 4.

²³ Hillel Zeitlin, "Der poet fun der minkhe-tsayt," *Der moment* 5.5.1922, p. 4.

one, Creator and creatures joined forever. God will go forth dancing with the righteous in the Garden of Eden, and they will see Him openly.²⁴

To be clear, I am not suggesting that Aaron Zeitlin's thought can be reduced to the thought of his father; there are important differences between them. But with regards to messianism, both believed that ultimately the future of humanity was mystically luminous. And so, where Aaron could share with Greenberg, for example, the perception of "goyses yor-hundert" ("dying century") and "veltishn ovnt" ("world-eve"), the Spenglerian "fintstere erd" ("dark earth") and "shkie in blut" ("sunset in blood") are tempered by "bashtralung" and "ibergang" ("radiance" and "transition"). Indeed, where Hillel criticized Greenberg for his lack of hope, and made fun of Markish's "so dey-soydes," Aaron's "Keter" (and *Metatron*) furnished precisely both.

Overview of Poem

In his brief treatment of the poem, Yechiel Szeintuch points to the futuristic aspects of the composition: mathematical formulations, geometric shapes, and musical terms; rejection of the old, yet the use of archaic terms; aero-poesis; short sentences and onomatopoeia; and the adoption of Marinetti's idea of speed. More significantly, though, he notes the kabbalistic import of the title when he writes: "But the essence of the poem is the search for the expression of the sense of change and becoming in the spirit of the kabbalistic symbol *Keter* – the first *sefirah*, which represents the primordial will of God: pure will active within Himself, without any outwards directions."²⁵ Szeintuch identifies the title of the poem as a reference to the *sefirah Keter*—the source of all being without content and the bridge between the domain of *Ein Sof* (infinity) and the realm of the *sefirot*—as a symbol for the historical and messianic moment that Zeitlin seeks to present. (As we will see below, there is much more to say about the meaning of the kabbalistic symbol and its role in Zeitlin's composition and thought.)

Like much post-war modern European poetry and literature, a central theme running through the work is the profound sense of the changing times—the awareness that that which has been is not that which shall be. For Zeitlin, these changing times point to the end-times, and the poem is filled with an apocalyptic urgency.²⁶ The poem transpires in

²⁴ Hillel Zeitlin, "Di benkshaft nokh sheynhayt" in Hillel Zeitlin, *Shriftn* (Warsaw: Velt Bibliotek, 1910), 10. Translation from Green, *Hasidic Spirituality*, 167-68.

²⁵ Szeintuch, "Between Literature and Vision," 131.

²⁶ The introduction to Hillel Zeitlin's essay on Lev Shestov written in 1921 also conveys this sense. He writes there: "we are marching quickly—perhaps to *kets yamin*, perhaps to *kets basar*, but in any case to the end." According to the *Zohar*, "kets yamin" ("the end of the right") indicates a favourable messianic end, whereas "kets basar" ("the end of flesh") indicates a catastrophic end. See Hillel Zeitlin, "Hippus ha-elohim shel Lev Shestov" Republished in Hillel Zeitlin, *Al gevul sheney olamot* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1965), 69. Many of Hillel's writings through the 1920s reveal his belief that the present age is that of the "Messiah's footsteps." See for example, his comments in his 1928 biographical sketch. More proximate to Aaron's poem are his comments in his 1924 essay "What does Yavneh Want?" and the Aramaic chapters

the time of “the final demon,” “a final beginning of a final era.” This same urgency informs *Metatron*, Zeitlin’s major apocalyptic statement.

And the world’s end is already near! Close the awesome beginning!
The blacker time’s forest, the more entangled and wild-wooded,
The faster, the sooner
He comes, luminous, free, wild,
The child of the creator,
The heroic king!²⁷

For Zeitlin, in a uniquely modern take on the “birth pangs of the messiah” motif, the accelerated pace of change points to the messianic breakthrough on the horizon: “The more changeable, dissimilar—/ The more immediate and closer!” In his manifesto cited above, Peretz Markish wondered what poetic forms might be able to represent the speed of the times.²⁸ Zeitlin’s “Keter” delights in capturing such dynamism and exuberance:

Let it come to pass speedily, velocity-freefall—
Anything but prosaic and anything but sedate-soberly!
Become crazy in God!
Become rhapsod!
To the very last
May the heavy, the pregnant-swollen slow-motion crawl
Burst apart, totally,
All the more immediately!
All the more momentarily and suddenly!
The more uncatchable becomes movement’s phrase
(Slow-motion groans despondently: catch him!)—
The nearer to everything and to the expiration of days,
The further from self and ego’s thrall...

Desiring the messianic end, the poet longs for the immediate culmination of history’s slow gestation, with the heightened speed of modernity pointing to the intensification of ‘labor’ and the imminent messianic birth, which, as we will see below, entails the dissolution of duality and hence self and ego.

