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A Symbolist Kinah? Laments and Modernism in the Maghreb

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“There is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor,”1 so write Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, describing the privileged place “minor literature” holds in their theory. Borrowing from Kafka’s observations concerning Prague German and Czech and Warsaw Jewish literature, Deleuze and Guattari add two other characteristics to the “small literatures” (kleiner Litteraturen). In what now becomes “minor literature,” “language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization”2 and the writer writes via a “collective assemblage of enunciation.”3 But in the view of these two theorists, “deterritorialized writing” corresponds, perhaps exclusively, to “oppositional writing” in a major language, since they claim that “a minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.”4

In Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation, polylingualism figures only as a metaphor, for multiple languages are never taken into full account and the definition of the minor revolves around only one language. In their text, polylingualism refers to “points of nonculture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape”5—that is, elements which allow for the deterritorialization of the major language. In order to create the desired “becoming-minor,” Deleuze and Guattari

2 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, 16.
3 This second characteristic, it should be acknowledged, also applies to major literatures, since language is a social, not an individual, phenomenon.
4 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, 16.
5 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, 27. The irony of identifying the Third World with “nonculture” seems to be lost on these writers, even when they are purportedly attempting to be revolutionary, opening the canon and discussing literatures previously tentatively described as “marginal” or “popular”; see also ibid, 18.
advocate “the minor or intensive” “use of the polylingualism of one’s own language.” Actual multilingualism is thus absent from the ideal they imagine: “It is certainly not by using a minor language as a dialect, by regionalizing or ghettoizing, that one becomes revolutionary.”

This position valorizes monolingual production. It does not explain the multilingualism of minority cultures, nor does it allow for texts infused with other languages than the “major” one—most likely a European language. It is further complicated if we think of Jewish historical conditions and literary practices—even if, ironically, the theory itself was inspired by Kafka’s diary entries confronting Czech and Warsaw Jewish literature. Because of their cultural situation, shaped in large part by the diaspora, Jews have traditionally been “in a peculiar linguistic situation.” Jewish literatures have typically been multilingual and marked by translation, while languages have played an important role in the construction of Jewish identity.

Chana Kronfeld has already pointed out the significant exclusionary effect of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory. Adopting her critique, I offer two counter-arguments to their position. First, I argue that minor literatures can emerge from multilingual contexts and social conditions; and secondly, that minor languages have the capacity to challenge and re-inscribe dominant languages. I emphasize the role of minor languages in the make-up of major languages, as well as the power which minor languages have in revitalizing major languages. Here I will offer one counter-example which effectively undermines Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation of the minor: Sadia Lévy, a multicultural and multilingual Algerian poet writing from an oppositional or marginal position and using a threatened and minor language. This Jewish poet employs at least one other language in opposition to his territorial or dominant language—in Lévy’s case, a colonial one, since he writes in French and Hebrew. As a Francophone avant la lettre—an Algerian Jewish Symbolist poet, composing Hebraized Latin verses in French, in colonial Algeria, in the early 20th century—Sadia Lévy also calls into question the boundaries of the field of Francophone studies.

Sadia Lévy is simultaneously positioned within the historical context of

6 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, 26–27.
9 As we shall see, for political and ideological reasons Lévy constitutes an almost-forgotten figure in the history of Francophone literature. In France, the efforts of Guy Dugas, who has written about Lévy’s work in the context of Jewish Maghrebi literature, have rendered results outremor: in the US, as far as I know, Yaël Even-Levy is the only scholar to have dedicated herself to examining Lévy’s work, in her 1998 doctoral dissertation at Brandeis entitled “The Poetics of Identity in Judeo-Maghrebi Poetry: The Poetry of Sadia Lévy, Ryvel, and Blanche Bendahan.” I would like to recognize her pioneering study, to which I am indebted.
Westernization, acculturation, and Frenchification of the Jewish Maghreb and at the crossroads of the Arabic, Hebrew, Judeo-Spanish, and French languages and literary traditions. An Arab Jew, shaped by both East and West, Sadia Lévy is also an author who allows us to look at the development of Modernism from a different angle. Writing at a remove from the literary center and yet connected to it, in an ambivalent motion of conformity and resistance, Lévy identifies with Symbolism, in itself a liminal movement between pre-Modernism and Modernism. He also invites us to look at Modernism variantly due both to his privileged linguistic resources and to the fact that his use of traditional genres treads a fine line between the popular and the erudite, the oral and the written, the secular and the sacred—perhaps his most unique balancing act.

Sadia Lévy is not a postcolonial writer. He can be seen as non-oppositional because of his francophilia and, in line with theoreticians of the Maghreb, perhaps not even a Maghrebi writer because of his privileged position as a Jew in colonial Algeria when Jews became French citizens. And yet he destabilizes this “privileged position” when he claims a different cultural identity, one which is not limited to “our ancestors, the Gauls,” but embraces “our forefathers, the Hebrews.” These forefathers enter the French text speaking such eloquent Hebrew that the intruding ancient language infuses the French text with new allusions, images, and sounds, completely transforming its character.

