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**Man, Woman, and Serpent: Kabbalah and High Modernity in the Early
Writings of Aaron Zeitlin**

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Abstract: This study presents a translation and analysis of Aaron Zeitlin's 1924 essay, "*Man, froy un shlang*," published in *Illustirte vokh*. The short essay belongs to the neo-kabbalistic phase in Zeitlin's oeuvre, and is part of the same literary project that includes such compositions as *Metatron: Apokaliptishe poeme* (1922) and "*Keser: Fragmentn fun a rapsodye*" (1923). At the heart of the essay is Zeitlin's creative reading of the Garden of Eden narrative which he claims describes the "eternal connection between three related things: Between death, sex, and civilization." According to Zeitlin's interpretation of the Genesis story, which I show to be based on his reading of a Zohar passage, the narrative describes the human condition as the fall from unity and stasis (associated with the male) to duality, multiplicity and change (associated with the female). Furthermore, Zeitlin's short essay contains the key to understanding aspects of his earlier poetry, namely *Metatron* and its desire to transcend the fluctuations of history, and "*Keser*," and its desire to transcend phenomenological reality and annihilate time (both associated with the female divine potency in Kabbalah) as the precondition for the messianic breakthrough. My study also presents a translation of his 1926 poem "*Dokument*," also concerned with the relationship between *geshlekh* (sex) and *geshikhte* (history).

Nathan Wolski

Expulsion from Paradise is in its main aspect eternal: that is to say, although expulsion from Paradise is final, and life in the world unavoidable, the eternity of the process (or, expressed in temporal terms, the eternal repetition of the process) nevertheless makes it possible not only that we might remain in Paradise permanently, but that we may in fact be there permanently, no matter whether we know it here or not.

Franz Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*

Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe...

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

For some time now I have wondered why scholars of Kabbalah, in particular those interested in its modern manifestations, have not mined the writings of Aaron Zeitlin (1898-1973). After all, his father Hillel has received extensive attention, and no one would imagine writing the history of the twentieth century Kabbalah without reference to his contribution to Jewish thought. Just why this is the case is not readily apparent. Zeitlin's work is well-known to scholars of Yiddish poetry, chiefly to be sure because of those poems he wrote in the wake of

the Holocaust, but he is also known as a kabbalistic thinker, even if to only a handful of specialists. In earlier studies I have shown how the Kabbalah in general, and the *Zohar* in particular, lie at the heart of Zeitlin's poetic-religious quest.¹ This is true of his earliest futuristic-apocalyptic poetry as it is of his later Holocaust poems. The following study is but a small part of my ongoing endeavour, to which I hope others will join me, in exploring Zeitlin's rich and diverse kabbalistic thought. What will be made clear here, and what is immediately apparent upon reading his wider oeuvre, is that kabbalistic thought and kabbalistic mythopoesis found their modern Yiddish voice in prose, verse, and drama—or *farkert*, modern Yiddish found its kabbalistic key—in Aaron Zeitlin.

The focus of the present study is the translation and analysis of Zeitlin's essay, "*Man, froy un shlang*," which was written in 1924 and published in Warsaw in *Illustrierte vokh* (Illustrated Weekly).² The two-part essay appeared two years after Zeitlin's long apocalyptic poem *Metatron*, and one year after "*Keser: Fragmentn fun a rapsodye*."³ It precedes the publication of his literary manifesto, "*Der kult fun gornisht un di kunst vi zi darf zayn*" (The Cult of Nothingness and Art as it Should Be), written in 1926, in which he explicitly identified the *Zohar* as the blueprint for Jewish artistic renewal.⁴ As I will discuss below, this

¹* All Zeitlin translations are my own.

For detailed information on Zeitlin's biography, see the *Yivo Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (on-line). 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 Faierstein, *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" ["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. See also Isidor Niborski, *Mysticisme et Ecriture: l'Oeuvre et la Pensée d'Aaron Zeitlin* (These du Doktorat, 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); Nathan Wolski, "The Sktik Kabole Niger Couldn't Digest: Poetry, Messianism, and Literatoyre in Aaron Zeitlin's Keter," In *geveb* (December 2018).

² Aaron Zeitlin, "*Man, froy un shlang*," *Illustrierte Vokh* 25 and 27 (June 26 and July 10), (Warsaw, 1924), 14-15, 15.