Zeitlin shares the expressionist angst of his contemporaries. He sees “Spaces and places—dead, rotting!” He sees the “whirlwind of blood and light-beams, / The battlefield-fallen folk of millions.” But he also hears the tide rising “over all, over carcass and bone, / Over stone, / Over joy and groan, / Over genius and idiot, / Pouring entire oceans of God, boiling hot / Over the chilly earthly globe!” Where his contemporaries are “sweating terror for the world’s downfall,” proclaiming doom, Zeitlin hears the

added in 1928 and published in *Sifran shel Yehidim*. See Green, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era*, 5, 37, 55.

²⁷ *Metatron*, 18.

²⁸ Markish, “Di estetik fun kamf,” 37.

astrals announcing “Nisht untergang, ibergang iz!” (“Not downfall, but transition!”) and presents a vision of atoms transforming as part of the rise of a new world.

The atoms have transformed!
The atoms have rearranged!
The atoms have changed dress
Into the purest garments,²⁹
Into the slightest garments,
Into the flowering-purest and most delicate garments...

The messianic reality is described here through a stunning image combining science and Kabbalah—atoms reconfiguring into more subtle garments of divinity, with matter becoming thinner, as it were, less veiled from the divine.

In assessing this difficult poem, it is important to bear in mind that the poem we possess is part of what was intended to be a longer work, a work which Zeitlin either never wrote or never published, hence the subtitle “Fragments of a Rhapsody.” In his 1923 letter to Nigler, he calls that longer project “Getlekhe rapsodye: An elef ha-shvii forshpil” (Divine Rhapsody: A Seventh Millennium Prelude.) The title is suggestive. Firstly, for its explicit association with the seventh millennium, the cosmic Sabbath and messianic age, and also because the word *forshpil*, which does indeed mean prelude, can also mean the dance party in honor of the bride the night before the wedding. Presumably, the wedding Zeitlin had in mind was the cosmic wedding between the male and female aspects of divinity according to the Kabbalah, whose complete union marks the cosmic *tikkun*. The association with a dance party might also shed light on what Zeitlin intended by rhapsody, a word which might point to a free-flowing episodic yet integrated piece of music marked by contrasting shifts in tone, or to a portion of an epic poem. Or perhaps he had another great modern poet in mind, T.S. Eliot who penned his “Rhapsody on a Windy Night” in 1911. Whatever the case, the poem does not pursue a clear narrative logic and shifts in perspective repeatedly: between the omniscient narrator, the world, the man of the sixth millennium, and the celestials. As is customary in many of Zeitlin’s poems, “Keter” combines Aramaic, Hebrew, and Yiddish; high kabbalah, contemporary Yiddish colloquialism, and modernist form and style. His description of the dynamic man of the sixth millennium as “film of *Atiqā Qaddisha*,” and his portrayal of *Malkhut*, the veil of dynamic consciousness, as “total-world screen...fuzzy-wavering-flickering” are examples of this surprising eclecticism. Importantly, even though “Keter’s” language and categories are “hyper-Jewish,” its concern is the entire world.

Mystical Messianism: Seeing through the Partitions, the Annihilation of Time, and the Rise of the New Androgyne

²⁹ Zeitlin uses the Aramaic “levushin,” thereby conveying a more spiritual sense of that which clothes divinity.

I turn now to those themes which I take to signify the mystical and messianic heart of the poem. I have already noted the general significance of the name *Keter* and some of its kabbalistic associations. More specifically, however, Zeitlin appears to be drawing on the kabbalistic sense of *Keter* as pre-differentiated unity, in contrast to the world of multiplicity in which we live. *Keter* stands for a kind of unified consciousness far removed from the working of quotidian cognition. It is a mystical-poetic consciousness which enables a transcending of history, time, and duality, which are all the mark of *Malkhut*, the tenth and final *sefirah*, the divine feminine. Zeitlin never states this explicitly and we must follow his allusions carefully.

The opening canto contains the key to his thinking:

The final demon is ripping out a laugh upon its mouth
And exploding in laughter and its edifice shall fall,
When stripped bare becomes the woman, the most multi-garmented of all,
The most ancient, the disguised of all disguises: the woman.

We have already rummaged in the darkest shaft [and digging sought],
Already attuned our hearing to the gentlest pulses of the night[s' effects],
And one thing has eluded us undetected and not even thought:
The quietest and most silent—the mystery of sex.

The oldest of partitions, set far before our eye,
The oldest and the proudest—the mirror-abyss of woman [cast about.]
You mirror-abyss, how we desire to mirror your abyss,
Into the night to you within and from your surface-splendor without!

The woman is *Malkhut*, the source of duality in the world, and more broadly phenomenological reality itself. The identification of *Malkhut* with multiplicity is found in the *Zohar*, and is spelled out more clearly by Zeitlin in an essay he penned one year after “Keter.” As I have explained elsewhere,³⁰ the second part of the essay—“The woman with innumerable names”—makes it clear that *Malkhut*, who “varies and changes” as the *Zohar* says, is the source of dynamism, ephemerality, egoism and beauty, as opposed to the stasis, unity, and permanence of the higher sefirotic realms. As the source of duality, *Malkhut* is also the source of sex (*geshlekt*), which for Zeitlin will become one of the chief symbols of dualistic existence.

