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# Unveiling the Sculpture within the Marble Block: Erasure Poetry as Poetic Sculpturing – How to read Alex Ben-Ari's *Mayim Mayim*

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This article examines the boundaries of poetry as a textual form by exploring its intersections with visual arts, conceptual writing, and experimental poetics. Focusing on the techniques of Concrete poetry, Ready-made poetry, and Erasure poetry, it outlines their development and application in general and in modern Hebrew literature. These forms challenge conventional notions of poetic authorship, textuality, and interpretation by transforming existing texts through graphical deviation, parodic displacement, and erasure.

The discussion culminates in analyzing Alex Ben-Ari's *Mayim Mayim* [Water Water, 2020], a unique case in which the poet erases and refashions his previously published poems. Ben-Ari creates a new poetic layer that functions simultaneously as self-parody and a new creation by blackening most of the words in his first book, *Yamim Smuyim* [Hidden Days, 2008]. Engaging with theoretical and artistic perspectives, the article examines how Erasure poetry redefines poetic creation as an ongoing process of revision and transformation. Ultimately, Erasure poetry is presented not merely as a subversive poetic act but as a form of poetic sculpturing, revealing the poem hidden within the original text, just as a sculptor carves a figure from the ready-made marble block.

## Introduction

Is poetry a text? At first sight, that question might seem silly, and the obvious answer would be – of course it is. Poetry consists of letters, written in standard languages; it has an author who composes it, a reader who reads it, and intentional content that is transferred and can be interpreted by a reader. According to the Russian formalist Roman Jakobson, like other linguistic communication, poetry is constructed from message, context, and linguistic code, and it mediates between an addresser and an addressee through the textual medium, which he called 'contact'.[1]

But poetry is a unique kind of text. Although there are many ways to write poetry and various sub-genres, poetry is generally considered distinct from the 'standard' use of language and conventional texts due to several 'deviations'.[2] Most of these deviations, or exceptions, lie in the content of the poem, such as the lexical deviation (e.g., neologisms), grammatical deviation (e.g., broken syntax), semantic deviation (e.g., absurd metaphors), and so on.

However, one of the most interesting deviations in poetry lies in its form rather than its content. The 'graphological deviation' of poetry occurs in its unique typography: 'The line-by-line arrangement of poetry on the printed page, with irregular right-hand margins. The typographical line of poetry, like the typographical stanza, is a unit that is not paralleled in non-poetic varieties of English: it is independent of and capable of interacting with the standard units of punctuation. This interaction is a special communicative resource of poetry'.[3] In other words, poetry differs from standard texts in many ways, but one of the most interesting differences is how it uses the relations between the words and the blank page.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, experimental forms of poetry have challenged the boundaries between poetry and conventional texts and sometimes even between poetry and visual art forms. The central case study of this article is a Hebrew poetry book by Alex Ben-Ari, titled *Mayim Mayim* [Water Water, 2020]. This work was created by the Israeli conceptual poet, using a technique known as Erasure poetry, which is linked to two additional poetic techniques: Concrete poetry and Ready-made poetry. As I will argue, Ben-Ari's pioneering work combines all three techniques by presenting poems from his first book, *Yamim Smuyim* [Hidden Days, 2008], that he himself erased (See **Figure 1**).[4]

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[1] Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics (1960)," in *The Routledge Language and Cultural Theory Reader* (Routledge, 2000), 334–339.

[2] Geoffrey N. Leech, *A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry* (Routledge, 2014), 42–55.

[3] Leech, *A LInguistic Guide to English Poetry*, 42–55.

[4] Alex Ben-Ari, *Yamim Smuyim* [Hidden Days] (Carmel, 2008) [Hebrew]; *Mayim Mayim* [Water Water] (Dfus Bayit, 2020) [Hebrew].

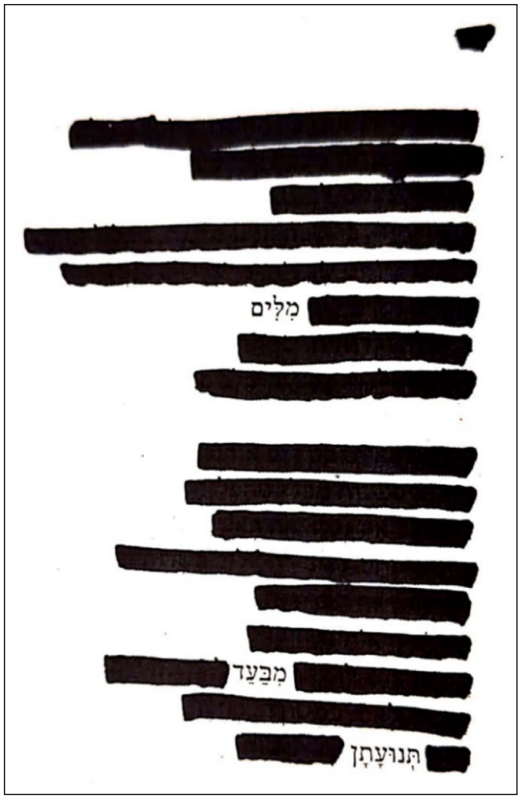



**Figure 1:** Alex Ben-Ari, no title, from Mayim Mayim (2020). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

A close examination of this excerpt quickly reveals that, on the one hand, it is a work in which all the visible words connect in the reader's mind to form a text. On the other hand, it is most definitely not an ordinary text. The work is predicated on the understanding that it emerges from an unknown original text that has been erased; the graphic relationships between black and white produce an artistic experience that is not only textual but also visual.

