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Dan Pagis’ “Ein Leben” –
An Ophthalmologic Poetics of German-Hebrew Eye-Contact

“Reading Stereoscopically” – Introduction

Among all Hebrew poets of German-speaking background, Dan Pagis might well be regarded as the most enigmatic.2 His Hebrew poetry “is written primarily in a deceptively simple vernacular idiom,”3 and seemingly instantiates the modern monolingual paradigm.4 Though scholars have been able to show Pagis’s pervasive engagement with his German mother tongue in archival writings, his published poems are, nevertheless, still read as the monolingual Hebrew output of an exophonic poet.5 My paper seeks to challenge this view and presents Pagis’ writings as a poetic echo chamber, wherein his mother tongue not only resonates in his Hebrew poems – to the attuned ear – but wherein, at times, Hebrew even subversively recedes behind the German via the poetic device of homophonic translation, which I analyse in the poet’s writings for the first time. Thereby, this paper offers a key for unlocking a central aspect of Pagis’ poetic “code.”6

For this purpose, we shall explore the unison resonance of Pagis’ German and Hebrew voices in two poems – the most explicit bilingual poem of Pagis’ published corpus, the Hebrew poem featuring the German title Ein Leben, and probably his best-known poem, Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway-Car. Both poems describe different kinds of mother-son relationships and are read in the context of Pagis’ biography as alluding also to the poet’s relationship with his German mother

1. An early draft of this paper was written at the Martin Buber Society of Fellows and presented at a workshop of the Franz Rosenzweig Minerva Research Center for German-Jewish Literature and Cultural History at the Hebrew University Jerusalem, devoted to the theme of Bildung and Therapy. I would like to thank Gideon Tiekotz for his help with secondary literature, and Na’ama Rokem for her comments and questions, which focused on Pagis’ pervasive creative engagement with the German language as an intentional one, rather than as a repressed unconscious residue that he carried with him after his immigration to Palestine in 1946. Cf. Naama Rokem, “Dan Pagis’s Laboratory: Between German and Hebrew,” in The German-Hebrew Dialogue: Studies of Encounter and Exchange, ed. Amir Eshel and Rachel Seelig (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017).


tongue. But whereas Ein Leben has received surprisingly little attention in German-Hebrew studies, despite its obvious and even demonstratively bilingual character, Written in Pencil has not yet been deemed a relevant subject for bilingual studies, other than in regard to the problems its translators are faced with.8

Our analysis of these two poems is aimed at both contributing to the discourse on Pagis, as well as to fostering the understanding of the multilingual German-Jewish text at large. This paper, therefore, is part of an ongoing research geared toward mapping the wide spectrum of multilingual poetic devices in German-Hebrew studies, with a specialized focus on bilingual homophony.9

Hereby, we will focus less on third spaces or gaps in-between languages, but rather on a shared poetic and phonetic spaciousness beyond language borders.10 As a methodological provisional vantage point, we shall, nevertheless, adopt the outlook that has proven useful in Na’ama Rokem’s study of Pagis’ German archival writings as “a stereoscopic reading that takes into account both the German and the Hebrew perspective without positing the primacy of either.”11

“You may write anything“ — Multilingual Poetics

“You may write anything,” Pagis asserts to himself in his poem A Small Poetics, “for example, that and that. / You may, with any letter you can find, / with any label to endow them with.”12 This Ars Poetica proceeds with a reference to the well-known Biblical scene of legendary Jacob staging himself as his brother Esau13: “But you better check,” writes Pagis, “if the voice is your voice / and the hands your hands.” Thus, Pagis’ cautionary note to himself acts upon the assumption that he – the Hebrew poet – neither invariably speaks in his own voice, nor are his own hands, at times, in charge of writing the characters of his Hebrew poems. On the level of biblical metaphor, he rather

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8. Manor, “Tell Him That I.”
10. Cf. “When viewed along an historical continuum, bilingual writers clearly share more with one another than they do with theorists of the gaps and the losses between languages. We hope it has become evident that their artistry thrives not between but across languages and cultural spaces.” Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson, The Bilingual Text (Routledge, 2014), 329.