According to Zeitlin here, the mystical and poetic quest (for Zeitlin, they are one and the same)³¹ is to see beyond the externality of *Malkhut*'s reality, namely, the veil of

³⁰ See Wolski, “Man, Woman, and Serpent.”

³¹ See for example his letter to Avrom Liessin from 1933 where in reflecting on “Keter” and *Metatron*, he writes: “It is, however, not the metaphysics of a philosopher and certainly not of a well-read intellectual, but of a poet with religious-mystical experiences.” From Szeintuch, *Aaron Zeitlin and Yiddish Literature*, 227.

ephemeral phenomenological reality which has marked human consciousness ever since we ate from the Tree of Knowledge. Significantly, in describing this veil of multiplicity as a partition (Heb. *mehitsah/mehitsot*), he recalls one of the foundational teachings of Chabad and the source of Hasidism's so called acosmism or radical immanentism (depending on one's interpretation)—the parable of the partitions. I cite here the version of R. Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudylkow, the Ba'al Shem Tov's grandson, who cites the teaching in the name of his grandfather. Commenting on Deuteronomy 31:18: *And I shall surely hide My face*, R. Moshe writes:

On the face of it this is astonishing! How is it possible that the blessed Holy One will hide His face from Israel, heaven forbid?... This may be likened to a king who made numerous partitions in front of his palace by means of illusion, so that [people] would not be able to enter, and hid there, and made walls of fire and rivers by means of illusion before his children. And look, the wise one among them pondered the matter [saying]: How is it possible that the compassionate father would not want to show his face to his beloved children?! This can only be an illusion and the father wants to test whether the child will strive to come to him, but in truth there is no hiddenness. And indeed, as soon as he dared to enter into the river, the illusion disappeared and he crossed over, and likewise with all the partitions, until he arrived at the king's palace...³²

As far as I am aware, in combining the theme of the illusory nature of the partitions that separate humans from God with the theme of dualistic phenomenological reality stemming from *Malkhut*, Zeitlin has furnished a novel interpretation. At the heart of Zeitlin's mystical messianism, then, lies the deep desire to cultivate a mystical consciousness that can see through the illusion of multiplicity and thereby herald the disappearance of *Malkhut's* reign and reality. Hence the poet awaits her "primordial-flashing disappearance," though only after she has birthed the messiah,³³ who stands for the very spiritual consciousness which is capable of seeing through her in the first place. Addressing *Malkhut*, the fuzzy screen of dualistic, dynamic, and ephemeral reality through which and on which we encounter the world, the poet affirms that *Keter*, the symbol of pre-differentiated, unified being and consciousness, has promised a messianic birth. The messianic horizon is assured, deferred, and imminent:

O,
Total-world screen you, fuzzy-wavering-flickering [offset]!
Between day-after-tomorrow yes
And now in the meantime-not-yet
Are we reflected through you and quiver-shiver...
So listen, you screen with pressed out hide!

³² From *Degel Mahane Ephraim* (R. Moses Hayyim Ephraim of Sudylkow) on Deuteronomy 31:18. Hillel cites a version of this parable in his presentation of the fundamentals of Hasidism, published posthumously in *Be-fardes ha-hasidut ve-ha-kabbalah* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1960), 13-14. See Green, *Hasidic Spirituality*, 76.

³³ In his 1926 poem "Yosef della Reina," the messiah is the offspring of holiness and Lilith! See Wolski, "Aaron Zeitlin's Yosef della Reina."

Thus by His very own will [to abide]
Has *Keter* solemnly sworn:
Not deaths shall you miscarry [and deliver]—
Awesome immensities will from you be born!

As the source of duality and multiplicity, *Malkhut* is the source of time itself, and so *Keter* consciousness requires and enables the annihilation of time. Although in *Metatron*, it is history that needs to be overcome rather than time itself, we already find intimations of what will become central in “Keter.” And so, in the ninth canto we find “Time wishes to not be time, but beyond-beyond-time.”³⁴ In “Keter,” however, time has become the central concern: “the queen of queens,” “I want you, I sense you, I seize your existence!” It is in cantos six and seven that time’s annihilation—the precondition for the breakthrough of the messianic age—is imagined:

And again: Just like the sea,
Like a sea without a levee, like a sea, washing away every deficiency,
Like a sea lacking a shore,
In order, [furthermore,]
That everything should be cooked anew in your agitation,
Would I pour you out, Time, out and in
Over and over,
And afterwards, compress you once more, that you would enter your smallness,
Like a mouse in its hole,
And become non-time,
Become impatience, pure impatience and insignificance,
A bare and holy emptiness,
A circular-locked-up indivisibility
A final beginning of a final era—
A zero!

Time!
For now I merely carry the train of your dress,
A foolish page,
But I crave to conquer you, Queen, and ride my ride
Tumult and haste,
With you, side by side!
Wind up and spool your total-world thread,
And abruptly let its filaments fly loose and strands scatter!
...
Then,
Comes to you as well, O time, to you, O Amazon, an end, [shatter]:
You’ll lie cold and broken—a cold-bluish piece of porcelain,

³⁴ *Metatron*, 15.

And with you is annihilated the last trace of matter.