The precariousness of Lévy’s privilege is apparent in the ease with which his French citizenship was given then repealed, his rights granted then revoked. At turns included and excluded, his position in relation to the surrounding Muslim, colonial French, and even to the Jewish community, is complicated. Historical contextualization is also necessary in order to avoid essentialisms and to approach a reality which does not necessarily fit the moulds or paradigms already established by scholarship regarding “colonialism”, “postcolonialism” or “minor literatures.”

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Pour accorder l’Instrument …

A Gustave Kahn.
octobre 1928.
In memoriam.

Amusons-nous, ce soir, Muse musicienne
D’assembler en sonnet quatorze vers légers
De ceux-là que flûtait la syrinx des bergers
Aux temps arcadiens de l’églogue ancienne …
Je n’ai qu’un instrument d’âme phénicienne!
Cependant joie ou deuil, rire et pleurs mélangés,
Je ne sais point d’accents qui lui soient étrangers
Et par lui j’ai ma voix comme à chacun la sienne.

Mystère d’atavisme en l’immense Athanor!
Un psalmiste, un lévi m’a légué son Kinnor …
Ce kinnor qui sonnait aux fêtes solennelles
Des Hébreux dans le Temple élevé par Hiram,
Je l’ai pris pour chanter mes tendres villanelles:
Formosam Kehatus Ardebat Séfiram.

To Tune the Instrument
To Gustave Kahn.
October 1928.
In memoriam.

Let’s amuse ourselves tonight, musician Muse
Crafting into sonnet fourteen light verses
Of those the shepherds’ flute played
In the Arcadian times of the ancient eclogue …

I have but one instrument of Phoenician soul!
Yet joy or grief, laughter and cries mingled,
I know no accent stranger to it,
And through it I have my voice, as each has his own.

Mystery of atavism in the immense Athanor!
A psalmist, a Levite has handed me his Kinnor …
This kinnor which sounded during the solemn festivals
Of the Hebrews at the Temple Hiram built,
I took to sing my sweet villanelles:
Formosam Kehatus Ardebat Séfiram.

The above poem is a remarkable mixture of linguistic and literary references. It combines Latin poetry—marked by images from classical mythology—with Hebrew poetry, bearing its own linguistic and religious affiliations. All this is performed not only in French, but in a poetic genre and a verse meter most closely identified with the French: a sonnet written in alexandrines.

Virgil’s pastorals and the psalmist’s songs merge in the “immense Athanor”—the alchemist’s furnace, the crucible of transmutations. “Athanor” itself comes from
the Arabic al-tannúr—“oven” (Hebrew *tanur*), adding yet another defining cultural strain to this voice to which no accent is a stranger. The sonnet indeed thematizes the gestation of an individual poetic voice, combining seemingly disparate elements which, as the rough matter in the athanor forms the basis of the philosopher’s stone, constitute the prime matter of a complex, composite identity.

What is most striking at a first reading of “Pour accorder l’instrument” is the packaging of such novelty and originality in exceedingly traditional form. A classical Petrarchan sonnet, following the regular rhyme scheme of *abba abba ccd ede*, the poem offers a interweaving of cultural and linguistic references which reveals a daring, innovative poetic stance.

The initial alliterative and paranomasic verse—“Amusons-nous ce soir, Muse musicienne”—places the poem in the realm of song. It stresses, from the outset, the poem’s musicality—not only in what it says, but also in the message its repetitive mellifluous sounds carry. The emphasis on music is developed through the poem by associating instruments and genres of the Greco-Latin tradition—the flute and the eclogue—with those of biblical origin—the kinnor and the psalm. In the end, the blending of these two sets of elements produces a traditional French pastoral genre, the *villanelle*, now a hybrid product, in which Hebrew and Latin, “East” and “West,” conjoin and transform one another.

When the poet suggests a collaborative creative enterprise to his muse—“D’assembler en sonnet quatorze vers légers”—he already proposes a mixture that accentuates the plurality of languages and traditions: Choosing intertexts from Arcadian times to craft a modern sonnet to be sung accompanied by an instrument of “Phoenician soul.” The bucolic image of shepherds in pastorals contrasts with the urban and commercial image of the sailors introduced into the text by the Phoenicians. The combination of disparate elements is made explicit, indeed thematized, in the phrase “rire et pleurs mélangés,” which in turn introduces the poet’s uniqueness, as he affirms his own individual voice: “Et par lui j’ai ma voix comme a chacun la sienne.” But the poet admits that his unique voice is a plural one, marked by many accents, since—like the instrument through which it comes—his voice comprehends different languages: “Je ne sais point d’accents qui lui soient étrangers.”

The choice of the word “Phoenician” to qualify the instrument’s soul enhances the composite nature of the poet’s voice and of the poem itself as it unfolds before us. At the same time, the word “Phoenician” offers a possible point of intersection between the multiple integrating strands, exhibiting as it does significant connections to both East and West. The Phoenicians were among the first ancient peoples to settle colonies in North Africa, where the Jews first lived under their government and thence established a constant presence in the continent. The Phoenicians here allow the poet to claim an old link to African history and soil.10 But the Phoenician language is

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10 It is believed that the first Jewish colonies were founded in Africa following the destruction
also related to both the Hebrew and Greco-Latin components of the poet’s voice. Although as a Semitic language it forms the Canaanite group together with Hebrew and Moabite, its alphabet, borrowed and transformed by the Greeks, is the source from which Greek, Latin, and other Western alphabets derive. Moreover, Hebrew is written in what is still called the Phoenician alphabet, while Phoenicia corresponds to present-day Lebanon, the cultural center of the Francophone Levant. Taken together, these two last facts make for a new and surprising link between French and Hebrew.

