

IN EXILE by Melvin Wilk. BkMk Press, Kansas City, Mo. 1979.

The cover and title page of Melvin Wilk's *In Exile* are produced appropriately in the style of Hebrew characters, for the poet is rooted in his Jewish past and present, yet removed from them, and this paradoxical tension and its universal parallels are central to his poems here. Wilk's diasporic vision is often polar, with language (Hebrew/Yiddish and English), geography (Brooklyn and Iowa), culture (immigrant and American), and family bonds (father/grandfather and the poet) among the more exclusively local but includes the suicide, whether Hart Crane

or a nameless homosexual, the unemployed worker in his isolation, the black man adrift in white America.

On the other hand, these are not poems of self-absorbed alienation. Throughout, one sees the struggle toward affirmation. For instance, in "Riding Home," the last piece in the collection and reminiscent of Donne's "Good Friday: Riding Westward," the poet, bicycling in Iowa, is drawn by the "Jewish smoke" of ancestral memory to the rediscovery of Jacob's goodly tents. Earlier, "Beginners" recalls the poet's boyhood rejection of his grandparents' Sabbath preparations only to conclude: "Now there are fruits of the vine in Iowa to be blessed/And candles to light on Friday evenings at sundown." Similarly, the advice to the black Elijah ("Elijah's Visit to the Statue of Liberty") is "turn back to your father/and to your father's father." Psychologically speaking, such turning may be inevitable, for "One day when you're certain you're free/You become the father your father was" ("In the Zoo After the War").

Technically, Wilk's achievement depends on his artful artlessness, understatement, simplicity, starkness. His use of Yiddish and yiddishisms is sporadic but unabashed, with references to *yahrzeit*, *trumbeniks*, and *Shabbes*, and in most effective irony to the cry of that itinerant exile, the ragman: "*Alteh zachen! Alteh zachen!*" /Old things, old song, an even older story" ("Lost in Translation"). Likewise, the flavor of Yiddish clings occasionally to the simultaneously native and alien English tongue: "For affection on our block who used words?" ("I Think of Dancing When I'm Blue").

It is a small step from such locutions to the core of Wilk's imagery derived from daily and domestic events. In "New York" the blooming roses smell "like lipstick." The subject of "Dropping Out" tries

"to shove his misery out of sight/like a smelly sock under a dusty bed" and then takes to "crushing roaches as if correcting old mistakes." After sex, the lover in "Too Late" eats "devil dogs." Similarly, a father's jalopies and a mother's club chair mark the metaphorical landscape. As a result, the poetic atmosphere is *haymisch* (homely) and *menschlich* (human).

But *menschlichkeit* at times lapses into violence and terror. In consequence of a hemorrhage, we learn that "The oil cloth gleamed like a slab of liver" ("My Father's Cars"). A speaking wound in "Victim" tells us that "Scars are secrets, as thin as flame." And the moon in "Suburban Nocturne" is "Scarface with just a hint of the Nazi." From allusions in other poems it is also clear that images of holocaust rise easily to Wilk's consciousness.

It is "Pilgrim Father," however, that realizes violence most fully. After his abandonment in a Brooklyn slum, after the destruction of his "Polish town" by the Germans, the poet's grandfather is murdered in a housing project elevator:

They left him soaking
in the blood running from his anus.
The cops saw that my grandfather wore
toddler size Pampers,
just a little too big.
Not like the first howling fuss,
but still and silent now
in the blood and feces and water.

In one sense, the old man's fate is endemic to our age, for Wilk observes in "Dining Out" that "drowning in excrement/is our century's fashion in martyrdom."

But even in death, the grandfather lies in exile. "Buried between LaGuardia and Kennedy,/a long way

from Luninets, /under the jets." And if the poet himself returns to the dwelling places of Israel, it is a return always in progress, as it is for each of us to his own Jerusalem: "I keep on breathing, I keep on surviving, /clutching my yarmelke against the whirlwind" ("Praying in America").

Martin Itzkowitz