In the second passage, Zeitlin explicitly refers to time as female; she is Queen and Amazon. The idea that time has its ontic source in the divine feminine derives from the *Zohar* (see for example, *Zohar* 2:155b-156a; 3:58a-b). While I cannot be certain precisely which zoharic text Zeitlin had in mind as the basis for this idea, the following passage is paradigmatic, and perhaps also the source of his thinking about the “man of the sixth millennium,” a motif which also appears repeatedly in the writings of his contemporary Uri Tsvi Greenberg. I cite here from the *Pritzker Zohar* 1:116b-117a:

Rabbi Yehudah opened, “... *time* is Assembly of Israel, who is called *time*,... Why *time*? Because She has a fixed *time* for everything: drawing near, being illumined, uniting fittingly....”

Rabbi Yose said, “Similarly it is written: *I, YHVH, will hasten it* בעתה (*be-ittah*), *in its time* (Isaiah 60:22). What is בעתה (*be-ittah*)? ה בעתה (*Be-et he*), ‘In the time of the letter *he*,’ when She rises from the dust; then *I will hasten it*.”...

Rabbi Yehudah said, “So they have declared, but come and see the mystery that I have learned: When Assembly of Israel was exiled from Her realm, letters of the Holy Name separated, as it were, ה (*he*) separating from ו (*vav*). ...She therefore lies in the dust that entire day of *he*. What is that? Fifth millennium.... When the sixth millennium arrives, mystery of *vav*, *vav* will raise *he* at six times ten.... Every sixty years of that sixth millennium *he* is invigorated, scaling its rungs. In the six hundredth year of the sixth springs of wisdom will open above, springs of wisdom below, and the world will prepare to enter the seventh, just like a person preparing on the sixth day, as the sun is about to set, to enter Sabbath.”

We need not be concerned with all the intricacies of the passage. Suffice it to note that Assembly of Israel (= *Malkhut*), the female aspect of divinity, is called *time*, and that the sixth millennium, the Hebrew year 5000, beginning in 1240/41 CE, marks the onset of a millennium-long messianic process imagined as the raising of *Malkhut*, signified by the letter *he*, from the dust of Her thousand year exile, and separation from *vav*, the male face of divinity. (*He* has the numerical value of five and *vav* the value of six.) Significantly, according to this particular passage, messianic tension intensifies in the year 1840/41, the six hundredth year of the sixth millennium (5,600 in the Hebrew reckoning), and culminates in the year 2240/41, the beginning of the seventh millennium.³⁵ Again, no where does Zeitlin allude to this passage explicitly, but the *Zohar*’s juxtaposition of time as feminine with the messianic horizon of the sixth millennium seems very resonant with his project in “Keter.”

Though the zoharic sources are indispensable, it is important to note that these ideas about time and its location in the divine feminine are also found in the early writings of

³⁵ On the messianic significance of the sixth millennium in the *Zohar* and in the writings of Abraham Abulafia, see Haviva Pedaya, “The Sixth Millennium: Millenarianism and Messianism in the *Zohar*,” *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 72 (2012): 51-98 [Hebrew].

the Chabad masters, with which, in light of Hillel's pedigree, we can assume Aaron was familiar. According to Dov Baer Schneersohn, "The root of the becoming of time is in the aspect of *Malkhut*, which is specifically the aspect of the feminine,"³⁶ while according to his successor Menachem Mendel, "The root of time comes to be only in the aspect of *Malkhut*."³⁷ Elliot Wolfson's comments on these passages are particularly resonant for Zeitlin's project:

We may conceive of time, therefore, as a bridge suspended over an abyss bounded by the nothing-that-is-everything at one end and the everything-that-is-nothing at the other end. The release from time is possible, however, even in the middle, even in the course of one's lifetime, when the emptiness of being is contemplated from the standpoint of the infinite. Attaining this state of annihilation, turning *yesh* [being, is] back to *ayin* [nothingness], is the eschatological consciousness through which and in which time as the primordial pulse of creation is covertly revealed, openly concealed.³⁸

Significantly, according to Chabad theosophy, it is in *Keter*, the highest *sefirah*, known as "I will be" and "nothingness," and which according to Dov Baer Schneersohn is "above the aspect of the source of time"³⁹—that the overcoming of time is attained.⁴⁰

Although the messiah figures throughout the poem, the messianic is primarily imagined as the overcoming of fallen reality and the return to humanity's edenic condition, prior to duality and multiplicity, outside time, and before sex. This new state is described variously throughout the work, but perhaps the central image for this new phase in human existence is the androgyne. In a poem notable for its fragmentariness and lack of linearity, it is the androgyne who appears most often—in cantos 2, 6, 7 and 9. Zeitlin's androgyne rises at the very end of history following the annihilation of time, and signifies unity regained and the arrival of new consciousness. The depictions echo modernist sculpture:

For when you, in your fever, will away
And there'll no longer be any more time to wait—
Shall we become a one again, we billions,
An androgyne will arise from us, planted like a tree by its stake!
And the most supremely-sonorous and sharpest of axes
Will be unable to shatter in pieces its ONE:
Its clothing and robes—

³⁶ Dov Baer Schneersohn, *Imrei Binah* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1975), folio 40c; cited in Elliot R. Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Death, and Truth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 108.