The “athanor” adds yet another component—the Arab—to the cauldron of languages and cultural formations interacting in the poem. More importantly, it also stresses the role of mixture and transmutation. Known by the alchemists as the “oven of immortal fire,” being, literally, the place where the “egg” containing the philosopher’s stone matter was placed and slowly burned, the athanor also symbolizes the location of physical, moral, and mystical transmutations. It is where all things are blended, transformed, and give rise to the new.

Before introducing the most-decisively Hebrew strand of his voice, the poet first speaks of “atavism”: “Mystère d’atavisme en l’immense Athanor!” In doing so he acknowledges a lineage, a common history, and characteristics shared with his ancestors. The image that represents this inheritance in the poem is the psalmist’s gift to him of a kinnor: “Un psalmiste, un lévi m’a légué son Kinnor …” Such an image reinforces both the speaker’s self-identification as a poet, in a parallel with the Arcadian shepherds in the beginning of the poem—for the Levites were the psalmists, the poets/singers of the Temple—and the connection of poetry to orality and musicality, since the poem is to be spoken or chanted.

As much as the poet claims Hebrew culture as a crucial element in his mélange, it comes marked by the presence of the other. It is not just a rhyme which makes Lévy include Hiram in the poem, for the speaker has already mentioned the “Phoenician soul” of his instrument—that which we have discovered to be a kinnor. Solomon, of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, the Jews coming via the sea and joining their ancient neighbors, the Phoenicians. André Chouraqui writes, “Till the fall of Carthage in 146 B.C., the Jews, in partnership with the Phoenicians, molded North Africa with Semitic influences … To quote Gsell, ‘by the end of this period (813 B.C. – 146 B.C.), the natives of North Africa by their language and by their customs, had become Phoenicians’—in other words, Semites, closely related to the Hebrews of Palestine”: André Chouraqui, Between East and West: A History of the Jews of North Africa (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of North America, 1968), xvi, 6.

11 “Symbole du creuset des transmutations physiques, morales ou mystiques,” reads the Dictionnaire des Symboles. I find it particularly significant to my reading of this poem that the word “creuset” means both “furnace” and “place where different things blend and merge.” Cf. Le Petit Robert I, p.422. On the athanor, see Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, Dictionnaire des Symboles (Paris: Seghers, 1973), 134; Grand Larousse Universel (Paris: Larousse, 1995); Andrea Aromatico, Alchimie, le grand secret (Paris: Gallimard, Série Découvertes n° 302, 1996).
who dedicated seven years to building the Temple of which his father David had dreamed, is not mentioned here. Instead, it is King Hiram of Phoenicia who figures as the builder of the Temple. According to the Hebrew Bible, this is factually true but not entirely accurate. The Phoenicians were David’s and Solomon’s allies; Hiram supplied timber, gold, carpenters, stonecutters, and on-site supervision for the Temple and other building projects. As a skilled bronze craftsman, Hiram was himself invited to Jerusalem to carve, among other smaller works, two great bronze pillars and capitals, together with the elaborate pomegranate and lily work atop the pillars.12

Lévy’s inclusion of Hiram valorizes the actual worker, the builder, the craftsman, perhaps in a somewhat Parnassian identification with the work of the poet—whose activity is linked similarly to the Hebrews through the Levites’ song. But Hiram also represents the other within, for he appears prominently at the very moment when the poet is claiming his own Hebrew heritage. Hiram’s role in the building of the Temple reminds us of the cultural and economic interdependence between the two peoples. The reference to his name is thus an acknowledgement of the role the other plays in the definition of one’s self—which once more reveals itself as multiple and plural.

If “Phoenician” successfully encompasses the various cultural (or at least linguistic) traditions Lévy is claiming, the athanor complicates the idea of a possible “pure” ur-origin. It scrambles all, intersecting the various elements so that they become something other than what they were, even while retaining some of their unique characteristics, being now collectively transformed into something new. The speaker of the poem affirms himself as poet by acknowledging all these combined heritages, and offers his new creation, where Latin and Hebrew are identifiable but not fully recognizable as either language.

In the final verse, Lévy takes from the second of Virgil’s Eclogues the verse “Formosam pastor Corydon ardebat Alexim” (“The handsome shepherd Corydon is consumed by the fire of his love for Alexis”). Lévy transforms this into “Formosam Kehatus ardebat Séfiram”—where Kehath is the poet and Séfira his wife. Kehath is the French transliteration of the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים, the son of Levi, leader of a priestly family, ancestor of Moses and Aaron. Séfira itself is a Hebrew name רְחֵז, whose French transliteration is the same as that of רְחֵז, a name which, according to kabbalistic cosmogony, refers to one of the many emanations of God. Lévy takes the Hebrew names and imposes the Latin declension upon them, making a textual representation of his pluri-accentual poetic voice—and an emblem of his identity. Pledging allegiance to two different classical traditions at one and the same time, Lévy reveals much of his poetic project through this Hebraized Latin, an elitist pidgin of sorts.