³ Idem, *Metatron: Apokaliptische Poeme* (Warsaw: Alt-Yung, 1922); idem, "*Keser: Fragmentn fun a rapsodye*" in *Varshever almanakh* (Warsaw: Beletristin-Fareynikung, 1923), 1-19.

⁴ Idem, "*Der kult fun gornisht un di kunst vi zi darf zayn: Protest un ani-ma'amin*," in *Varshever shriftn* (Warsaw: Literarn-klub baym farayn fun yidishe literatn un zshurnalistn in Varshe, 1926-27), 1-9.

remarkable short essay has much in common with the aforementioned poems and contains the key to unlocking aspects of his earlier poetry.

Man, Woman, and Serpent

1.

We die because we love

“And my tribe,” sings Heine, “it is the Asra, who die, when they love.”

We die, however, not only when, but also because we love.

Between death and sex is a kinship like between lightning and thunder. When one opens the Bible, one finds at the very beginning the story of the first-woman Eve and the first-man Adam—two direct God-descendants. They are warned not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—eat they do, however, the serpent coaxes. As for the second tree, the Tree of Life, it mourns over the wrong of the first two world-created, seeing that they have lost eternity for the sake of a fruit of a tree, on which good and evil grow together.

Do you grasp the profundity of this Genesis-tale? Here lies the key to the tragedy of all who love and die, here are concealed all the loud and quiet screams of history, here are crystallized the tears born in the eye by all generations.

The old story with two trees in an old garden seeks, among other matters (I say “among others matters” for it contains, like pearls on the sea-floor, countless meanings), to describe the eternal connection between three related things:

Between death, sex, and civilization.

Da'at. Knowledge—in Hebrew—means: sex-consciousness (“And Adam knew Eve”). The Tree of Knowledge—the Tree of Sex and Knowing—bears double fruit. Fruit of good: evolution; fruit of evil: death.

Adam and Eve, the first couple, became detached from the eternity-tree, where they grew together with divinity—expressed differently, they exchanged domains from cosmic love to egoistic, personal-human love and began to live for one another: Adam for Eve and Eve for Adam. However, that which they perceived, that which they discovered—that they are separate yet one, that they are man and woman—this also contained a deep sorrow: the sorrow of knowing, the wound of understanding. They grasped that in wishing to live only as and for self, there would afterward come a time when they will need to die, for they whom they will engender, the future man-and-woman-couples, will need life for themselves alone.

The first sexual relations between Adam and Eve were the opening chord of the world symphony, the first morning-call of awakened times—it was also, however, simultaneously, a sign that death would come, for once they had known one another sexually, neither Adam nor Eve could live eternally any more: from now they had to leave a place for the people-to-come, for children, and children’s children, for world.

True, according to the Bible, Adam and Eve, and the first people more generally, lived for so long that their death seems to us as a minor evil. Regardless of how Methuselah-like-old the first people were, however, I believe that of death they had the same fear as we ephemeral tomorrow-we-die-people. See, they could permit themselves the luxury of life only as long as they did not become superfluous and a burden. The moment arrives when the fresh-verdant, newly-arrived, people-generations have so sprouted around the old trunk, multiplied so much, that they, the earlier ones, had to move aside and die off. And the more human life becomes shorter and shorter, like days in the winter, and death becomes more frequent, faster, more fatal, sex grows, and with it—death.

Reproduction and sex engendered world-being and world-life—but at the same time death stood at life’s door, as its condition, like a law from life itself, and—through the mediation of sex—bound fellowship with civilization.

Sex and civilization are bound precisely in the same way as sex and death.

Were it not for sex, were it not for that first “knowing” which Adam “knew” Eve—eternity would have remained unmoved like snow on Mont Blanc, and Adam and Eve would have remained two gigantic mute Garden of Eden gods. The Garden of Eden itself would have stood eternally open, like a house which does not fear thieves, and it would have been unnecessary to position at its entrance two guarding swords—angels.

However, as soon as the primordial consciousness awoke—the consciousness of sex—consciousness in general needed to awaken. And what is consciousness if not good and evil, joy and terror, abyss and heaven?...

Not for nothing did Adam and Eve, straight after falling, after detaching themselves from the eternity-tree, sew the first costume, and suffer the first shame. What is civilization then, if not dress and feeling shame? Dress—namely, form; and feeling shame—namely, feeling guilty, bearing the eternal feeling of sin, lamenting that the primal-parents separated themselves from eternity...