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seems to have assumed the role of Jakob impersonating his brother Esau. His Small Poetics, then, is intended as an instruction on how to rid himself of such disguise; how to put an end to his biblical comedy of errors. That is, were Pagis was not speaking in his own voice, as he wrote his Hebrew poems, but in the voice and disguise of another, as he suggests in his Small Poetics, in whose voice was he speaking? What do Jakob and Esau stand for in Pagis’ poetics?

When considering Pagis’ adaptation of biblical myth, we had better take into account the tradition of authoritative Rabbinic exegesis, wherein Jacob came to stand for Jewish tradition, whereas Esau was associated with its enemies, primarily with the rival exegetical tradition of Christianity.14 This late antique and medieval school of interpretation began to change in the nineteenth century, as instantiated in the commentaries of Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch, and, most prominently, in Heinrich Heine’s famous poem To Edom – another name for Esau –, which concludes with a reference to Heine’s times:

Later we [Jacob and Esau] became more cordial,
Day by day our friendship grew—
For I also started raging
And I almost seem like you.

Here, Jacob and Esau stand for Jewish and German culture respectively, with a self-ironic reference to the dead-end of modern Jewish emancipation into German culture.15

We would assume, therefore, that Pagis, of Jewish descent, by assuming his poetic role as biblical Jacob adopted German – Esau – but as a disguise, and that Hebrew would designate his original voice – at least according to the Zionist meta-narrative, which postulates Hebrew as the national paradigm to be redeemed in any diasporic Jew, even if he grew up in another language, say in German.16 But the poem was written in Hebrew and in Israel, whereby the relationship between Hebrew and German – the founding language of Zionism – had turned around and the firstborn, as it were, became second in line.17 Research on Pagis confirms this impression and consensus which

15. Hacohen, Jacob & Esau, 225.
16. Cf. Bialik’s polemic call: “All the best works by Jews written in foreign languages shall be redeemed! Undoubtedly the uprooting of Hebrew as a spoken language is one of our greatest national sins. If there is the slightest remedy for it, it is only through the process of transmigration of souls. All the products of Jewish thought and feeling, of our entire past and present, must go through this metamorphosis, and live again reincarnated in the Hebrew.” Haim Nahman Bialik, The Hebrew Book. An Essay, trans. Minnie Halkin (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1951), 236. See also Buber’s famous statement from 1909 that Hebrew – a language he could neither speak nor understand – was, in fact, his real tongue, rather than his beloved German tongue, which he thereby denounced as a foreign one. Barbara Schäfer, “Buber’s Hebrew Self: Trapped in the German Language,” Jewish Studies Quarterly 14, no. 2 (2007). On this ideology of national appropriation, see Sebastian Schirmmeister, Begegnung Auf Fremder Erde: Verschränkungen Deutsch-Und Hebräischsprachiger Literatur in Palästina/Israel Nach 1933 (Berlin: J.B. Metzler, 2019), 56.
17. There, Hebrew became the dominant vernacular, endorsed by Zionist ideology (whose founding documents, Draft, not for circulation! – jan.kuehne@mail.huji.ac.il (3)
prevails among scholars of his poetic oeuvre: notwithstanding the fact that Pagis’ poems were written and published in Hebrew, they were actually conceived and partly drafted in German – his mother tongue.18

“But of Course Mostly Hebrew” – The German Paradigm

This paradigmatic stance of Pagis’ German is hardly surprising, for he had spent his entire childhood – until the age of fourteen – in the German-Jewish culture of the Austro-Hungarian empire, in Radau – a city next to Czernowitz in the Bukovina (a German-speaking region now divided between Romania and the Ukraine). But the locus of his childhood days had been “neither in a land nor in a city, but in a large room, with its walls entirely covered by books from classic German literature”, so his wife Ada Pagis.19 There, in the home of his maternal grandparents, he developed a calligraphic passion for copying Gothic letters from these books, into which Pagis could immerse himself for hours on end.20