This unique work might reveal something about the boundaries of poetry as a text and the possibility that poetry can become a living and changing material with which the poet can sculpt. Thus, instead of imagining poetry as a creation akin to painting – bringing something into being out of nothing, applying material onto a blank page – we may conceive of poetry as marble sculpture, formed from something that already exists through the subtraction of material. Nevertheless, Ben-Ari chose to erase his own poems, thereby also giving them a new life. In this way, unlike other erasure poems that treat an existing text as a block of marble and sculpt a new text within it, often conveying political or social critique of the original text, Ben-Ari's engagement with his own work is more organic. In other words, Ben-Ari's work not only unsettles the conceptual boundaries between text and visual art but also combines these established writing techniques to generate an entirely new poetic option: dynamic poetry akin to the sculpting with water.

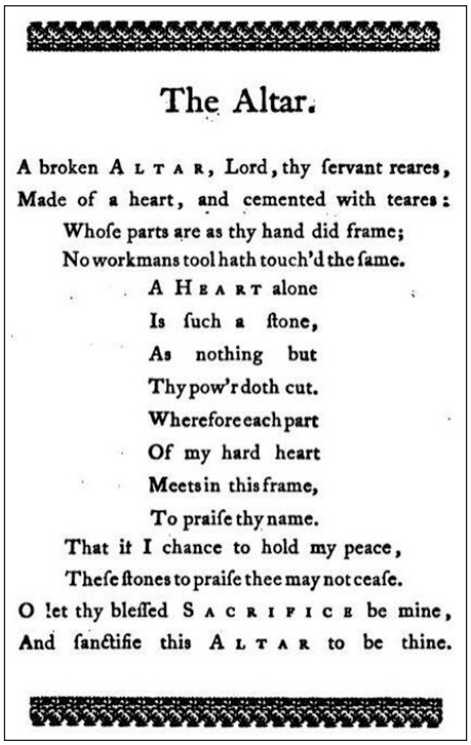
To arrive at the comprehensive analysis of Ben-Ari's book, I first provide an overview of these three quite extreme poetic techniques that challenge our concept of poetry as a regular text in both English and Hebrew poetry.[5] This is essential for understanding why Ben-Ari's work draws inspiration from these poetic traditions, yet at the same

[5] It is important to note that these three techniques also exist in non-poetic contexts. One can find liturgical texts structured as specific patterns and literary Ready-made or Erasure non-poetic literary works. However, these three techniques traditionally exist primarily in poetry, and I will focus on this context in this work. A comprehensive study of conceptual poetry in Hebrew has yet to be undertaken, and therefore I hope that the mapping I will present, beyond its contribution to this article, will serve as an invitation for future research on these phenomena in Hebrew poetry.

time presents an entirely different possibility, through the choice to use his own poems as the original text for the erasure.

## Concrete Poetry, Ready-Made Poetry, and Erasure Poetry

I aim to focus on three distinct poetic techniques, each challenging the traditional notion of text as a work authored by a poet and meant to be read linearly and convey an original meaning. Concrete poetry, also known as Pattern poetry, Calligram, or Carmen figuratum,[6] is a form of poetry that uses the graphological deviation accepted in poetry to arrange a poem in a particular shape, pattern, or image. Concrete poetry pushes the boundaries of graphological deviation to the limit, and while reading this experimental and playful poetry, one might wonder: Is this an image or a text?



The Altar.

A broken ALTAR, Lord, thy ſervant reares,
Made of a heart, and cemented with teares:
Whoſe parts are as thy hand did frame;
No workmans tool hath touch'd the ſame.
A HEART alone
Is ſuch a ſtone,
As nothing but
Thy pow'r doth cut.
Wherefore each part
Of my hard heart
Meets in this frame,
To praiſe thy name.
That it I chance to hold my peace,
Theſe ſtones to praiſe thee may not ceaſe.
O let thy bleſſed SACRIFICE be mine,
And ſanctifie this ALTAR to be thine.

**Figure 2:** George Herbert, The Altar (1633). Public domain.

Concrete poetry is an ancient tradition.[7] Some image-like poems, dating to the 3rd century BC, can be found in the Greek Anthology. These Greek poems are shaped like an axe, a pair of wings, an altar, and other simple objects. Much later, this tradition continued with the famous poem by the English poet George Herbert, 'The Altar' (1633, see **Figure 2**).