I have already noted above that within what the Bible recounts about Adam and Eve’s first day, countless meanings can be found. I have extracted here but one of them, from which it emerges that sexuality, *duqra*, male, and *nuqba*, female, are two contrasts, eternally producing:

Love—Evolution—Death

Death—Love—Evolution.

Death stands in the middle of the wonderful proportion. It is that which makes possible being, which makes possible the eternal further, the interminable later.

Death is a condition of civilization, a law of life, and—the sun-shadow-fruit of love.

We die because we are civilized and because we love.

You should, therefore, not consider as mere affect or as inconsequential metaphor the equivalence so beloved of poets between love and death. It is more than equivalence and certainly more than affect. You need only add to the alliance of two a third: civilization, understanding, “knowledge of good and evil.”

Precisely that “knowledge of good and evil,” however, was bequeathed to Adam through Eve. It was not Adam, but rather Eve, who, in the midst of the happy Garden of Eden-blindness where seeing does not pertain on account of its radiant luminosity, was the first to catch sight of the earth underfoot. The woman was first to bring evolution, death, and

love, the first to bequeath to the man clothes, form, the feeling of being sinful and shame, the necessity of civilization, and will for being.

Also Enkidu, one of the two chief protagonists in the remarkable ancient Semitic Epic about Gilgamesh, is led out of his wild, roaming Adamic-life by means of a woman through a sexual act, and becomes in this way—a city dweller.

For with woman, as she to whom earth and form are first revealed, begins “city,” begins everything that is marked by representation, everything which is transient-melancholy and ephemeral-beautiful, like the sun in fall.

The man, however, yearns to return to the primordial edenic blindness which is so radiant. He yearns to return—from city, from civilization, from form, death, and love—to the tree of eternal life, to the happy formlessness of infinity, to un-humanness and non-egoism (*oyser-mentshlekkayt un oyser-zikhikayt*).

The woman wants, the man wants to cease wanting—this very opposition drives all the wheels of history; it is the struggle between City and God (*shtot un got*), the conflict between earth-consciousness and beyond-consciousness.

Man and Woman—beautiful, tender ephemerality and raging-masculine un-humanness.

This is the key to everything, and the door at the same time.

From time immemorial, the mystics have known this and the world-artists felt this—and it is for this reason that the wonder of sex animates all mysticism on the one hand, and all world-poetry on the other.

Schopenhauer wrote his “World as Will and Representation.”

Truth be told, a work ought to be written with the name “The World as Man and Woman.”

And do you know who sees it exactly that way?

The *Zohar*!

2.

The woman with innumerable names

Man and Woman, after their banishment from the Garden of Eden, remain at the mercy of the serpent in the dark. The serpent, green, coils at their feet and says: “Now you are God!” But man and woman weep. In the darkness their white tears fall on the serpent’s green back.

Now they will die.

Terrified, Adam looks upon the red-blooded, red-fleshed enigma Eve. She stands before him red like a conflagration, proud and tall. What does she want from him? She handed him an apple and in the apple lay annihilation.

Suddenly Eve begins to incline Adam towards her and the darkness grows full with mysteries. The serpent hisses in anger. Was he then no more than God's poor pimp? He moves aside a little. A consolation arose for the pair, unexpected and great. Adam knew Eve. From Eve—the seductress and serpent's helper—becomes the first mother.

“See,” says Eve joyfully to Adam. “Soon life will again appear in the world. And even though we will die—life itself will not die.”

Trembling, Adam kisses his woman, leans on her motherliness, like on a wall of salvation [see Isaiah 60:18, NW]—Adam becomes child of the beloved.

In her, the become-mother—his hope for redemption, the possibility to someday extricate himself, in a million years' time, from under God's chastising hand and become edenic one again.

And note:

That which I recount here of Adam and Eve's first earth-night is valid for all our generations from time immemorial until now.

As long as woman is only form, thirst, and beautiful death—Adam fears her red-blooded enigma. She rouses in him all his desires, he is her slave, her dog on a chain—but close, but second-self, but beloved does she become to him afterwards, when he catches sight in her—beneath the veils of her beautiful but blind form—the essence: mother.