At the time, affluent Bukovian Jews like Pagis’ parents were in the habit of hiring nursemaids from the local German population, so that they may teach their children “pure German of the local dialect”.21 In addition, mother Yuli and her parents contributed their acquired German to young Pagis’ education. His father Yosef spoke Russian and hardly any German – initially a source of contempt on behalf of his mother’s family, because “the little German he knew was garbled by his

18. For German as the para-language of his Hebrew archival material, see the appendix to תורותם של יידיים - סעיפים 17 [Dan Pagis - Studies and Documents] (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2016). On Pagis’ psychological relation with German, see Gold, “Betrayal of the Mother Tongue.” For Pagis’ poetic experiments in German, see Rokem, “Dan Pagis’s Laboratory.”
20. Pagis, Sudden Heart, 30.
21. Pagis, Sudden Heart, 31. The German-Hebrew hybrid Yiddish, perceived as a dialect lagging behind literary German, was out of the equation, at least since Mendelssohn, whose disdain of Yiddish as a literary and public language was profound. In demanding “either pure German or pure Hebrew ... only, no mingling of the languages” (“Rein Deutsch oder rein Hebräisch ... nur keine Vermischung der Sprachen”), he sought to supersede the Yiddish-inflected

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Regardless of such purist bias, Yuli anticipated the multilingual future of their relationship, in her Hebrew letter to Yosef from September 1934, after he had migrated to Palestine without her:

When Yuli writes that “at the end of autumn” she would “no longer be here”, she alluded to her plan to follow her husband, accompanied by their son, to Palestine. She could not have foreseen, of course, that she would die all of a sudden three months later. Pagis was left behind, without mother or father, and stayed with his mother’s parents. He tried to reach his father in Palestine, first through a German letter of his own handwriting, later with a Hebrew one. Remarking on the latter’s handwriting, Ada Pagis concludes that the Hebrew letter seems to have been dictated by his Hebrew teacher, who might, just as well, have composed it himself. This is to emphasize that six-year-old Pagis expressed himself naturally in German and wrote emotional German characters by his own hand, whereas his Hebrew voice and letters were that of another, didactic self that wrote through him like a hand through a glove.

This constellation – left alone with his mother-tongue, constantly in search for his father’s – became paradigmatic of his writing, even after he managed to flee from a labour camp in Transnistria in 1944, immigrated to Palestine two years later, and eventually established himself as a Hebrew poet who became part of the Israeli school curriculum: Still, in the Hebrew manuscripts of his last book, we can discern German as a para-language, in which Pagis comments, edits and orders his Hebrew texts – the language whereby he thought, even though he wrote and published in Hebrew. That is to say, the voice of Pagis still resonates as a German one, even though his poems are in Hebrew. Similar to Jacob in the biblical scene, thus, Pagis seems to have managed to disguise his poetic performance before Hebrew eyes. Or is he assuming the role of Isaac, the near-victim


22. Pagis, Sudden Heart, 21.

23. “And what do you do about the languages? Are you learning Hebrew and English? I still haven’t, because the teachers are yet to return from their summer vacation, and at the end of autumn I will no longer be here. Just imagine: your Russian and my German, to which we’ll add two more languages! But of course mostly Hebrew.” Pagis, Collected Poems, 359 [2.9.1934]. S.a. Pagis, Sudden Heart, 21.

24. Pagis, Sudden Heart, 28.

25. See the appendix of: [Dan Pagis - Studies and Documents].

26. Renown translator Anne Birkenhauer, who, having translated Pagis’ poems into German, remarked upon her impression as if having restored parts of his poems to the language wherein they were originally conceived: “Beim Übersetzen seiner Gedichte hatte ich in manchen Passagen den Eindruck, ihn in die Sprache, in der bestimmte Gedanken entstanden sein mußten, zurückzübersetzen. (Das mag manchmal am Einfluß des Deutschen auf moderne hebräische Phrasen liegen, aber es geht darüber hinaus.)” Anne Birkenhauer, “Dan Pagis Übersetzen,” Jüdischer Almanach (1995), 51. On the basis of Birkenhauer’s observation, Nili Scharf Gold argues that Pagis had suppressed his

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of his father’s blind faith? “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau,” states Isaac in the biblical legend.27 In other words, the voice is German, but the hands are Hebrew. Even though he wrote his poems in Hebrew, pointedly formulated, Pagis voice is German – his mother tongue. It is heard not only by his translators, but increasingly by scholars in the context of the translational and multilingual turn, too, in which we approximate the sensitivities of translators and learn to think like them.