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“Kinah pour la mort de René Ghil” is another, more radical, example of Lévy’s

multilingual work that reveals different cultural affiliations in the combination of two universes of discourse. The linguistic diversity characteristic of Jewish-Maghrebi poetic life provides the cultural grid for reading the “Kinah.” The juncture of religious and poetic, divine and metapoetic, is thematized throughout the poem; it might be argued that the poem is itself the realization of this juncture. Moreover, while in the “Kinah” Lévy approaches the Symbolist ideal—a suggestive, musical, and incantatory poetry—he also attempts to give legitimacy to a minor culture, a popular and oral one. The “Kinah” is an expression of the encounter between Symbolist poetic values and traditional Jewish poetic art, which feed and complement one another in the poem.

The combination of two frames of reference or universes of discourse, encompassing Jewish/Kabbalistic and Symbolist elements, is a mark of the modernity of Lévy’s use of a traditional genre. This double layering is subtly hinted at in the very title of his poem.

**K I N A H**

*pour la mort de René Ghil*

**LAMENTATION**

*sur le mode prophétique*

Hoï! le Ménasséah’ est mort! Hoï! sa guittith est brisée!

Romps une corde de ton kinnor, Kehath, fils de Lévi
Et déchire ton vêtement pour le deuil de ton ami
Les dix mois du deuil prescrit pour le poète René Ghil.

Il est mort, le Ménasséah’, le chantre à la voix rythmante!
Nous n’entendrons plus son chant d’or qui maîtrisait la pensée,
Jamais plus le son d’or de sa guittith à présent brisée.

Futurs! Vous célébrerez le poète en vos jugements,
Le créateur de paroles longues pour le coeur pensant
Le souffleur de dires ovalaires pour l’esprit pulsant.

Mais nul que son geste ait accueilli n’oubliera ses égards
Nul qui sincère l’ait approché n’oubliera son regard:
Ce sourire attentif tout luisant de naïve amitié.

Hoï! Hoya sur nous parce que le Mennasséah’ est mort!

Comment ce guibor est-il tombé? Quel effort l’a vaincu?
Comment put-il être renversé le lion chevelu?
Quelle foudre invisible et sans fracas l’a donc terrassé? (I)
La force et la splendeur du Bahour étaient encore sur lui
Jusques au passer de la soixantième année de son âge.
Et sa tempe était pure ainsi que la tempe d’une vierge.

Ni les frivolités brillantes de Paris fol et sage,
Ni la faveur des puissants que l’on brigue en se méprisant,
Ni les grisantes flatteries de la langue juvénile
Ne l’avaient longtemps séduit du lent labour de son partage
Où, parmi les sévérités de la loi qu’il s’était faite
Il épousait, par éclairs, son seul azur, ses joies d’élite!

Nord qui l’avez vu naître et Poitou qui l’avez vu mourir,
Et vous qu’il chérissait molles collines d’Ile de France,
Dites comment fut déconcerté par l’ange sans visage
Le hardi musicien, le héros du parler doux et rond.

Hoï! le Ménasséah’ est mort! Hoï, pour sa guittith brisée!

Emules d’Assaph et vous, descendants des fils de Korah,
Tocheurs du Kittar, des néguinoth ou de la schéminith
Elevez la voix et pleurez sur la mort de René Ghil!
Elevez la voix et pleurez en hommes sur ce psalmiste
Qui créait sa musique et son verbe et vous y contraignait.
Elevez la voix et pleurez sur son Oeuvre inachevée!
Elevez la voix et chantez un schir pour l’un de vos maîtres.

Toi, Kehath, fils de Lévi, et vous Séfira, sa choisie,
Biddy-Lilian, leur fille, comme une harpe vivante,
Doucement, sans élever la voix, vous pleurez l’ami.
Le Ménasseah’ est mort mais sa guittith quoique brisée
On ne sait quel autre poète l’a prise, on ne le sait!

Voici la Kinah pour les dix mois du deuil de René Ghil (II).
Monique R. Balbuena

Sadia Lévy
(1926)

Guibbor: vaillant, héros, homme fort.

K I N A H

for the death of René Ghil

LAMENTATION
on the prophetic mode

Oy! The Ménatzéach is dead! Oy! His gitit is broken!

Break a string in your kinnor, Kehath, son of Levi!
And tear off your clothes for the mourning of your friend
Ten months of prescribed mourning for the poet René Ghil.

He is dead, the Ménatzéach, the cantor of the rhythmic voice!
We will no longer hear his golden song that mastered thought,
Never more the golden sound of his gitit now broken.

Future ones! You will celebrate the poet in your thoughts,
Creator of long words for the thinking heart
Breather of oval sayings for the beating mind.

But nobody welcomed by his gesture will forget his attentions
No one who, sincere, has approached him will forget his look
That alert smile of bright naïve friendship.

Oy! Oya to us because the Ménatzéach is dead!
How has this gibbor fallen? What has defeated him?
How could he be overturned, the maned lion?
What invisible and silent thunderbolt has struck him down?