In this case, the image seems secondary to the text, and this poem is, above all, a text. Nevertheless, the reader's initial receptive experience, seeing the poem on the page for the first time, may well be a visual experience of observing the altar form, only after which, with the shape of the altar in mind, the reader might proceed to the text itself.

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[6] Roland Greene, Stephen Cushman, Clare Cavanagh, Jahan Ramazani and Paul Rouzer, eds. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics: Fourth Edition* (Princeton University Press, 2012), https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400841424, 175–176, 207–208, 294–295.

[7] Mary Ellen Solt, *Concrete Poetry: a World View* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1970); Elizabeth Cook, "Figured Poetry," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 42.1 (1979): 1–15; Ulrich Ernst, "The Figured Poem: Towards a Definition of Genre," *Visible Language* 20.1 (1986): 8–27; Dick Higgins, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature* (SUNY Press, 1987); Luis Arturo Guichard, "Simias' Pattern Poems: The Margins of the Canon," in *Beyond the canon*, ed. Annette Harder, Remco F. Regtuit, and Gerrigje Catharina Wakker, Vol. 11. (Peeters Publishers, 2006), 83–103.

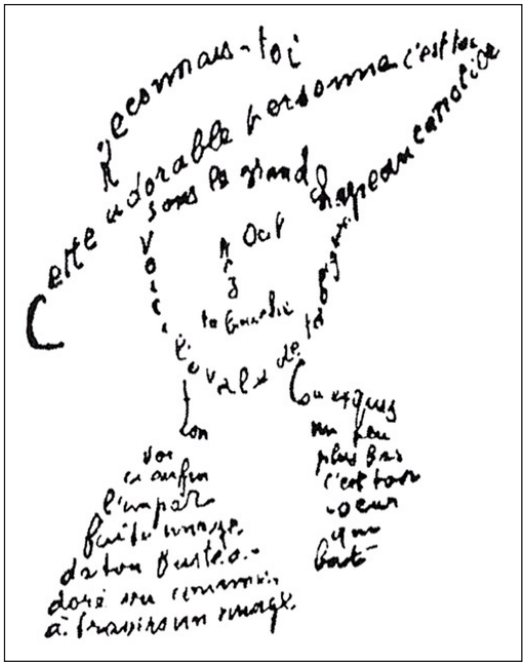

**Figure 3:** Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Reconnais-toi' (1915). Public domain.

20th century's poetic Avant-garde complicated things even further. In another example of a Concrete poem, the French Calligram 'Reconnais-toi' [Recognize yourself] by Guillaume Apollinaire (see **Figure 3**), we may wonder: is this a text or an image? The answer to this question is probably both.

This kind of poetic deed uses the loose form of poetry to challenge the boundaries between text and image and creates works that can be viewed as paintings with words or poems with an image shape. In this way, which demands craftsmanship, Concrete poetry creates an object simultaneously conveying two layers of meaning – textual and visual. In many cases, the textual layer is the most prominent; in other cases, the graphological layer is more substantial, and sometimes they are both aligned.

Experimental poetry may challenge the mainstream definition of poetry as a text in a completely different way, which focuses on content rather than form, via Ready-made poetry. Ready-made poetry constructs a poem from an existing text that usually originated as a non-literary text. Thus, while Concrete poetry combines text and image and creates a new double form of art, Ready-made poetry challenges the standard meaning and usage of other fundamental components of a text: the identity and intention of the addresser and the addressee, as well as the context. This technique was developed in the 20th century under the influence of Ready-made art. Works such as Avant-garde sculpture *Fountain* (1917) by Marcel Duchamp, who placed a porcelain urinal in the museum as an art object, challenges notions of authorship and the construction of meaning in the visual arts. If a ready-made urinal can be considered an object of art, then artistic value is not intrinsic to the object itself but rather a product of cultural consensus constructed by its viewers.

In another notable work, *L.H.O.O.Q*, Duchamp doodled on a copy of Da Vinci's canonical *Mona Lisa* and added a mustache to La Gioconda. These two works may represent two paths for Ready-made art, distinguished by the material each path chooses to work with. The first represents the choice of putting everyday material in the spotlight and elevating it to the level of art and the latter represents the second

path, tinkering with classical and canonical material, and by this, transforming it such that it becomes the object of renewed examination.[8]

There are many forms of Ready-made poetry, but the one we might call 'pure' Ready-made usually takes the path of *Fountain* and places a 'found' text, originally written in an everyday context, for example, in a newspaper article, as a poem, which can be called Found poetry.[9] This form of poetry redefines itself, suggesting that a poetic quality might be concealed in every text, waiting to be uncovered. The displacement of the original text and its refashioning as a poem works as a serious parody.[10] Thus, Found poetry raises similar questions to those of Duchamp's work about the fundamental definitions of poetry: must a poet create every word anew, or is it sufficient to use words that are already available and merely arrange them as a poem? In other words, does poetry have to be born as such, or can it be christened as poetry later in life?[11] And perhaps more than that – if the meaning of an artistic work is arbitrary and given by the interpreter, is there a difference between a poet and any reader?