Bearing this sensitivity in mind, we shall turn to one of Pagis’ last and only posthumously published Hebrew poems. It features a German title. Could we perceive therein an expression of his genuine poetic voice, which, as his Small Poetics tells us, he had been working towards all his life as a poet? Is Jacob stepping out of his role as Esau? Is the German title of the poem – Ein Leben – an expression of Pagis’ German “voice that is his voice,” written in Latin rather than Hebrew characters, that is by “hands that are his hands”? Let us turn to the poem itself – with the original Hebrew on the left; my translation on the right. I left the German title in both cases untranslated, as in the original version.

Ein Leben

In the month of her death, she is standing next to the window, a young woman with elegant perm, pondering, looking outside.

From outside an afternoon cloud is looking at her from the year 1934, blurred, out of focus, but always faithful to her. From inside it is me looking at her, four years old, almost, holding back my ball, slowly leaving the photo and growing old, growing old carefully, quietly, so as not to frighten her.

Ein Leben

In the month of her death, she is standing next to the window, a young woman with elegant perm, pondering, looking outside.

The contrast, or rather interrelationship between German title and Hebrew poem,28 both in the context of Pagis’ monolingual Hebrew oeuvre, as well as in regard to the content of the poem, is extraordinary and remarkable. It highlights not only the poet’s emotional relationship to his mother, who had died when he was only four years old, but also to his German mother tongue. Thus, in light of Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida, I explore the photograph “not like a theme, but like a wound”;29

German language, but among others, Rokem has shown that this actually points to a continuous engagement with his mother tongue. Cf. Gold, “Betrayal of the Mother Tongue,” 246; Rokem, “Dan Pagis’s Laboratory.”
29. Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography (Hill and Wang, 2010), 21. The original French version was published in 1980; the English translation one year later; the first Hebrew translation in 1988, i.e. two years Draft, not for circulation! – jan.kuehne@mail.huji.ac.il (6)
to which Pagis’ poem serves as a sort of poetic therapy. Like the medical branch concerned with the treatment of eye-disorders, known as ophthalmology, the poem intervenes into the photograph and seeks to correct the averted gaze of his lost mother, so that the poet may behold her face, may meet her eyes.30 The longed-for poetic eye contact would also reestablish a connection to his German mother tongue, in whose image – Bild – he fashioned himself still as a Hebrew poet, akin to the literary tradition of German Bildung.

But Pagis’ mother does not look into the camera, which is located inside the room, from wherein he watches her. She “is standing next to the window, / ... / looking outside.” In order to meet his mother’s eyes, the poet mirrors his poetic self – the ṣax – in the cloud – the ṣax –, which enables him to watch her from the outside; precisely from that direction into which his mother is looking.

Thereby, highlighted by the verb “looking” – the predominant activity described by this poem – a triangle of gazes is poetically established, which enables the poet to meet his mother’s eyes. In synchronicity with this poetic activity, the German title is overlooking the Hebrew poem. In such manner, both gazes – of son and mother – as well as both languages – German and Hebrew – are juxtaposed to each other in the poem. I would like to reiterate this point from a different angle and ask, Where do these gazes meet? And how does the German title Ein Leben relate to the Hebrew

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poem?31 An answer will be found in the relationship between poem and photograph (see image 1)32.