From that moment on begins his way to her—the way in spirit.

Then he senses that only here, in mother, lies concealed a distant possibility for him to exit (whenever it might be) the serpentine circle-dance: death, form, knowledge. From her eyes, the two cut-open hearts which burn under her brow—gleam a vestige of that ancient edenic-blindness, after which he yearns amidst his Babel-towns, his immeasurable cold knowing and eternally changing cultures.

Hence—the mother-apotheosis in mysticism and poetry. Most profoundly—in the *Zohar*.

Man and Woman—two eternal foundational principles according to the *Zohar*, which, to employ Goethe's phrase—“weave the living garment of divinity.”

True, a meaningful division of the entire cosmos into the two foundation-principles, Man and Woman, can already be found amongst the ancient gnostic-heretical sects, where the thirty world-aeons (those which Schelling later intended by the word: *zeitalters*) are comprised of fifteen man-woman pairs, each pair—a double-whole and twofold-unity. However, all this is fantasy in comparison with the *Zohar*. For here, in the Bible of the Kabbalah, sex becomes the cornerstone of an entire edifice, whereby above must unite with below, and the light, veiled in darkness, must be unveiled with mighty combination-performing hands.

Says the Zoharist:

There exists a lower woman—from whence I know that there is an upper woman, of which the lower is her reflection, an offshoot from higher rungs. This is the woman with innumerable names. This is *Matronita*—the World-Lady, the beautiful girl, *ulimta shapirta*, *ayalta*, the doe, the supernal rose, eagle and Noah's dove.

Lower woman is but a link in the chain of *nuqba*, in the chain of the eternal feminine. A chain must be complete, it must not become disconnected anywhere.

For the chain to be whole, that the gold of the chain should not become darkened in any place, that no rust should cling to it, that the links will remain firm and durable—there must be a constant bond between the links:

Lower woman must perpetually face upper woman, like the moon toward the sun. There must be mutual influence between them. Just like here below, there exist acts of pure union in the supernal realms, dependant on one another, one the condition for the other. The sexual must become holy on earth in order that no blemish may befall the pure love of the celestial realm.

Sex, however, is not thereby pushed aside by the Kabbalah with two ascetic hands, as is done, for example, in Christian mysticism. Rather, purification is called for. The fire which abides in passion, the fire without which existence is nothing, death, chaos—that wandering fire must little by little be stolen away from desire, to be restored to the parental-house, the origin-house of all fire and life:

In the house of holiness.

Zeitlin's essay on the Garden of Eden narrative is deceptively complex and I will only outline its most salient points here.⁵ According to Zeitlin, the old tale of the Garden of Eden outlines the nature of the human condition in all its complexity. Briefly stated, the narrative recounts humanity's fall from unity to duality and multiplicity. Zeitlin promises much in his interpretation, namely, "the key to the tragedy of all who love and die...all the loud and quiet screams of history," and suggests that the ancient myth seeks to describe the "eternal connection between three related things: Between death, sex and civilization."⁶

According to Zeitlin's reading, the first human couple originally inhabited eternity "where they grew together with divinity" "in the midst of the happy Garden of Eden-blindness where seeing does not pertain on account of its radiant luminosity" and where they were like "two gigantic mute Garden of Eden gods." Expressed differently, their existence was marked by changeless unity with God. Noting that *da'at* in Hebrew does not merely imply knowing, but

⁵ As far as I am aware, Miriam Trinh remains the only scholar to have commented on this essay. Though insightful, her analysis does not mention the zoharic source text, nor does she connect the essay to *Metatron* and "Keter." She does, however, discuss his poem *Dokument*, presented below, though interprets Zeitlin's Kabbalah through the lens of the Lurianic thought rather than his zoharic sources.