One well-known example of Found poetry is Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, a multi-volume work published over several decades, beginning in 1934. The work is based on texts from American legal documents and court cases from 1885 to 1915, from which Reznikoff created disturbing and violent poetry that does not explicitly mention its formal origin.[12] Another example is Bern Porter's book *Found Poems* (1972), which contains many experimental Ready-made works from various original texts, such as Christian sermons and technical textbooks.[13] Porter displaced excerpts of these texts and placed them as poems, thus unveiling their unique poetic quality. Kenneth Goldsmith is probably the most critical contemporary conceptual poet and speaker of Ready-made poetry.[14] One of his most important Ready-made works is *Day*, where he transcribed an entire daily issue of the *New York Times* as literary material.[15] These works raise another question that disturbs poets and readers alike: Can Found poetry, with its constraints, achieve the same artistic depth as traditional poetry?[16]

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[8] David Hopkins, "Marcel Duchamp's Readymades and Anti-Aesthetic Reflex," in *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 253–263.

[9] *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 503–504.

[10] Yuri Tynianov, "On Parody (1929)," in *Permanent Evolution: Selected Essays on Literature, Theory and Film*, ed. Ainsley Morse and Philip Redko (Academic Studies Press, 2019), 294–328; Simon Dentith. *Parody* (Routledge, 2002), 1–21.

[11] Stanley Fish, "Is There a Text in This Class?," in *Campus wars* (Routledge, 2021), 49–56.

[12] Charles Reznikoff, *Testimony: The United States 1885–1915 Recitative* (Black Sparrow Press, 1979). For further reading, see Justin Parks, "Charles Reznikoff's 1934 *Testimony* and the Idiom of American Violence," *Criticism* 59, no. 1 (2017): 49–73, https://doi.org/10.13110/criticism.59.1.0049.

[13] Bern Porter, *Found Poems* (Something Else Press, 1972).

[14] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

[15] Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (Geoffrey Young, 2003).

[16] Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Finally, I would like to review a third poetic technique, sometimes viewed as a sub-genre of Ready-made or Found poetry.[17] However, I would like to present it as a different technique, related, to a certain degree, to the traditions of both Ready-made and Concrete poetry, which, until now, have been regarded as two separate traditions with no point of intersection. Erasure poetry, which also evolved mainly in the 20th century as a modernist and Avant-garde movement, usually takes an already existing text, mostly a canonical text, and partially erases it to create a poem. Erasure poetry takes the Ready-made path of *L.H.O.O.Q.* by Duchamp, by manipulating a canonical, preexisting work and adding a new interpretive layer. Despite the similarity, Erasure poetry differs from Duchamp's work and standard Ready-made poetry because the erasure process subtracts from the original material while leaving visible graphological and typographical traces. This technique transforms the poem into a blend of Ready-made and Concrete poetry, sometimes verging on visual art.

We tend to think of literary writing as an art similar to painting – the author stands before a blank page and slowly adds ink through the creative process of creation until the work is finally completed. However, Erasure poetry is more comparable to marble sculpting – the artist begins while standing in front of a certain natural perfection, the whole block of marble, and slowly creates and carves his work of art by subtracting material, not adding. I think that the guiding idea of this movement is that of Michelangelo, who is credited with the saying: 'The statue is already perfect inside the block of marble, even before I begin to work. It is already there. I only need to extract it: carve around it and remove the unnecessary material'.[18] Like Michelangelo, this poetic movement 'carves' poetry from blocks of existing material – an existing text. Erasure is an act of seeing anew, of giving new life to an existing text by damaging and carving it, just like marble sculpting.

Poetic sculpting employs various techniques, the most common is erasing by 'blackening.' The selected exposed words left from the original text are read as a connected text and create a poem. Thus, the new poem constructs a double meaning – one woven from the connection of the visible words, and a second, ironic one made from the relationship between the original text and what remains of it.[19] In most cases, the act of erasure is accompanied, beyond its aesthetic value, by a critical value. The erased text is often a canonical piece with dramatic cultural significance. Thus, the

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[17] Travis Macdonald, "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics," *Jacket magazine* 38 (2009). See also https://www.thehistoryof-blackoutpoetry.org.

[18] It is most likely that this saying, attributed to Michelangelo, is based on his Sonnet 61. For further discussion of this idea about art, see David Summers, *Michelangelo and the Language of Art* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 203–233.