A Triangle of Gazes – The Sepia Photograph

At first glance we may discern a crucial difference between poem and photograph: Pagis is missing from the photograph.33 He seems to have imagined himself into the picture frame in the course of contemplating his mother’s portrait, holding his breath while doing so – “holding back his ball,” which, in Hebrew, could also mean the globe. For Pagis, the world seems to have stood still – a breathtaking moment of Atemwende – whenever he saw the image of his lost mother at the end of her short life. Concomitantly, we may realize how the process of translating a photograph into a poem also illustrates a characteristic of every process of translation: the translator, along with his world and times, becomes part of the translated text.

Parallel to the manner in which Pagis had poetically projected himself into the photograph in order to be closer to his mother, the German title was added to the Hebrew poem, as apparent from an archival typoscript of the poem (see image 2).34 Similarly to the way whereby Pagis’ poetic self entered the (description of the) photograph is the German title put into motion vis-à-vis the Hebrew poem. This motion from the German towards the Hebrew signifies here also part of Pagis’ multimedia translation process – from photo to poem – in which the translator becomes part of

31. A small aside: We know from Dan Pagis’ wife, Ada Pagis, that the photograph into which the poem intervenes, was a permanent item in his office (e-mail to author, 26.6.2020). Pagis’ friend and colleague Elazar Ben-Yoetz reports even having seen the photograph on Pagis’ desk during visits. (Personal conversation) That is to say, Pagis seems to have faced the averted gaze of his mother throughout his life, on a near daily basis during his work as a Hebrew scholar and poet. Furthermore, we find traces of this photograph also in earlier poems, such as in the third stanza of רוח לפנים, שבת נישנים. Thus, the poem – written in what Amir Eshel would call “eternal present” – presents the photograph as a constant place of encounter both with his mother and his German mother tongue throughout his life. Cf. Amir Eshel, “Eternal Present: Poetic Figuration and Cultural Memory in the Poetry of Yehuda Amichai, Dan Pagis, and Tuvia Rubner,” Jewish Social Studies 7, no. 1 (2000). As a reminder of his mother’s loss and as object of contemplation, the poem presents also what Barthes would call the punctum (the wounding, the personally touching detail) of Pagis’ gaze: “the punctum should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it.” Barthes, Camera Lucida, 53.

32. Pagis, Sudden Heart, 96a.

33. Apparently, no other photograph exists, in which young Pagis would be present, too, as apparent from an inquiry to Ada Pagis, which her daughter Merav conveyed: שמה שלידך, לא כל זמן אתה מעומד על המצלמהnoinspection. “Why did you forget to look at the photographer?” (e-mail to author, 20.5.2020)

34. Gnazim Archive, 28074-2. However, it is not clear, what came first – title or poem. Consider the fact that the German title was handwritten from left to right, as if to begin the draft of a German text. Only later, apparently, the Hebrew text of the poem was typed below, from right to left. Afterwards, the title was encircled and set into motion by an arrow to crown the Hebrew poem.

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the translation, and German part of Hebrew.

Nevertheless, the relationship between title and poem remains ambivalent for now; we do not know which language preceded which.\textsuperscript{35} This ambivalence, however, which does not lend superiority to one language or the other, is a crucial part of Pagis’ poetic, stereoscopic self-projection into the photographic image – the Bild – of his mother. Pagis had modeled himself and his Hebrew poetry throughout his life after his German mother tongue, which serves as a conceptual, emotional, and poetical paradigm to his writing, as shown above. However, the relation between German and Hebrew in Pagis’ Ein Leben is not as unmediated as the German heading of the Hebrew poem might suggest. Rather, it is as indirect as the interrupted eye contact in the photograph between his mother’s averted gaze and her observing son, mediated by the afternoon cloud. However, in the photo, the cloud is not visible and, like the boy, a poetic projection.