⁶ Although he does not cite it, or even allude to it, one wonders whether Zeitlin has in mind the famous myth from BT *Yoma* 69b which also explores the inter-relationship between the sexual instinct and civilization. According to the Talmudic tale, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, the leaders of the Israelites prayed that the evil impulse be eliminated. The impulse to commit idolatry was handed over to them, and they cast it into a lead pot with a lead cover, rendering it powerless. They prayed further and the sexual impulse was also handed over to them, but a prophet warned, "Realize that if you kill him, the world will be destroyed [because the desire to procreate will vanish]. They imprisoned him for three days, and looked in the whole land of Israel for a fresh egg and could not find it. They said, 'What should we do? If we kill him, the world will be destroyed.'... They blinded him and let him go. This helped inasmuch as he no longer entices a person to commit incest."

more specifically sexual consciousness, Zeitlin understands the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil to in fact be the Tree of Sex and Knowing, which “bears double fruit. Fruit of good: evolution; fruit of evil: death.” Although strictly speaking, Adam “knew” Eve only after their partaking of the forbidden fruit, for Zeitlin, it is sexual consciousness—the primordial consciousness that is also knowledge of duality—that awakens consciousness in general, and it is the woman who brought this consciousness to the world. True, she defied God, but her defiance was not so much a sin, but rather a “catch[ing] sight of the earth underfoot.” And even if she brought death into the world, she also brought love and the potential for change and development, and even consciousness itself: “Death...makes possible being, which makes possible the eternal further, the interminable later.”

In his fallen condition, and in contrast to the woman who sought and seeks earth, love, change, etc., “man...yearns to return to the primordial edenic blindness...to return—from city, from civilization, from form, death, and love—to the tree of eternal life, to the happy formlessness of infinity, to un-humanness and non-egoism.” It is this opposition between man and woman, between eternity/unity/stasis/permanence/non-egoism on the one hand, and death/duality/dynamism-change-time-history/ephemerality/egoism on the other, that “drives all the wheels of history.” As the subtitle to the second part of the essay makes clear, Zeitlin’s association of woman with change and multiplicity (“innumerable names”) stems from his reading of the *Zohar*. Earthly woman is a reflection of the celestial woman, namely, *Malkhut*, the final female divine potency, whose nature is also marked by dynamism and death.

There is much more that might be said about this short essay (Freudian, Jungian, and phenomenological readings come to mind), though I will confine my remarks here to exploring Zeitlin’s kabbalistic source and offering some reflections on how this essay corresponds to some themes in his early poetry.

Although he does not say so explicitly, Zeitlin’s musings on unity and multiplicity and their connection to the Garden of Eden narrative derive from a stunning passage from the *Zohar*. I cite here the text not only to explicate Zeitlin’s thought, but also to highlight his deep familiarity with zoharic writings which lie at the heart of many of his poems and his broader mystical-poetic quest. (In his manifesto of 1926, Zeitlin refers to the Jews as “the people of Song of Songs poems and Zohar-plastic global visions” and explicitly turns to the Kabbalah as a blueprint for artistic renewal: “Kabbalah-image! Kabbalah-plastic! Jewish and equal to Cosmic Art!”)⁷ His interest in the *Zohar* was undoubtedly also motivated by his father’s recently begun exploration and elucidation of the kabbalistic masterpiece.⁸

⁷ Aaron Zeitlin, “Der kult fun gornisht,” 5-6; see also on these excerpts, David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 275.

⁸ Hillel’s *Zohar* writings begin to emerge in 1919/20, now collected in *Be-Fardes ha-hasidut ve-ha-kabbalah* (Tel Aviv: Yavneh Press, 2003). On Hillel Zeitlin and the *Zohar*, see Arthur Green, “Hillel Zeitlin and Neo-Hasidic Readings of the *Zohar*,” *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 22 (2010): 59-78; idem, *Hasidic Spirituality for a New Era: The Religious Writings of Hillel Zeitlin* (New York: Paulist Press, 2012); 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.

The passage (3:107a-b, cited here from the *Pritzker Zohar*) is a homily uttered by Rabbi Shim'on on Song of Songs 2:1: *I am a lily of Sharon, a rose of the valleys*. As Zeitlin himself notes in his essay, the rose is one of the chief symbols for *Shekhinah/Malkhut*, the feminine aspect of divinity and the ruler of our world.