The Bahur’s strength and splendor were still within him
Until the passing of his sixtieth year
And his temple was pure like the temple of a virgin

Neither the brilliant frivolities of wild and wise Paris,
Nor the favors of the powerful that one courts while spurning oneself,
Or the inebriating flatteries of youthful language
Were enough to seduce him away from the slow labor of his lot,
Where, among the strictness of the law which he made for himself,
He wedded, in sparks, his only azure, his joys of elite!

North, who saw him born, and Poitou who saw him die,
And you whom he cherished, soft hills of Ile de France,
Tell how disconcerted he was by the faceless angel
The audacious musician, the hero of sweet and round words.

Oy! Over the dead Ménatzéach! Oy for his broken gitit!

Emulators of Assaph, and you, descendants of Korach’s sons,
Players of the kittar, of the neginot or of the sheminit,
Raise your voice and cry over the death of René Ghil!
Raise your voice and cry all together over this psalmist
Who created his music and his verb and forced them upon you.
Raise your voice and cry over his unfinished Work!
Raise your voice and sing a shir for one of your masters.

You, Kehath, son of Levi, and you, Sefira, his chosen one
Biddy-Lilian, their daughter, like a living harp,
Quietly, without raising your voice, you will cry for your friend.

The Ménatzéach is dead but his gitit, although broken,
We don’t know the poet who has taken it, we don’t know!

Here is the Kinah for the ten months of mourning for René Ghil.

The title of Lévy’s *kinah* is presented in two parallel sets of distichs. The manner in which these two sets are laid out on the page makes them equivalent to one another, as if one were seeking to translate the other. Such a translation is even more explicit in the juxtaposition of “Kinah” and “Lamentation.”

For a Hebrew speaker, the word *kinah* immediately evokes the traditional Hebrew poetic genre expressing mourning, pain, and sorrow. For many Jewish readers, it invokes the liturgy and biblical poetry recited on the Ninth of Av. The mere presence of the word *kinah* thus establishes both the atmosphere and the literary tradition. In this tradition, the inscription-like title “pour la mort de René Ghil” focuses the theme of mourning on the death of a particular individual. Lévy’s *kinah* may then be seen as an individual elegy, a spiritual eulogy for a personal friend. It is important to note that in Jewish literary tradition the collective or communal character of the genre is not erased by the personal subject matter. Thus Lévy’s *kinah* mourns the tragedy that has
befallen the community of poets with the death of René Ghil. The French translation, “Lamentation sur le mode prophétique,” recalls the biblical book of Lamentations, and with it, yet again, communal suffering, for Lamentations, or Eikha, in Hebrew, is the book read on the Ninth of Av in synagogues all over the world.

“Kinah” is a radical departure from Lévy’s earlier works, being not a sonnet but a poem consisting of sixteen stanzas of varying length, divided into two main groups: monostichs followed by four stanzas each. The dominant verse is an odd syllabic one, with fifteen syllables. In an earlier poem named “Délivre-moi!,” the speaker addresses his muse, Abishag, and asks: “Veuillez me délivrer des Cordeaux du sonnet.” At the end of the collection, Abishag appears to have heard him and finally granted his wish. The poet is liberated from the bonds of the sonnet, and his new work comes with the Hebrew mark of his muse: A Hebrew genre, infused with Hebrew words and biblical references. In addition, according to the method of gematria, the number of verses in the poem, 26, is equivalent to the Tetragrammaton, God’s ineffable name (yhwh). The number of syllables in each verse, 15, adds up to a different name for God, yah.

The monostich that makes up the first stanza introduces terms which immediately refer us to the Book of Psalms—associated with David—and hence Abishag as the poet’s muse, who also names the volume. Many of the psalms were originally sung in chorus, accompanied by instruments such as the tambourine, the harp, the trumpet, and the pipe. “Ménasséah” is the choirmaster, and “guittith” is a stringed instrument which accompanied the psalms sung in the Temple by the Levites. Such an immediate reference to the psalms also inscribes the poem in musical and liturgical realms. The psalms embody the primeval connection between poetry and music, stressing the relevant role of music in the elaboration of Hebrew prosody. Many psalms indicate the instrument that should accompany the verse in their line, of which Lévy’s constitutes a direct paraphrase: “Le-Menatzeaḥ al ha-gitı́t mizmor le-David” (Psalm 8:1). This first monostich, together with the accompanying three, sound as the voice of the choirmaster, or in modern times, the leader of the prayer. At his prompting, the congregation follows his lead. The four stanzas between the monostichs represent the lines recited or sung by the congregation.

The first tercet recalls another instrument, the kinnor, in the same sacred poetic context: “Romps une corde de ton kinnor, Kehath, fils de Lévy.” This tercet clearly mentions the priestly family and service, thereby introducing the eulogized person, René Ghil, within the traditional practice of Jewish mourning: “Et déchire ton vêtement pour le deuil de ton ami/Les dix mois du deuil prescrit pour le poète René Ghil.”

The poet first addresses himself, or his poetic persona, as “Kehath, fils de Lévi.” Sadia

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14 I am borrowing here from Edouard Dhorme, Poésie Biblique (Paris: Grasset, 1931), cited by Haim Zafrani in his Poésie juive en Occident musulman (Paris: Geuthner, 1977), 274. Note that this account of psalmist poetics relates to French Bible scholarship in Lévy’s own time.