Note that the action most frequently described in the poem is that of “looking”: the mother is “looking outside”; an afternoon cloud is “looking” at her “from the outside,” and the poetical I is “looking” from the inside. A triangle of gazes which conflates inside and outside through an active perception, which, as the German title of the Hebrew poem suggests, is active also beyond linguistic borders. But only two points of the triangle are connected – there is no direct connection possible between the gaze of the mother and that of the son. Only via the “afternoon cloud” (‘\textit{anan} / \textit{ונא}”), may the poetical ‘I’ (\textit{ani} / \textit{אני}) establish eye-contact, because as the mother is looking outside, so is the cloud looking from the outside towards her. Only the poet, who takes on the position of the photographer, sees both.\textsuperscript{36} This mediator of the “cloud”, therefore, signifies also the interlocutor via which both languages of the poem meet in its translation of the photo. But it is “blurred, out of focus,” as is the conflation of languages it points to. Thus, we will have to sharpen our analytical gaze and zoom in for a closer analysis.

\textit{“Always Faithful” – The Loyal Cloud}

Just as the alter-ego of the poetical ‘I’ – the afternoon cloud – was ever faithful to Pagis’ mother in his poem Ein Leben, so did Pagis persist in his engagement with the German language, even though he wrote and published his poems in Hebrew. The afternoon cloud serves as a metaphor, which stands both for the indirect, but nevertheless constant engagement with the German language under the surface of the Hebrew language, as well as for the indirect eye-contact between mother and son, mediated by the poetical translation of the photograph into two languages. The key for this

\textsuperscript{35} Another typescript seems to suggest, that the German title is a later addition, which followed two attempts to find a Hebrew title: מחי, i.e. \textit{A Life}, is the first attempt and a direct translation of the German title Ein Leben. קורות חייו, i.e. "Sepia photograph", is the second attempt and a line taken from the poem.

\textsuperscript{36} In this position, the poet acts not as a photographer, but as a projector of his imagination.

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multilingual conflation of sight (the triangle of gazes) and sound (in two languages) is found already in the title of Pagis’ poem *Ein Leben (A Life)*.

The German indefinite article “ein”, as in “*Ein Leben*”, sounds, if read, similar to the Hebrew word for “eye”, the “גֵּד”. By synaesthetically transposing the photographic gaze into poetic sound, the bilingual homophonic diaphoneme of the Hebrew word for “eye” – the *ayn* – phonetically translates the German “ein”. This homophonic translation between the language of Pagis’ poems and his mother tongue establishes both a visual as well as a phonetic contact between the poet’s contemplative glance and his mother’s averted gaze which opens the poem – both in a literal and multilingual sense. The bilingual conflation *ayn/ein* phonetically sets into motion the photographic image frozen in time, freeing the phonetic signifier from its seemingly monolingual grapheme.

Also the second word of the poem’s title *Ein Leben* can be read both as a German and a Hebrew word and makes sense in both languages alike. It, too, encapsulates the relationship between mother and son in the bilingual homophony of the Hebrew poem’s German title: In accordance with Pagis’s *Small Poetics*, which legitimates writing Hebrew also in German characters – also the second part of the title *Ein Leben* can be read as a Hebrew word, after a small shift of the poetic foot or Hebng: גֵּד יָבַן (*ayn le-ben* [‘labe:n/], instead of *ayn lēben* [‘le:bən/]). This Hebrew idiom can be translated both as “eye/gaze of the son,” as well as “eye/gaze on the son.”

Both readings are well established in the triangle of gazes monilized by the poem, which also enables the poet’s mother to rest her eye imaginatively on her son, whose poem transposes the visual unto the audible realm. Thereby, not only is the biographical wound of the dead mother’s photographic present absence poetically healed, as it were, but also the gap between his poetic language and his mother tongue – the other aspect of the wound – is phonetically bridged by a conflation of both languages in the bilingual homophone of *Ein Leben / גֵּד יָבַן*. Nevertheless, the awareness of a real substantial loss remains ineradicable, as a second homophonic reading of the indefinite article *ayn* suggests: the German *ein* can also be transphonated as the Hebrew יָבָן, which literally means “nothing”. *Ein Leben*, therefore, reads as גֵּד יָבָן (ayn le-bén); as leaving “nothing the son” – a life without a mother.