³⁷ Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, *Or ha-Torah*, Bemidbar (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1998), vol. 3, 996; cited in Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 111.

³⁸ Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 112.

³⁹ Dov Baer Schneersohn, *Perush ha-millot* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1993), folio 59c.

⁴⁰ See Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 115-117.

Stone,
And it, the serene one, alone—
Luminous stone.
Awesome and radiant and beautifully Samsonite-grown—
Luminous stone.
At its feet—
Everything.
And it, serene colossus—
Over all.
It looks and understands
An expectant, quiet understanding.
It stands—
And is stone.

The motif of the androgyne is, of course, not original to Zeitlin. It is one of the core rabbinic myths about the creation of humanity:

Rabbi Yirmeyah son of El'azar said, "When the blessed Holy One created Adam, He created him androgynous, as is said: *Male and female He created them* (Genesis 1:27)." Rabbi Shemu'el son of Nahmani said, "When the blessed Holy One created Adam, He created him with two faces. Then He sawed him and gave him two backs, one on this side and one on that."⁴¹

It is also central in kabbalistic thought which conceives of divinity in male and female terms. Zeitlin is at his mythopoetic best, however, when he repositions the androgyne from the beginning of time to its end.⁴²

Woman and Man
Become then more united, unique-alone,
Standing-stone

Furthermore, the new androgyne will not simply be a recapitulation of the old. In place of a back to back configuration, as described by the rabbis, the new Woman and Man, like the cherubim above the ark, will be aligned face to face:

And that androgyne,
The one extending unto *Keter*
Will not be like the ancient androgyne,
Who once stood in the Garden of Eden,
Before Adam-Eve were separated
By the serpent-youth, the divider!

⁴¹ *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:1. See below, note 90.

⁴² On Zeitlin's mythopoesis, see my forthcoming article, "Mythopoesis, Mysticism, Messianism and Modernity in Aaron Zeitlin's *Metatron*."

No one will tear it apart,
A one-alone will it be, a child of sun and stones,
And its two countenances
Will be aligned one towards the other,—
Not like before, when stormy desires
Burned like smoke,
Because Adam's face could not see Eve's:
Back to back
They stood, unable to look at one another—
And lust's lava rolled within them its weave...

So united, sexuality—the most essential marker of duality—comes to an end. Hence the surprising call of the poet, “May sexuality cease!” and the wish for “Liberation from multiplicity, / From sexual two-ing and three-ing!”

Aside from offering an image for the totality of the human condition—history as the site of humanity's passage from unity to multiplicity and back to unity—Zeitlin's purpose in drawing on the figure of the androgyne is further revealed when we consider the first mention of this new messianic being:

The rise of the steel-strong silent stander—
My monument, the man beyond men...

The Yiddish original, “*der mentsh iber mentshn*” makes it clear that Zeitlin has Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in mind, though following his father, this new man is less overman and more *al adam*, supernal human, marked by a new spiritual consciousness geared towards unity and divinity.

When we are with ourselves, we can sometimes ask: “Man is the transition to Supernal Man,” but why do we need Supernal Man himself?... [Because] we cannot be satisfied with the narrow and limited life, full of ruptures, contrasts and contradictions we live, but must strive to more elevated life, to pave the way for Supernal Man.⁴³

I see, Supernal Man is also only a transition. One must pass from Supernal Man to the Supernal God.⁴⁴

It is a mark of both Hillel and Aaron's thought that Nietzsche receives a mystical interpretation. And so for the latter, in “Keter” (and also in *Metatron*, see cantos 15 and

⁴³ Hillel Zeitlin, “Ha-tov ve-ha-ra al-pi hashkafot hokhmei yisrael ve-hokhmei ha-olam,” *Ha-Shiloah* 8 (1901): 205.

⁴⁴ Hillel Zeitlin, “Adam Elyon o El Elyon.” Reprinted in *Al gevul sheney olamot*, 49. On Hillel Zeitlin and Nietzsche, see Ya'akov Golomb, “Hillel Zeitlin: From the Nietzschean Übermensch to the Jewish Almighty God,” *Daat: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah* 56 (2005):135-151 [Hebrew].

27), Nietzsche's overman of the earth who comes after the death of God is replaced with the androgyne who signifies the messianic dissolution of duality.

A Tale of Two Clocks

Zeitlin's mystical-messianism and his distance from the Yiddish moderns, even those drawn to apocalyptic themes, is clearly manifest in the poem's final stanza and its presentation of the "new world-clock" whose hours mark the passage to the new world. Already in *Metatron*, Zeitlin employed a similar motif, imagining the messianic as the cessation of all clocks (as counterpoint to the tumult of history) followed by the arrival of a twenty-fifth hour:

At exactly the same time,
In every city and every village,
Clocks will begin ticking tiptoe quiet, so quiet,
Like rain on summer grass, rain on summer grass,
Bubbling deep, bubbling far,
As though from out of an abyss,
The twenty-fifth hour,
The first of the new night-day. [lit. *mes-les*, from time to time]⁴⁵

The desire to break through to a new order of time is one of the hallmarks of apocalyptic thought and I have already noted the importance of overcoming time in "Keter." Zeitlin's messianic clock is at once a poetic expression of this idea, as well as a neat illustration of where he differs from the Yiddish moderns of his day and before, a difference brought into stark relief when we recall the most famous clock scene in modern Yiddish literature, found towards the beginning of the third act in Peretz's *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* (1907). I cite here from Hillel Halkin's translation:

(The dead stand in a circle. The jester clammers quickly up the clock tower and tinkers for a long time with the hands of the clock. With a squeak, they begin to move. He starts to count the hours, the clock chiming them angrily after him. Between each count and each chime, the Recluse interrupts.)