15 While the practice of tearing one’s clothes (keri’a, in Hebrew) is accurately portrayed, the
Lévy’s levitical status is clear from his name. The fact that he is a poet only enhances his identification with the Levites—the Temple poets, singers, and musicians who assisted the priestly services. In some circles, Sadia Lévy was even known as “Sadia le poète,” either in a natural and functional translation or in an epithet juxtaposing name and vocation. Calling himself Kehath, using the French transliteration which follows the original Hebrew pronunciation, is no sign of modesty. In the aggadic stories in the Talmud, Kohath is represented as one of the seven righteous men instrumental in restoring the Shekhinah to earth after it had ascended into heaven because of the sins committed by previous generations. Kohath was the second son of Levi, the clan of Kohahites being among the most important levitical clans—levitical aristocrats in charge of the most sacred objects. Only the Kohahites were allowed to serve in the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, and granted the privilege of carrying the Ark through the wilderness.

Sadia Lévy includes himself in this noble lineage of poets at the same time as he asserts the modernity of his use of the biblical and liturgical model. By rediscovering a filiation, he creates for himself a proper name, self-inscribing himself into history in a reactivation of one of its lost moments. As much as his name choice may betray an inflated self-esteem, Lévy’s verses also include René Ghil among the psalmists—as a leader, no less; in fact, as the choirmaster. This role parallels Ghil’s position among some of his peers, who considered him to be the leader of “L’Instrumentisme,” a theory creating correspondences among vowels and consonants, colors, and musical timbres, adding to the “internal meaning” of the words an “exterior meaning” shaped by the letters and their correspondent orchestral sounds. Ghil (1862–1925) was also considered a master by many Symbolists.

The fourth stanza reveals a more evident spiritual and mystical level in the poem. The first verse, while addressing future poets, offers messianic and apocalyptic allusions: the world to come, “ha-olam ha-ba”; the days to come, “les jours futurs”; and the Last Judgment: “Futurs! Vous célébrerez le poète en vos jugements.” Kabbalistic resonances may be heard through the kinah, the two perfectly parallel verses—“Le créateur de paroles longues pour le coeur pensant/Le souffleur de dires ovalaires pour l’esprit pulsant”—particularly endowing the poem with some fundamental kabbalistic concepts. The poet is “créateur” and “souffleur”—creation and cosmogony both lie at the center of kabbalistic preoccupations—and many of Kabbalah’s theories are

grieving period is often eleven rather than ten months following the initial 30-day period (Sheloshim).

16 The French transliteration follows the Massoretic Hebrew vocalization of the biblical text. In English, the name is normally spelled as Kohath. Cf. Bible Louis Segond (Paris: Alliance Biblique Universelle), 1910.

founded upon language and its powers. In the image of God, the great Creator, the poet breathes life into his creation. The reference is to ruah, or spirit (see Gen 2:7). The act of creation (physical, artistic) and the act of breathing are consequently intertwined. In turn, “paroles longues” can be coupled with “dires ovalaires.” The combination of utterance, “paroles/dires,” and shape, “longues”/“ovalaires”—in which sight, sound, and synaesthesia are combined in the shape of the mouth and the utterance it emits—makes for an innovative geometric metaphor/synaesthesia. This is a theory of prosody as spatial form, resembling Kandinsky and Klee’s geometric theories of color, but even more radical. This parallelism, moreover, enhances orality and the physical or mechanical enunciation of the words, something not only related to Creation in the Bible and the Kabbalah but also to the theoretical production of André Spire, Lévy’s contemporary Jewish Symbolist poet and linguist.

Here, the Hebrew sources of vocal musical expression converge with Symbolist values. Despite the importance of musical instruments in the Psalms, it is the human voice which plays a crucial role in Hebrew liturgy. The midrash Shoher Tov on Tehilim emphasizes precisely this point: “The Lord, Blessed be He, said: ‘Even though you have glorified me with harps and lyres, nothing is more pleasant to me than the sound of your voice.’” On the other hand, all of the Symbolist poets’ experimentation with sounds and voice points to the centrality of voice in their poetics. According to Michel Butor, Mallarmé

always considered that purely instrumental music could not be complete, that it could only find its full justification if it somehow exceeded its margins, established the true place of a text, that it absolutely needed to culminate in song.

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18 I find it stimulating that avant-garde musician Arthur Petrónio makes the connection between Ghil’s theories of instrumentation and Kandinsky’s work. Born in Switzerland in 1897, this Frenchman of Italian origin developed polyphonic works: symphonic poems with few verbal elements underlined by sound instruments and rhythm made by percussion instruments, whispers, and breathing. He claims that René Ghil and Kandinsky aroused his interest in sound poetry. Cf. http://www.ubu.com/sound/petronio.html
20 Cited by Zafrani in his discussion of Judeo-Arabic music, Poésie juive, 282. On the musical instruments in the Psalms, see especially Ps 150:3–6. Verse 6 completes and generalizes the previous list of keley shir, “instruments of song”: “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.” Note, again, the connection of “breath” with “le souffleur de dires ovalaires.”
The pair “le coeur pensant” and “l’esprit pulsant” presents the oxymoron of a “thinking heart.” It stresses necessary conditions related to poetic creation: To feel while remaining reasonable, offering a vision of the poet as a whole, both emotional and rational. Intensity of feeling coupled with rigorous method, analytical reasoning, and precision is one of the tenets of Edgar Allan Poe, a herald of Symbolism and without doubt an influential figure for Sadia Lévy.\(^22\) The poet’s use of “pulsant” or “beating” in the phrase “beating mind” can be seen as another allusion to kabbalistic cosmogonical theories, in particular to the phenomenon of *tzimtzum*, in which God retreats himself in the process of creation.