**Discovering the Surface – Overtones of Poetic Depth**

If, at the beginning, we posited that throughout his oeuvre, Pagis had expressed his German voice in Hebrew, in his poem *Ein Leben*, Pagis can be said to express his Hebrew voice in German. Beyond a case study, however, this posthumous poem serves as a key to unlock a hitherto hidden phonetic layer of Pagis’ poetic voice. It invites us to re-read his Hebrew oeuvre not only stereoscopically – with our eyes simultaneously attuned both to Hebrew and German –, but with our ears stereophonically attuned to the overtones of one language in another, as it were. However, in
order to substantiate this claim, we still have to rule out the possibility of a homophonically contingent as an unintentional coincidence.

I have demonstrated the inner logic of the poem’s thinking process and its reverberations in sound, through pointing towards the predominant motive of the poem – the eye, the ayn –, which returns in the Hebrew reading of the German title Ein Leben – both in regard to the bilingual mother-son relationship and the triangle of gazes. This motif seems to play out also in the acronym of the apparently carefully designed poem. Pagis seems to have developed it over a long span of his poetic lifetime, since we can find traces of his meditations on his mother’s photograph in earlier poems.

The appositeness of homophonic translation as a carefully applied poetical device is furthermore supported by Pagis’ expertise as a scholar of medieval Hebrew poetry who had published on multilingual word-plays popular at the time, however, with no specific reference to bilingual homophony or homophonic translation. Being aware, as a scholar, of multilingual poetic devices, however, does not necessarily enable Pagis, the poet, to creatively employ such techniques in his own writing. Yet, there is a clear indication that he was not only aware of the technique of homophonic translation but that he also admired and intentionally engaged with it in his poems: In a letter to Austrian experimental avant-garde poet Ernst Jandl, accredited with having introduced into modern German-speaking poetry the technique of homophonic translation – also called surface translation, after Jandl’s poem oberflächenübersetzung – Pagis relates to this term explicitly. He writes to Jandl in 1985:


37. The acronym could read as: בָּאָה, הָשַׁמָּא, מָא, מִי, i.e. “with mother [hebr.], with mama [germ./yidd.]; see from where I have written / from the “eye” what I have written”. (The acronym of the last stanza is itself an acronym, which stands for מעלה לי הנחתちは, ציון מה שכתבתי, which could also be read as a pun: “interesting, what I have written.”
38. Cf. fn. 31.
Surface- and “deep-translation” – Pagis’ neologism – that is homophonic transphonation of sound and semantic translation of sense, appear to be interdependent in Pagis’ poetics. Pagis openly acknowledges not only being familiar with Jandl’s technique of surface translation. He also hints at the fact that, though in a different manner from Jandl, under the surface of his seemingly monolingual Hebrew poems, Pagis engaged in homophonic translation from his German mother tongue. Inspired by Jandl, Pagis apparently did so already since the 60s, a few years after the publication of Jandl’s influential poem *oberflächenübersetzung*. This deep-layer in his poetry, however, is easily dismissed, if read and heard superficially; so Pagis. He implicitly asks for what could be defined as a homophonic or surficial reading of his poetic oeuvre – in addition to the superficial reading of his poems – attuned to the deep phonetic and semantic nexus of his Hebrew poems within their German para-language.

Hebrew Sealed in German – Conclusion

I would like to illustrate the possibility of reading Pagis’ oeuvre also stereophonically, attuned to bilingual homophony, very briefly with another poem, which was published ten years after his encounter with Jandl’s surface-translation. This poem – *Written with a Pencil in a Sealed Railway-Car* – is probably the most famous of his poems and describes a mother-son relationship, as well. Let us briefly recapitulate this poem, which most Jewish-Israelis know by heart from their school-education:

41. “[I] hear you in three ways: in your own original voice (a recording of a reading confirmed this for me), in a deep-trans surface-translation, and [...] in a sense also in a deep translation. Already in the sixties I myself write in Hebrew [...] But your eyes [...] My poems are [...] heard or read superficially, not at all close to yours, but in truth I have in depth I have learnt a lot from you.” Gnaziim Archive 492/1591. Deletions are mine. For a full, albeit faulty transcript, see Rokem, “Dan Pagis’s Laboratory,” 64f. Rokem’s insightful article pointed me to this letter, however, there, “Oberflächenübersetzung” (“surface-translation”) is misleadingly transcribed as “oberflächliche Übersetzung” (“superficial-translation”) (ibid.).