Jester: One!... Two!...
Recluse: God is through!
Jester (impatiently): Three!... Four!...
Recluse: He'll send no more—
Jester (losing patience completely and rushing ahead): Five!... Six!... Seven!
Recluse: ...miracles from heaven.
Jester: Eight!
Recluse: He's shut His gate.

⁴⁵ *Metatron*, 55-56.

Jester (angrily): Nine!... Ten!... Eleven!... Twelve!...
(Shouting down to the recluse)
Why don't you learn to help yourself?⁴⁶

That Zeitlin is offering a messianic and mystical reworking of this canonical scene is self-evident. Zeitlin, however, is not merely engaging in intertextual play. As Avraham Novershtern has noted, “Peretz’s eschatological vision has nothing to do with a ‘new dawn’; it is centred on the ghastly ‘night,’ which bears the tidings of destruction.”⁴⁷ Where Peretz’s clock counts off despair and doubt (God is through, the gate is shut etc.), Zeitlin’s clock counts off an assured and hopeful transition:

And that which exists—is gone! What is—was!
And what is becoming—is!
And what is becoming—happens!
Nine, ten!
And everything that’s divided from outside—unify!
Unify!
Eleven, twelve—
And one again [comes by]!

Culminating with *eyns* (one), the sign of ultimate unity and the number of *Keter* (see below, n. 67), Zeitlin returns us to the heart of the mystical quest, expressed so poignantly by his father as follows: “We pray and with ‘One’ we intend simply that the blessed Holy One and His name are one, that all is one, that all changes and differences, separations and oppositions, reversals and contradictions, permutations and transformations are mere illusion.”⁴⁸

Zeitlin’s “Keter” knows the expressionist angst and paroxysm of his Warsaw contemporaries. He sees the “the desecrated-saw-felled trees / With gnarled bodies” and the “offspring of slaughtered mothers without fathers.” But he knows too that we are living in the time of the final demon’s last laugh, “between day-after-tomorrow yes / And now in the meantime-not-yet.” What his expressionist and futurist contemporaries know and see, he knows and sees; but he knows something else as well.

⁴⁶ I. L. Peretz and Hillel Halkin (trans.), “A Night in the Old Marketplace,” *Prooftexts* 12, no. 1 (1992): 41-42.

Halkin’s translation is rather paraphrastic. Here is the original Yiddish: “Eyns, tsvey.../Gevezn nisim alerley/Dray.../Di gute tsaytn zenen farbay!/Fir.../Farmakht far undz toyer un tir.../Finf, zeks, zibn.../Mir zenen yesoyimim geblibn/Akht... Nayn— Men muz zikh helfn aleybn!/A shefele tsvishn velf!/Elf! Tsvelf!” I. L. Peretz, “Bay nakht oyfn altn mark,” in *Ale verk: Dramen* (Vilna: Kletskin, 1925), 305-306.

⁴⁷ Abraham Novershtern, “Between Dust and Dance: Peretz’s Drama and the Rise of Yiddish Modernism,” *Prooftexts* 12, no. 1 (1992): 76.

⁴⁸ Hillel Zeitlin, “Kavanot ve-yihudim.” Reprinted in his *Sifran shel yehidim*, (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1979), 180. Cited in Arthur Green, “Three Warsaw Mystics,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 13 (1996): 28.

Too much *literatoyre*? Not enough ‘betrayal’?

In an interview published in *Literarische bleter* in 1929, Zeitlin lamented his loneliness as a poet without an audience.⁴⁹ In fact it was his failure to find an audience, as well as Niger’s harsh comments about “Keter,” that triggered his switch to drama.⁵⁰ Indeed, upon reading “Keter” this “failure” is not surprising. As is clear from the forgoing discussion and from the notes elucidating the poem itself, grasping Zeitlin’s poetic quest requires a deep familiarity with kabbalistic sources and concepts (from the *Zohar* through the early Hasidic masters), as well as a general yet sincere mystical sensibility. Who among his readers would have been able to understand him? For whom was he writing? (In his introductory remarks to volume 3 of his *Gezamlte lider*, p. 12 he writes: “The ideal reader (where is he?) is a *hakham u-mevin me-atsmo* [wise sage and understands on his own.]” The Hebrew phrase derives from M. *Hagigah* 2:1 and pertains to one who is worthy of receiving the mystery of the Chariot, the esoteric teaching about God.) Aside from his brother and father, his friend Bashevis, and later Heschel, I wonder whether there have been more than a handful of readers who have fathomed the depths of his early “neo-kabbalistic” works. Where Peretz’s “neo-hasidic” stories launched a literature, Zeitlin’s “neo-kabbalistic” poems had no impact.