שושנת (*Shoshannat*), a rose—for *שניאת* (*shanniyat*), She varies, Her colors, *ואשתניאת* (*ve-ishteni'at*), and changes, from color to color.... *Shoshannat, A rose of, the valleys*—for *שניית ומשניאת* (*shanniyat u-mshanneyat*), She varies and changes, Her colors: sometimes for good, sometimes for evil; sometimes for Judgment, sometimes for Compassion. *The woman saw that the tree was good for eating and attractive to the eyes and the tree was desirable to look at, and she took of its fruit and ate* (Genesis 3:6). Come and see, for people do not know or consider or contemplate: When the blessed Holy One created Adam, investing him with supernal glory, He asked him to cleave to Him, so that he would be unique and single-hearted, in a place of single cleaving, never changing or reversing—in that bond of faith, to which all is bound, as is written: *and the Tree of Life in the midst of the Garden* (ibid. 2:9). Afterward, they strayed from the way of faith—abandoning the unified tree, highest of all trees—and came to cling to a place that changes and turns from color to color, and from good to evil and evil to good. They descended from above to below and clung below to many changes, abandoning the highest of all, who is One and never changing, as is written: *God made the human being upright, but they sought many schemes* (Ecclesiastes 7:29)—*but they sought many schemes*, surely! Then their hearts changed in that very aspect: sometimes toward good, sometimes toward evil; sometimes to Compassion, sometimes to Judgment—according to that to which they clung, surely!

According to the *Zohar* here, the primal sin in the Garden of Eden lies in the human beings' choosing dynamism, duality, multiplicity, and complexity over stasis and unity. Expressed in terms of *sefirot*, humanity chose *Malkhut*, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, over *Tif'eret*, the male aspect of divinity, the Tree of Life. Although the original plan was for Adam and Eve to remain bound with the unchanging source of life, they chose change over stasis and simultaneously brought multiplicity and death into the world. As Melila Hellner-Eshed has observed, the *Zohar* is not merely describing the human condition as a fall from unity to multiplicity; rather, it is presenting two different states of consciousness, one feminine—dualistic and dynamic, and one masculine—changeless and unitary.⁹

If in reading Zeitlin we are uncomfortable with his portrayal of the feminine as death and duality as opposed to the masculine as life and unity, or woman as earth-consciousness and man as beyond-consciousness, or (as we shall see below), female as outside and is, as opposed to male as inside and must be—and if his thought strikes us as “medieval” (think of the Aristotelian idea of woman as matter and man as form)—we should remember that in many ways Zeitlin is at heart a zoharist (a “*Zohar-mentsh*,” as his father would say)¹⁰ and that these categories are first and foremost kabbalistic symbols describing the human condition of

⁹ Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows From Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, trans. Nathan Wolski (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 345-347.

¹⁰ Hillel Zeitlin, “*Der Zohar*” in Hassidus (Warsaw: Nayer ferlag, 1922), 83.

both men and women. Indeed, lest one accuse Zeitlin of describing the feminine only in negative terms, one should note that although associated with death, duality, and ephemerality, it is the feminine that is the source of the beautiful in the world and of phenomenological reality itself: “For with woman, as she to whom earth and form are first revealed...begins...everything which is transient-melancholy and ephemeral-beautiful, like the sun in fall.” Even if not a full-fledged rehabilitation of Eve, Zeitlin’s creative reading of the *Zohar* passage and his sympathetic understanding of both Adam and Eve—but especially Eve, who grasps beauty, life, and world even at the expense of death—goes some way to undoing the simplistic binary reading of the Genesis narrative. Eve may not be a hero, but she is not a villain either; certainly she is not demonic. Moreover, it is in Eve as mother that the hope for redemption lies: “In her, the become-mother—his hope for redemption, the possibility to someday extricate himself, in a million years’ time, from under God’s chastising hand and become edenic one again.”

As noted above, the essay’s exploration of themes of unity and duality, stasis and dynamism, continues ideas first presented in two of his earlier poems, *Metatron* and “Keser,” both of which Zeitlin understood as part of his neo-kabbalistic futuristic poetic quest.¹¹ Both poems present a vision of duality transcended. In *Metatron*, it is history that is concluded, whereas in “Keser,” it is time itself that is annihilated. Expressed differently, both *Metatron* and “Keser” seek to resolve humanity’s post-edenic condition—dualistic, historical, ephemeral, and ever-changing. For Zeitlin, history and time have become the site of the catastrophe and need to be transcended—or better, just ended—to enable the new to arise. Significantly, there is no *Aufhebung* of history here, nor is Jewish history especially sacred or meaningful, though of course the categories of the poetics and thought are all entirely Jewish.¹²

Metatron is a long and complex poem. Briefly stated, Zeitlin’s *Metatron* is the Angel of History, the dynamic force of becoming. Based on a passage from *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* (1:27a) where he is understood to be the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, *Metatron* is presented by Zeitlin as the very source of the dualistic fluctuations of history. He is “*dopl-meynik/yo-neynik*” (double –meaning/ yes-ing-no-ing) always building and destroying.