[19] Heike Schaefer, "Un/published: Presence and Absence in Contemporary Erasure Poetry," *American Literary History* 36.2 (2024): 463–488.

blunt act of erasure challenges the original text's canonicity and sometimes discredits its original message or ironically tries to correct it in retrospect.

One of the first and most famous examples of Erasure poetry is the Ronald Johnson's *RADI OS* (1977), created by erasing the first four books of John Milton's English epic *Paradise Lost* (1667).[20] As would be the case with later Erasure poetry, the title of the new work *RADI OS* is itself an erasure of the old title: ~~PA~~RADI~~SE L~~OS~~T~~. Johnson's poem carved out the characters of God and Satan from Milton's work, leaving a poem that discusses the most fundamental forces of existence in the eyes of 20th century thought – order versus chaos, nature versus human, poetry versus silence. In doing so, the creator seemingly reveals hidden intentions in Milton's original work, a work of struggle. Still, he places this epic struggle, through the erasure, in a wholly new post-modern context.[21]

The critical value of erasure is intensified in Travis Macdonald's work *The O Mission Repo* (2008).[22] In this prose work, Macdonald chose to erase the official report produced by the American authorities following the 9/11 attacks. For example, the critical text erased the first letter 'T' from the phrase 'Terror Attacks' to deliberately create the phrase 'Error Attacks' instead, read as an accusation that targets the government.

In Macdonald's polemic case, the word 'omission' in the title (formed by erasing the word 'commission') tells the whole story – the text itself was created through omission, and its criticism of the official report, and the disaster itself is expressed through the same word. Macdonald's method of blackening the text evokes memories of military censorship and redacted documents, which partially publish classified documents by obscuring their sensitive parts, a process visually similar to literary erasure. In this way, Macdonald censors and reshapes the official messages and narrative presented in the government's report. Thus, the erased text opens with a statement that ultimately undermines the entire validity of the original report: 'We, The Narrative of America, present this repo as a history'. Macdonald's work undermines the original text with significant criticism. Erasing it is a manner of deconstruction, and it thereby exposes it to its nakedness.[23]

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[20] Ronald Johnson, *RADI OS I-IV* (Sand Dollar Press, 1977). Another erasure project followed Johnson's work and used P*aradise Regained* by Milton as the material for erasure, see Michael Koshkin, *Parad e R ain* (Big Game Books, 2006). It is important to note that Johnson was not the first to use erasure as a creative literary technique; he was preceded by artists who began using erasure as early as the 1960s, such as the Italian Emilio Isgrò and the American Doris Cross.

[21] Eric Selinger, "I Composed the Holes: Reading Ronald Johnson's 'RADI OS'," *Contemporary Literature* 33, no. 1 (1992): 46–73, https://doi.org/10.2307/1208373; Ross Hair, "Orphic Apocrypha: *Radi Os* and the Found Text," in *Ronald Johnson's Modernist Collage Poetry* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2010): 123–155.

[22] Travis MacDonald, *The O Mission Repo: A Repo of the O Mission Error Attacks on Unit* (Fact-Simile Editions, 2008), https://issuu.com/fact-simile/docs/o_mission_repo_full_text.

[23] Regarding polemic erasure projects, see Yedda Morrison's book *Darkness* (Make New Books, 2012). Morrison erased Joseph Conrad's Heart of *Darkness*, leaving behind only the words and phrases that reference the natural world of Africa. Another example of ideological erasure project is the erasure of J. K. Rowling's text about gender, which was erased

Alongside the erasure method using blackening, which evokes the appearance of military censorship and creates a powerful effect and striking visual contrast on the page, there are other, sometimes more subtle, ways to produce Erasure poetry. It is worth mentioning the project *Nets* (2003) by Jen Bervin, who erased one of the most canonical corpora of poetry in Western literature – 150 sonnets by William Shakespeare.[24] The polyphonic correspondence between the erased Shakespearean sonnets, the new highlighted text, and its form on the page,[25] creates a layered conversation, sometimes critical and sometimes very loving.[26] For instance, the erased poem created from Sonnet 130 may be read as a poetic kernel of the original sonnet that describes the uniqueness of the speaker's loved one. The Shakespearean speaker declares that despite the image of the perfect beloved (likened to roses), his imperfect beloved is loved by him for her uniqueness. Bervin's poem carved from the original poem the words: 'I have seen roses / no such roses.'

Finally, another style of Erasure technique, in which the visual effect is perhaps the greatest, can be found in the works of Tom Phillips. Phillips, one of the first to work with literary erasure, created dozens of colorful paintings within Victorian novels. The paint erases, and the single words left exposed create Erasure poems.[27] In his works, there is a great impact of the kaleidoscopic colorfulness of the new painting that covers the text in a way that corresponds with the new textual content. The text Phillips creates is designed like 'speech balloons' in comics and is generally significantly influenced by the colorful comics culture, which is entirely different from the monochromatic blackened poems.