Zeitlin’s neo-kabbalism is certainly modelled in part on Peretz’s neo-hasidism and thus might be viewed through the “creative betrayal” lens developed by David Roskies. “Keter” (and many other works from Zeitlin’s early period) lies at the intersection of Yiddish expressionism and futurism on the one hand, and Jewish mysticism and messianism on the other; and Zeitlin’s work is unthinkable without the model of negotiated return and dialectical engagement with modernity developed by Yiddish writers and poets before him. He is after all “rehabilitating” Kabbalah by adapting it to a modern poetic form; he is not writing a commentary on the *Zohar* or a work of theology. However, if in Peretz it is the ironic secular humanist twist that marks the creative betrayal, and if the negotiated return and retrieval of the discarded past first requires rebellion and loss, then I am not certain that creative betrayal best captures Zeitlin’s poetic project. Growing up in Hillel’s *literarische shtub*, Aaron reached intellectual maturity in an environment where Torah, Talmud, Zohar, Tanya, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Shestov were all uttered in the same breath. Aaron did not grow up in a traditional religious environment; Hillel’s religiosity was too idiosyncratic. Unique among his contemporaries, Aaron did not need to rebel from the four walls of the *besmedresh*, because his study house already comprised the breadth and depth of traditional and modern Jewish literature as well as European philosophy and literature. True, he was not an observant Jew, but he remained a believing Jew.⁵¹ If there is

⁴⁹ “A shmues mit Arn Tseytlin” in *Literarische bleter* 22.1.1929 (page 916).

⁵⁰ See Szeintuch, “Between Literature and Vision,” 130-132.

⁵¹ For Zeitlin, belief, “must not be understood as static, but dynamic and dialectical, that is to say, not something congealed and ready-made, but an unending process.” Hence, God-finding and God-losing are continuous, sometimes even simultaneous, and “despair and belief are two sides of the one thing.” Zeitlin, *Literarische un filosofische eseyen*, 382-3.

rebellion at work in his early poetry, it is perhaps in his choosing to fuse Kabbalah and expressionism, precisely the mode of poetry his father so despised. But even then, his expressionist poetry is deeply kabbalistic, zoharic, and messianic. Moreover, “Keter” does not reveal the same ironic distance between subject and author that marks the Yiddish moderns. For although Zeitlin takes Kabbalah where it had never been—in poetic form and in imagery and focus—the conceptual categories and the terminology reveal deep continuities. My purpose here is not to quibble with David Roskies’ model, but merely to highlight that in Aaron Zeitlin’s early mystical poetry, we are confronted with a mode of Yiddish modernism that seems conceptually, and certainly spiritually, different from say Peretz, Manger, and even Bashevis. It is different too from the ubiquitous “qera she-ba-lev” (rending of the heart) of say Bialik and Berdyczewski: the internalised loyalty to tradition even against one’s own will and intellectual commitments, “the unbridgeable gap between the world view which stems from part of [one’s] feelings, and the primary religious feeling that preceded them.”⁵²

Where lies this difference? And how might we best characterize the young Zeitlin’s messianic-mystical-avant-garde project? The difference is surely not merely that of deep or even esoteric engagement with Jewish sources. Though this is significant. It is, I suggest, that Aaron Zeitlin possessed a certainty of belief, both in the coming messianic age, and in the ultimacy of divine reality. Zeitlin was not simply drawing on kabbalistic symbols to fashion his literature. He was writing *literatoyre* in its highest and purest sense, the way only a believer could.

This wonderful term coined by Manger’s father, apparently to describe the secularization of expressions from religious texts, is enticing and evocative, though as far I am aware it has never really been theorized.⁵³ What is meant by *literatoyre*? Does it point to a specific genre of literature? To a mode of reading? To the secularizing of the sacred? To the sacralising of the secular? What kind of literature qualifies? And what is the balance between *literatur* and *toyre*? Presumably Peretz’s Hasidic and Rabbinic stories would qualify, as do Manger’s biblical parodies, but what of the avant-garde works of Markish and Greenberg? And what of Yiddish realism? I do not intend to settle these questions here, both because the term is useful precisely because it means so many different things, and because such an investigation is well beyond the purview of this study. However, Zeitlin’s oeuvre in general, and certainly his kabbalistic and hasidic poems in particular (which number in the hundreds) demand a certain reckoning with this elusive idea.

I take *literatoyre* to signify any Jewish literary endeavour that seeks to express matters of ultimate concern in a modern literary format (poetry, prose, drama) while drawing deeply upon classical Jewish language and literature. This definition is admittedly and

⁵² See Eliezer Schweid, *The Idea of Modern Jewish Culture*, translated by Amnon Hadary (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2008), 133-34.