¹¹ See his 1923 letter to Shmu’el Niger: “I strive there [in *Keser*] (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.” See Szeintuch, *Aaron Zeitlin and Yiddish Literature*, 105; idem, “Aharon Zeitlin’s *ani maamin – tsvei briv tsu Shmuel Niger*,” *Di goldene kayt* 112 (1983): 148-170. Neither *Metatron* nor “Keter” have been analysed in depth, but see Szeintuch’s astute remarks in “Between Literature and Vision,” 125-132.

¹² These brief remarks are part of a larger study of Zeitlin’s early poetry exploring his poetics, mysticism, apocalypticism, and messianism, currently in preparation. See Wolski, “The *Shtik Kabole Niger* Couldn’t Digest.”

The return to unity in *Metatron* is assured, however, but only by history's completion, or better, cessation. "History! Accursed circus! Put an end to the accursed circus!" In the same stanza where the spirit of humanity rises to Metatron's throne to protest his double nature, humanity decries "History! Death and woman!",¹³ a phrase which we can now more fully appreciate in light of his essay which explains the connection between the feminine, death and duality, time and civilization.

In "Keser," which is even more obscure than *Metatron*, and whose focus is the sense of the changing times and impending messianic breakthrough—conveyed through a stunning fusion of avant-garde expressionism and mystical-messianism—we also find statements which become intelligible only in light of his essay. The poet's exclamation "May sexuality come to an end!" and his plea for "Liberation from multiplicity / From sexual two-ing and three-ing!"¹⁴ are not reflective of a hatred of the body, but rather express the desire to transcend the dualistic human condition.

The opening of the poem lays out Zeitlin's mystical quest:

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.

...

The oldest of partitions, set far before our eye,
The oldest and the proudest—the mirror-abyss of woman.¹⁵

The Woman, of course, is the divine feminine, *Malkhut*, the final *sefirah*, but also the source of the ever-changing phenomenal world. The phenomenal world is set before our eyes, at once a mirror of a higher unity, but also an abyss into which one can fall. And so, the multi-garmented world of multiplicity, the feminine phenomenal world, has to be unveiled, stripped, and seen through, to enable a return to unity. (Zeitlin's Kabbalah, like the *Zohar*'s, is often quite neo-platonic.) As the source of death, duality, history, and even time itself, the feminine must be transcended. Only then will a new unity be accomplished.

Time, I would pour you out, 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.¹⁶

...

For when you, in your fever, will away

¹³ *Metatron*, 46-49.

¹⁴ "Keser," 2, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

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!¹⁷

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), though it is also found in the early writings of 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,"¹⁸ while according to his successor Menachem Mendel, "The root of time comes to be only in the aspect of *Malkhut*."¹⁹ 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] 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.²⁰

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,"²¹ that the overcoming of time is attained.²²

Back to Zeitlin's "Keter." With the annihilation of time, a new beginning, and a new unity can arise:

Woman and Man
Become then more united, unique-alone,
Standing-stone²³

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

¹⁷ Ibid., 11.

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, *Or ha-Torah*, Bemidbar (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1998), vol. 3, 996; cited in Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, p. 111.

²⁰ Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 112.

²¹ Dov Baer Schneersohn, *Perush ha-Millot* (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1993), folio 59c.

²² See Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 115-117.

²³ "Keter," 13.

created him with two faces. Then He sawed him and gave him two backs, one on this side and one on that.”²⁴

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. Moreover, the new androgyne will not simply be a recapitulation of the old. In place of a back to back configuration, 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 and Eve were separated
By the serpent-youth, the divider!
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.²⁵

“Keter” thus offers a vision of a new creation, a new human being, edenic once more, after history and after time, marked by the erasure of duality—or if not erased, then softened to the point of verging on unity. As readers we are of course on the wrong side of the certain yet distant restoration. Something of the awaited unity is, nevertheless, made present in the poem, which, in offering a vision of our destiny, brings the tension of the human condition to consciousness. It is precisely this tension that underwrites human temporality: “Between day-after-tomorrow yes / And now in the meantime-not-yet.”²⁶