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as a protest by the genderqueer poet Rachel Stempel. See Rachel Stempel, "Natal Girl (& Other Repeat Offenses)," *Poemeleon, The VisPo Issue* (Spring 2022).

[24] Jen Bervin, *Nets* (Ugly Duckling Press, 2004), https://www.jenbervin.com/projects/nets. See also the erasure of Emily Dickinson's poems in Janet Holmes, *THE MS OF M Y KIN* (Shearsman Books, 2009).

[25] It is interesting to note that today, physical writing on paper, and therefore erasing, is disappearing in favor of 'digitally born' text. Interestingly, the graphic representation of writing and erasing still seems like the physical one – erasing with a line or by blackening with a black marker, etc. Berwin's erasure technique, which uses highlighting and blurring of some words, is unusual in relation to other erasure works because it is digital in nature.

[26] For further reading, see Alexandra J. Gold, "At Will: The Queer Possibility of Jen Bervin's *Nets*," *Contemporary Women's Writing*, Volume 13, Issue 1 (March 2019): 89–106, https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpz011; Toby Altman, "What Beauty Was: Jen Bervin's Untimely Sonnets," *ELH* 89, no. 2 (2022): 489–522, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/elh.2022.0018.

[27] Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel, fourth edition* (Thames & Hudson, 2005). For further reading, see James L. Maynard, "'I Find / I Found Myself / and / Nothing / More than That': Textuality, Visuality, and the Production of Subjectivity in Tom Phillips' 'A Humument'," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 36, no. 1 (2003): 82–98, https://doi.org/10.2307/1315400; Kristina Jipson, "'That/Which/He/Hid/Reveal I': Uncovering the Infinite in Tom Phillips' *A Humument*," *Textual Practice* 27, no. 2 (2012): 315–233, doi: 10.1080/0950236X.2012.738704. See also Mary Rufele's work, which uses white correction fluid to erase an etiquette novella from the same period: Mary Ruefle, *A Little White Shadow* (Wave Books, 2006).

Nevertheless, Phillips, like other Erasure poets, uses the original text as a playground, and he carves new poems from the original text. When looking at Phillips' works, one might first notice their colorful vividness. Only then is the reader's eye drawn to the words that remain exposed on the page in a simple monochromatic combination of black and white. After the reader connects the words into a coherent text, the whole experience of the work reveals itself: the contrast between the text and the drawing can create a confusing reading experience and sometimes even an ironic tension between the colorful comics-like artwork and the words themselves.[28] These new texts raise questions that Found poetry and Concrete poetry raise, on the one hand, questions of authorship, creativity, context, and meaning, and on the other hand, questions of reading techniques and the boundaries between text and visual arts.

## Concrete Poetry, Ready-Made Poetry, and Erasure Poetry in Hebrew

In 1976, the Israeli poet Meir Wieseltier wrote, 'I have sympathy for conceptual art in Tel Aviv.'[29] Nevertheless, conceptual and experimental poetry is uncommon in modern Hebrew poetry. Accordingly, there is scarcely any research employing the techniques examined in this article in the context of Hebrew Poetry. However, as I have mentioned, Concrete poetry is quite an old technique, unlike Ready-made poetry and Erasure poetry, and one might find unique typography of Hebrew poetry or liturgical texts (microcalligraphy) in manuscripts from the Middle Ages.[30] Furthermore, in some Jewish traditions, religious texts designed in the form of a specific image can still be found today in synagogues and even in private houses as a form of traditional decoration with magical textual power.[31]

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[28] Another form of literary erasure, although it is not poetry, that creates an entirely different reading experience is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010). This book consists entirely of erasure: it is cut out of the book *The Street of Crocodiles* (1933) by the Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz, who was murdered in the Holocaust. In Foer's case, the book consisting of Schulz's absence testifies to all the void that accompanies Schulz's life and writing – and, in general, to everything that was cut and uprooted during World War II. Referring to his book, Foer clearly stated that he sees the act of erasure as a work of carving something new out of the existing material, like Michelangelo: 'I took my favorite book, Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles*, and by removing words carved out a new story'. See Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* (Visual Editions, 2010). For further reading, see Jessica Pressman, "Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*: Memorial, Fetish, Bookishness," *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 1 (2018): 97–120, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/asa.2018.0004; Steven Heller, "Jonathan Safran Foer's Book as Art Object," *New York Times*, November 24, 2010, https://archive.nytimes.com/artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/24/jonathan-safran-foers-book-as-art-object/. It is worth noting that the Israeli artist Tamar Shippony has also employed a similar cutting technique in what she calls 'Carved Books'. See https://tamarshippony.com/portfolio-type/carved-books/.

[29] Meir Wieseltier, *Poems Collection*. vol. 2 (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2016), 146 [Hebrew]. Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all translations from Hebrew into English in this article have been made by the author.

[30] Dan Pagis, "Hebrew Pattern Poems and Other Artificial Forms," *Hasifrut* 25 (1978): 13–27 [Hebrew].