⁵³ See Roskies, *Bridge of Longing*, 235; idem, “Introduction” in *The World According to Itzik*, ed. Leonard Wolf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), xv; Chana Kronfeld and Robert Adler Peckerar, “Tongue-Twisted: Itzik Manger between mame-loshn and loshn-koydesh,” *In geveb* (August, 2015), 14-15.

deliberately broad. Different writers will emphasize different aspects of the portmanteau. Hillel Zeitlin's poems are closer to *toyre*,⁵⁴ Peretz's stories closer to *literatur*, while Aaron Zeitlin, in "Keter" specifically, occupies the middle ground in his loyalty to the kabbalistic tradition *and* to the aesthetic demands of modernism. Zeitlin is not secularising Kabbalah. Both kabbalistic symbols and messianic belief *and* modern conditions form the cornerstone of his literary project.

Could Zeitlin's *literatoryre*, his uncompromising fusion of mystical consciousness, messianic belief, and modern poetic form have ever succeeded? Could Niger have responded differently? And what does success and failure mean with regard to a poem anyway? Leaving aside aesthetic accomplishment and even conceptual or ideological content, critical reception is surely part of the assessment, as is the poem's reception among a broader audience of readers. Generational longevity, namely, whether a poem is read outside its immediate horizon should also factor (anthologization? canonization? by whom? for whom?), as should the role the poem plays in generating more poetry both among others and for the original poet herself. By all these markers, Zeitlin's "Keter" was a complete failure.

Yehiel Szeintuch suggests that where Niger was looking for allegory, he found instead symbolism and therein lies the source of the abyss and indeed rupture between poet and critic.⁵⁵ I wonder, however, whether there are deeper structural forces at play. Ultimately, I am inclined to view Zeitlin's neo-kabbalistic project as an inevitable yet spectacular failure: spectacular because of its original tropes, images, ideas, and cadences, and inevitable because, in light of the cultural context in which Zeitlin was writing and his potential audience of readers, it is hard to imagine the work ever finding a receptive ear. Indeed, Zeitlin's "Keter" is all the more spectacular in light of its inevitable failure. Walter Benjamin's well-known comments to Gershom Scholem about Franz Kafka come to mind: "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty, one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the figure of a failure."⁵⁶ Scholem's reply is equally instructive: "You really seem to understand this failure as something unexpected and bewildering, whereas the simple truth is that the failure was the object of endeavours that, if they were to succeed, would be bound to fail. Surely that can't have been what you meant? Did he express what he wanted to say? Of course."⁵⁷ To be clear, Kafka's failure and Zeitlin's failure are not the same. For Kafka, failure is inherent in the aesthetic formation of his works; the *mashal* has no *nimshal*, the novel cannot end; K *must* fail in his quest. But we do gain a peculiar and purer appreciation for "Keter" when it is viewed under the sign of failure, both in terms of its reception, and

⁵⁴ See the English translations in Green, *Hasidic Spirituality*.

⁵⁵ Szeintuch, "Between Literature and Vision," 131.

⁵⁶ Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (eds), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin 1910-1940* (Chicago: Chicago University of Chicago Press, 1994), 566. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Letter to Scholem, June 12, 1938.

⁵⁷ Gershom Scholem (ed), *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem 1932-1940* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 236. Translated by Gary Smith. Letter to Benjamin, November 6, 1938.

in terms of the limitations inherent in an unbridled optimistic messianic poetics which, alas, seems destined to fail. (Destructive apocalyptic poetics, think Halperin or Markish, proved far more successful among critics and readers.)

In a short poem from 1933, “Lid tsu di sonim”⁵⁸ Zeitlin poured forth his bitterness and scorn upon a Jewish world unable to understand him: “What do you know of my poem?” he writes to the “nisht-goyim” (not-Gentiles) who simply cannot follow his symbolic world. Is his failure then a function of his deep learning and esotericism? No doubt this played a role, but I do not think it conveys the whole story. After all, T.S. Eliot’s poems are no less obscurantist. In my view, we should assess his failure as the inevitable consequence of the radical secularism and revolutionary ideology of Yiddish modernism which could not accommodate the messianic certainty of the mystic. As Zeitlin reflected in an interview not long before his death: “In the Khalyastre-times I was a *fremde flants*, a strange and foreign plant.”⁵⁹ Zeitlin’s mystical-messianic expressionism did not call for revolutionary action or any political affiliation. In fact, its only call upon the reader was to cultivate a new mystical consciousness through which the current era may be better understood. Perhaps then, ironically, Zeitlin’s traditional messianism wasn’t messianic enough. There is after all nothing concrete to be done. In an era marked by radical political parties and ideologies, Zeitlin’s poetry calls for a messianic consciousness which might see through the duality of existence and thereby herald the coming age. And even though such a call does not necessarily preclude or oppose political action, the fundamental horizon of his work was the messianic breakthrough and not the political, which was too petty, merely so much loud noise from the lower realms incapable of bringing about the change he sought. Expressed differently, Zeitlin’s *literatoyre* was too close to its traditional sources, which were insufficiently betrayed, as it were, and contained too much *toyre* for his readers and fellow literati.

⁵⁸ Aaron Zeitlin, “Lid tsu di sonim,” *Globus*, November 17, 1933, 11.

⁵⁹ Zeitlin, *Literarische un filosofische eseyen*, 384.