43. Pagis poem stands by itself, while surface and depth translation compliment each other. Jandl’s poem *oberflächenübersetzung*, however, looses its homophonic dialectic, if read apart from the Whitman poem it transphonates. Weissmann, “Übersetzung Als Kritisches Spiel. Zu Ernst Jandls Oberflächenübersetzung.”

According to my reading this poem also incorporates a hitherto unacknowledged bilingual homophony, which adds yet another, novel interpretation. However, for the sake of argument and the need for brevity at the end of this paper, I just wish to highlight the importance of reading Pagis deceptively simple Hebrew poems stereophonically, with a second ear attuned to the German language. Thus, I shall leave important discussions aside, which this poem has raised, such as whether it is to be read in a circular manner, or whether its abrupt end should be rather left open.  

Alternatively, I wish to single out an important observation made by Dory Manor in his recent study on various translations of this seminal poem. “And what about this surprising construction, this expressive one, which is so Pagisian – [Cain son of Adam]?” Manor asks. 

The attentive reader will already understand to which German homophony I am pointing. Such a reading could clearly stand in opposition to the didactic Hebrew reading, which emphasizes that Cain, who stands in this poem for a NS-murderer, is, nevertheless, still part of the human family. Pagis’ unusual syntactical construction, however, emphasizes the name Cain. It resembles a German syntax, which makes a strong case for a homophonous German reading of “Kain Adams Sohn [Cain Adam’s son]” – all the more so since it lacks the appositional comma (“Kain, Adams Sohn”) – as a negation, as “kein [not] Adams Sohn.” But why insist? Every Hebrew or German reader would know that Cain is the son of Adam, the mythical first man. What would such a negation emphasize?

Let us return to Manor’s important observation:

47. The family connection is the trivial side of the matter, what is more, this information has already been given to us, implicitly, through the mentioning of the other characters. If the speaker is Eve and her eldest son is Cain, it is clear to any educated reader what the name of Cain’s father is. Nothing is gained with this mentioning of the name ‘Adam’, as long as it is not charged with additional meanings, and, in fact, the mentioning of the First Man is a redundant, superfluous addition, precisely in a place, where every word and every syllable is poetically fateful.” Manor, “Tell Him That I,” 117.
Undoubtedly, Pagis’ eye-catching construction of “Kain/Kein Adams Sohn” and the redundant information it delivers does point to a certain emotional meaning hidden under Eve’s didactic voice, which, however, cannot be found in the depth of the associative microcosm of the Hebrew language whereby the poem presents itself. Rather, it is to be found on the surface of its German sound and syntax – the product of a deliberate choice of wording inspired by the technique of homophonic translation. It conflates Pagis’ mother-tongue, the German to which he is emotionally bound, with the Hebrew language he didactically acquired. Whereas Pagis’ Hebrew “depth-translation” emphasizes didactically that, after all, Cain is of human descent – thereby entailing a whole gamut of associations and numerous discourses – the German “surface-translation” emphasizes the emotional impression that Cain is, in fact, inhumane and – to speak from in-between another meeting of German and Hebrew – not a mensch, he, who kills his fellow humans. And when, therefore, the poem breaks off with the mother’s “I” – “tell him [Cain] that I” –, enough is being said: Existence is juxtaposed to nothingness, affirmation of life posited against nihilism. And everything is contained in this "I" of a mother – all her children, all other mothers and their children, all of mankind, with all its mother tongues. All that Cain needs to know in order to become humane and brotherly with Abel is contained in this "I" of Eve, the mythical mother of all living beings – and of all mother tongues. Or, in the mother’s “eye”.

49. Whose Hebrew name also relates to breath (יָקָה), that ephemeral modulator of the human voice.