The eight stanzas following the next two monostichs reflect strong biblical allusions, together with equally clear references to Symbolist poets and poetry. The verse “comment ce guibbor est-il tombé?” echoes David’s words in the prototypical *kinah*—the king’s lament for the death of Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1:19–27: “*Eikh naflu giborim?*” Finally, this biblical and traditional context arrives in modern Paris, where the almost nervous repetition of “Ni, Ni, Ni” creates the atmosphere of the “wild Paris” with its salons, its balls, and all of its poets. The intensity of feeling, expressed by such an anaphoric construction also gives the impression of exaltation in prayer, however.

Ghil is now praised not only for his words, his “chant d’or,” and his friendship, but even more so for not indulging in the “folies de Paris”—or, as Lévy phrases it elsewhere, for refusing “the seduction of vanity.” The seriousness of such a poet’s mission is further emphasized by the use of the expressions “lent labour” and “sévérités de la loi,” which, à la Poe, advocate arduous work, rigor, and precision—rather than inspiration. The word “loi” is a junction: In a poem which mentions the Levites and their work in the Temple, it is possible to read the Law—i.e., the Torah—in the “loi.” The Torah also offers a set of prescriptions and commandments that are to be followed in the love and service of God. While “sévérités” may be an applicable term, there is also “joie” in observing such commandments and reaping the rewards that the faithful believe they extend.

The Torah is also present, obliquely, in the verse which mentions the prophet Assaph and the “fils de Korah,” both presumed authors of the Psalms. Korah was also a Kohahite, but one who rebelled and rose up against Moses, denied the divine origin of the Torah, and was punished by death—swallowed up by the earth.\(^23\) References to his name—even if his descendants agreed to abide by the Law—are a possible connection to the anti-establishment and insubordinate stance of poets, more specifically, in Lévy’s context, the Symbolists’ rebelliousness. In connection to “labour,” in line 24, however, “loi” may refer to the laws that govern poetic creation.


the laws of “the particulars of poetry.”24 Through “la loi qu’il s’était faite,” Ghil’s discipline and austerity are emphasized; the congregation of poets is marked in “ses joies d’élite,” where “élite” is the keyword. This term may well refer to the Symbolist poets, who saw themselves as an elite coterie of visionaries who shared a secret code and a common view of beauty. It might also refer to the Kabbalah and its teachings, which are meant to be passed on orally amongst the select members allowed access to the secret doctrine. Symbolism and Kabbalah share a connection with the occult, the valorization of words and voice, the concern with Creation, and the elite status of their members.

Other references as well as textual allusions to Symbolism appear in the *kinah*. The importance attributed to music in poetry—an idea developed throughout the poem—is a critical Symbolist value. In addition to “de la musique avant toute chose,” Verlaine’s preference “pour l’impar” is also evident in Lévy’s choice of the fifteen-syllable verse. Vocabulary favored by the Symbolists, such as “azur” and “Oeuvre”—which will become something of a Mallarmé trademark—are also prevalent in the *kinah*. “Oeuvre” naturally also alludes to the Work of Creation, in a successful conjunction of Symbolist and Kabbalistic domains. An intense use of litotes and other Mallarmean devices is evident in the poem, while in the volume’s preface, poet Jean Royère speaks of the “mystical adoration” he shared with Sadia Lévy for Mallarmé, whose “disciples” they proclaimed themselves to be. Lévy’s “Constellation of the Symbol,” mentioned in Abishag’s dedication, includes Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Moréas. In addition, the isolation, discipline, and seriousness which Lévy admires in Ghil very much recall Mallarmé’s own life-in-poetry.

As in every prayer, despite the grief that is pivotal to both poem and genre, words of relief and hope appear at the end of the *kinah*.25 Throughout its verses, the poet (as lyrical “I”) addresses other poets with exhortations, predictions of the future, and instructions to be followed. In line with the “prophetic mode” announced in its title, the *kinah* concludes with the reassurance that poetry will continue. Maybe Lévy is here himself taking over the mantle of poet, Levite, and prophet, even as the speaker proclaims “We don’t know the poet who has taken it, we don’t know!” But in the end, the poetical and genealogical lineage will not be broken because the broken gitit is now in other hands. The song will not be interrupted, because one of the other chosen poets has taken the psalmist’s instrument and will use it to delve into the mysteries and works of Creation.