Another poem from 1926 also explores the connection between sex and history, *geshlekht* and *geshikhte*, this time mediated by *gefekht*, combat. As in the essay presented above, sex is allied with death and civilization, though here, the connection with war is explicit. Not only is sexual difference a symbol for the dualistic and “fallen” human condition, but it is the mysterious relations between the divine male and female, themselves influenced by human behaviour, that determine the fate of the world. *Geshlekht* as sexual difference is the source of *geshikhtlekhe* nights, but as a symbol for the supernal forces, also the source of *gefekht*, the embattled state of our world.²⁷

²⁴ *Bereshit Rabbah* 8:1; see also *Vayiqra Rabbah* 14:1; BT *Berakhot* 61a, *Eruvin* 18a; *Tanhuma*, *Tazri’a* 1; *Midrash Tehillim* 139:5.

²⁵ “Keser,” 15.

²⁶ “Keser,” 9.

²⁷ Cf. Jacques Derrida’s famous essays on Heidegger and sexual difference, “Geshlecht 1: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference” and “Heidegger’s Hand (Geshlecht 11)” in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 7-62.

Document²⁸

(From the new song-book 'My Siddur')

Record yourself, O World, a document!
In the twentieth century said to you
A Yiddish poet,
A son of Kabbalists,
Who came to you, the fair and throng
Like a gypsy-child astray with song:

“I have beheld a dream!
My dream is a truth,
My truth is the shortest of poems,
My shortest of poems is thus.
Geshlekht hot dikh geshlakht, Sex has slaughtered you,
Sex has slaughtered you!
Your blood has flown,
O world, on account of sex!
Sex drives battles,
Geshlekht, sex—is *gefekht*, combat!
When nations below do battle—
Above battles Man with Woman,
Outside—with inside,
Must-be—with that which is!
The mountain of *Dukra*, the Male, battles
With *Nukba's*, the Female's, deepest vale—
O World,
Weighed are you
On Male and Female's scale!

All your historical nights
And your present luminous *geshiktlekhe*, historical, night—
All on account of *geshlekht*, sex!
Geshlekht hot dikh geshlakht, Sex has slaughtered you!
Sex drives battles,
Geshlekht, sex—is *gefekht*, combat!
Because of sex you have burned [turned lament],
Become unrecognizable,
And burn will you, yet more intense—
Record yourself, O World, a document!

²⁸ Aaron Zeitlin, “Dokument,” *Literarische bleter*, 17.12.1926, 841. See also Trinh, “Hatramat ha-shoah,” 171-174.

Aaron Zeitlin was born one year after Gershom Scholem. How different are their intellectual trajectories! Where for Scholem, the Kabbalah was the subject of philological inquiry and critical scholarship (admittedly in the service too of national and cultural renaissance), in Zeitlin we find Kabbalah as literature, poetics, and spiritual-artistic life. The foregoing discussion should suffice to make it clear that in Aaron Zeitlin we encounter a profound and original kabbalistic thinker and writer. His essays, poems, and plays are learned, beautiful, and artful, but above all unique in their fusion of kabbalistic symbolism and ideas with the literary and philosophical concerns of high Jewish modernity. Why then has he received such scant attention? Presumably, among the reasons for this serious lacuna are the institutional divides that mark Jewish academia. Scholars of Kabbalah rarely take an interest in Yiddish texts and are largely unfamiliar with modern Yiddish verse, while scholars of Yiddish literature are insufficiently versed in Kabbalah to approach his esoteric and at times obscure poetry. As a mystical poet writing in the ostensibly secular form of Yiddish verse, Zeitlin knew he was destined to remain unheard, and in his poem *Lid tsu di soynim* published in 1933 prophesied: “*Un lang vel ikh a sod farblaybn yener ume vos iz nisht vert ir got/* For a long time shall I remain a secret among that nation that is not worthy of its God.” Scornful, the poet laments: “*Vos veyst ir fun mayn lid/* What do you know of my poem?” Ultimately, however, he remains hopeful that “*oyfshteyn vet a mol a yidn-dor a nayer un tsindn vet er likht nokh mir, nokh zayn poet/* A new Jewish-generation shall one day arise and light a candle for me, for their poet.”²⁹

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²⁹ Aaron Zeitlin, “*Lid tsu di soynim*,” *Globus*, November 17, 1933, 11.