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24 The reference is to William Carlos Williams’ poem “The Thoughtful Lover.”
25 In his discussion of the *kinah*, Zafrani asserts: “… all of them [the poems] end invariably with a note of hope expressed in the recurrent themes of the usual perorations of Jewish poetry: redemption, the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the restoration of the old city of Zion and the national glory of Israel” (*Poésie juive*, 368). While Lévy follows the characteristics of the genre, he focuses on the poetic rather than on the national future.
I venture to suggest that Lévy’s use of Symbolist devices mixed with a return to genres and modes typical to Jewish cultural discourse and previously only used in “dialectal literatures” represents a conscious step towards a desired originality in his quest to affirm himself as a Jewish-Maghrebi Modernist poet. When he inserts liturgical Hebrew into French Symbolist poetry, he assumes his own hybridity—his liminal position at the crossroads of different cultures he claims as his own, as legitimate and integral parts of his poetic and cultural identity. This posture is expressed both by the genre and the languages he chooses. In his work, poetry is charged with all the meanings it carries in the Hebrew language and tradition: It is piyut (liturgy), shir (poem and song), and also mizmor (chant, melody). Lévy’s work displays, in fact, a sustained tendency to legitimize every kind of poetry, erasing dichotomies and traditional poetic distinctions—a coexistence of the oral, the popular, the written, the erudite, the mundane, the spiritual, the secular, and the sacred. Herein lies perhaps one of Lévy’s greatest achievements.

But such a combination of Jewish and Symbolist universes of discourse also constitutes a complicating factor in Sadia Lévy’s inclusion in an account of Francophone literature or minor literature. Having written one of the first Maghrebi novels in French, his “priority” has gone unrecognized by scholars of Francophonie because as a Jew, he is considered French.26—an ideological exclusionary act which

26 Guy Dugas claims that “the first volumes [of Judeo-Maghrebi literature] are published in the beginning of the [20th] century, about thirty years earlier than those by Muslim Arab authors”: La littérature judeo-maghribine d’expression française (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1990), 261. He adds that Lévy’s Rabin was also the first Jewish-Maghrebi work in French (“if we exclude a vaudeville mimeographed in Constantinople in 1880”): the first book in French by a Tunisian author appeared in 1919, that by a Moroccan author in 1925 (p. 38). Mildred Mortimer does not acknowledge Lévy’s novel and identifies Mohammed (Caïd) Ben Chérif as the author of the first novel written by an Algerian in French. The latter’s work, Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier, was only published in 1920 (reprinted in Paris, by Publisud, in 1997). She mentions another early novel, A. Fikri’s Zohra: La femme du mineur, from 1925, together with the famous tales of Cagayous, written in 1894 by the European Auguste Robinet (Musette). No Jewish Maghrebi work is cited: see Mildred Mortimer, A Literature in Transition (Boulder and London: Lynne Riener Publishers, 2001), 2, 10 (notes). For Ben Chérif’s novel, erroneously considered “the first example of francophone fiction by a Maghrebian,” see Farida Abu-Haidar, “Inscribing a Maghrebian Identity in French,” in Maghrebian Mosaic, 13–25 (p. 18). Also ignoring Lévy’s Rabin, Jean Déjeux suggests that Ahmed Ben Mostapha, goumier is “the first [novel] published by an Algerian,” Abdelkader Hadj Hamou’s (Fikri) Zohra, la femme du mineur being the second. Déjeux acknowledges the Jewish participation in Maghrebian literature, but only in Tunisia and Morocco: “We don’t hold onto the authors of Jewish origin in Algeria: the 1870 Crémieux decree turned the members of the Algerian Jewish community into Frenchmen”—adding that it is in Tunisia, in 1919, that Jews first began to write stories about the hara [Jewish quarter], citing names such as J. Vehel, Vitalis Danon, Rivel and Benatar: Jean Déjeux, Situation de la littérature maghrébine de langue française (Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, 1982), 19, 8, 20.
fails to grasp his ambivalent position or to recognize that the privilege of his French citizenship is, to adopt Derrida’s words in describing his own circumstances as a Maghrebi Jew, “precarious, recent, threatened, and more artificial than ever.”

Sadia Lévy died in 1957, before Algerian independence, and without seeing Abishag in print, due to restrictions against the Jews. His quest for original poetic expression might well be considered analogous to the collective quest for identity in North Africa. Not a post-colonial writer, but a Francophone avant la lettre, Lévy attempted to define or write his self and his place in history. In his choice of languages, genres, and intertexts, he revealed the multiple strands of his composite identity. He also expressed in his work both an attraction and an ambivalence towards France during a troubled and decisive historical moment for the Jewish diaspora in Muslim lands.

In conclusion, Lévy’s case is a counter-example to Deleuze and Guattari’s formula of minor literatures: The Algerian poet mines the dominant colonial language, infusing it with Hebrew, as well as biblical and kabbalistic metaphors. It is also an example of the possibilities afforded by multilingualism to define—or redefine—one’s personal and political identity.

27 Jacques Derrida, Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin (trans. Patrick Mensah; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 15: “I am speaking of a ‘community’ group … a supposedly ‘ethnic’ or ‘religious’ group that finds itself one day deprived, as a group, of its citizenship by a state that, with the brutality of unilateral decision, withdraws it without asking for their opinion, and without the said group gaining back any other citizenship. No other.”