[31] Dalia-Ruth Halperin, "Micrography: The Art of Drawing with Letters," *The Librarian Blog*, The National Library of Israel, https://blog.nli.org.il/en/micrography/.

Concrete poetry's playfulness, celebrated in pre-modern Hebrew texts, did not enter modern Hebrew literature. While there are a few typographical games in Modern Hebrew poetry, such as those found in Abba Kovner's or David Avidan's oeuvres, finding an entire image-like pattern poem is unique.[32] Nevertheless, one exceptional Hebrew poet who wrote several pattern poems is the experimental poet Efrat Mishori; to name a few from her book *Mimerchakei Efrat* (From the Distances of Efrat): 'Empty Square', 'The Little Mermaid', 'Zayin' [the Hebrew letter Z], 'Feh' [the Hebrew letter F], 'Cone', 'Anchor' and 'Tree.'[33] There are a few other pattern poems in Hebrew apart from hers, however, they mostly seem like one-time gimmicks.[34]

Perhaps the paucity of pattern poems in modern Hebrew poetry can be explained by the childishness or playfulness associated with this technique, which makes it seem 'not serious' enough. Alternatively, the technique is identified with the traditional Jewish tradition of texts designed as images. Either way, modern Hebrew poets that play freely with typography and layout are a relatively rare phenomenon, and 'pure' pattern poems are even more so. Nevertheless, because erasure poems display a visual poetics that seems more delicate than that of simple pattern poems, and especially as they have no clear Jewish tradition behind them, this constitutes a different case, as I will show below.

As an experimental poetic technique, Ready-made poetry is also not ordinary in modern Hebrew literature. Generally, it cannot be found before the 21st century, when trends of conceptual poetry began to influence Hebrew literature.[35] However, some earlier Hebrew poems pretend to be Found poetry.[36] Nonetheless, some Hebrew texts

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[32] It is also worth mentioning a lesser-known Israeli poet, Rotem Biksenspaner, who is also a graphic designer, and whose book of poems presents poems that play between the textual and design levels. See Rotem Biksenspaner, *And If They Told You, Choose: The Heart of a Lion or the Hair of a Panther* (Self-publishing, 2021) [Hebrew].

[33] Efrat Mishori, *Mimerchakei Efrat: poems 1994–1996* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996) [Hebrew].

[34] See, for example, the poem 'Ometz' [Courage] by Yehonatan Geffen, which is structured in the form of a bridge, which echoes the saying of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov: 'The whole world is a very narrow bridge, and the main thing is not to be afraid at all'. Another example is the political poem 'Tzurat Eretz' [a Shape of a Land] by Yehuda Leib Wittelsohn, which is structured as the map of Israel that cuts through the words of the poem with white spaces that represent the occupied territories of Judea and Samaria, and the Gaza Strip: https://www.yehee.co.il/%d7%a6%d7%95%d7%a8%d7%aa-%d7%90%d7%a8%d7%a5/.

[35] It is important to note that the idea of intertextual literary use of a text taken from another place and placed in a different context has existed in Hebrew literature since the Middle Ages and is known as 'Shibutz' [Inlay]. Like the Cento tradition, in which entire texts were written using quotations taken from classical authors, Hebrew literature also used similar forms, most often using biblical verses intended to demonstrate the poet's mastery of the Hebrew canon. However, this tradition is fundamentally different from the modern technique of Ready-made, as I will show below.

[36] David Avidan is probably the most playful Hebrew poet who experimented with pseudo-Ready-mades of different kinds. See Gilad Meiri, *Sympathetic Volcano: Parody, Humor, and Avant-garde in David Avidan's poetry* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2012) [Hebrew]. Other notable example is Dan Pagis's 'Lessons in Practical Hebrew' (1977), which pretends to be a set of exercises to learn Hebrew found in a grammar textbook. See Dan Pagis, "Lessons in Practical Hebrew," in *Milim Nirdafot: Shirim* [Synonyms: Poems] (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1982) [Hebrew].

can be seen as examples of a 'genuine' Ready-made: they literally cut and paste from the original text, using this displacement as a vehicle for criticism and irony, most often with political, critical, or polemical intent. For example, David Grossman's 'The Bumper Sticker Poetry' (2004) is a collage of bumper sticker quotes that are arranged ironically, sometimes creating contradictions or absurdity, such as: 'Holy One, blessed be He, we choose you. / Direct election is bad', or 'Death to traitors / Let the animals live / Death to all values'. The original meaning is erased and mocked by its displacement, and the author who rearranged all the quotes and created the inner dialogues between them becomes the new authoritative voice and interpreter without adding a word.[37]

Another example is found in the 'pure' Ready-made poems by Agi Mishol. The ability to recognize poetic quality in everyday Hebrew expressions is necessary for creating found poetry, as Mishol once said in an interview:

> The blessing is that I write poetry in Hebrew, a sacred language. There is so much knowledge in it and a secret hidden in the connection between the words, in the structure of the roots. But it is a curse because you hear everything without filters. Someone casually tells you, for example, the barrier of Kissufim,[38] you hear Kissufim and what blocks them. You immediately hear the entire resonance box of the words, even things you don't want to hear, you hear all the time.[39]

It is no wonder that Mishol used the metaphorical quality of 'Kissufim Barrier' in one of her poems while taking advantage of the ambiguous power of the Hebrew word. Mishol also wrote the Ready-made poem 'Efroach' [Chick], which skillfully redesigns as a poem, with line-by-line arrangement and Hebrew Niqqud [notation] that is usually associated with poetry, an excerpt from the Ministry of Agriculture's legal regulations regarding machines approved for killing chicks in the egg industry.[40] The poem's protest power, which aims to shock readers, derives, in this case, from the gap between the awful description of the machines that systematically kill helpless chicks and the cold technocratic language in which the regulatory provisions are formulated.[41]

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[37] This collage technique resembles the classical tradition of Cento – poetry written using only quotations from classical sources – however, the choice to work with bumper stickers as the raw material, rather than classical texts, makes the postmodern poetic act ironic and frivolous. For more on the political significance of the text, see Adia Mendelson-Maoz, "A Land That Eateth Up Her Inhabitants: 'Exercises in Practical Hebrew' by Dan Pagis and 'The Bumper Sticker poetry' by David Grossman," *Alei Siach*, vol. 57 (2007): 84–95 [Hebrew].

[38] The Hebrew word 'Kisufim' means longing, but it is also the name of a checkpoint between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

[39] Vered Lee, "Like Catching a Butterfly in Flight: An Interview with Agi Mishol," *Haaretz*, May 3, 2012 [Hebrew].

[40] Agi Mishol, *Era* [Awake] (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2013) [Hebrew].

[41] The Hebrew poet Anat Zecharia employed a similar use of technical rules with symbolic and metaphorical significance in her poem 'HaKotel HaMa'aravi' [The Western Wall]. This found poem, composed entirely from a book of Jewish

Finally, in the past two decades, a different kind of Ready-made poetry in Hebrew has emerged, with poems based on found digital texts.[42] Such poems are found, for example, in the poetry of Dorit Weissman, Dafna Shchori, Eran Hadas, Tomer Lichtash, and Tomer Zalmanson. Tomer Zalmanson's poetry is, for example, based on Facebook's automatic photo-analyzing algorithm or Facebook's automatic messages to the user, such as: 'Only you can see this. // Unless you share this. / We can show you how.'[43] The technical meaning of the original text regarding sharing posts on Facebook gains a whole new layer of metaphorical meaning by decontextualizing it and fashioning it as a poem about sharing emotions and experiences with others. Nevertheless, refashioning the text as a 'serious' poem ironically mocks the original so-called empathic message made by the machine.

All in all, Ready-made poetry is a new phenomenon in Hebrew literature. Some of these poems deliberately subvert the original meaning and critique the source text with the poetic technique of Ready-made. In contrast, others only reveal the concealed poetic qualities already present in the original text. Thus, after reading these poems, the reader must ask – what makes poetry poetry? Is it just the context and the form, or is there any intrinsic poetic quality that can be found even in everyday texts?[44]

The poet Yehuda Amichai has determined that poetic qualities can indeed be found in everyday text. Amichai offered a beautiful formulation in his poem 'The Day My Daughter Was Born, No One Died', which is not a Ready-made poem in its essence. The speaker in the poem, a figure modeled after Amichai himself, sets out on a nature walk with his scientist friend Tzvi on the day his daughter is born:

> We saw a sick and bare pine tree covered only with countless pine cones. Tzvi said that trees about to die grow more pine cones than the living ones. And I told him this was a poem, and you didn't even realize it. Even though you are a man of the exact sciences, you made a poem.[45]

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religious laws (Halakha) concerning conduct at the Western Wall, presents the ostensibly technical halakhic rules as a metaphor with religious significance relating to the sacred space. See Anat Zecharia, "The Western Wall," in *Biglal Taut Enosh* [Due to Human Error] (Mossad Bialik, 2012) [Hebrew].

[42] For a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and additional examples, see Noa Shakargy, *Internetica: Poetry in the Digital Age* (Mossad Bialik, 2021), 23–30, 97–101 [Hebrew].

[43] Tomer Zalmanson, *Yesh Lanu Drachim Ligrom Lecha Lehanot* [We have ways to make you happy] (Makom Leshira, 2021) [Hebrew].

[44] For further reading on this question and for empirical research that attempts to answer it, see David Fishelov, "The Institutional Definition of Poetry: Some Heretical Thoughts," *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 16.1 (1998): 5–13. In the Hebrew version of his article, Fishelov discusses the poem by Yehuda Amichai, quoted below; see David Fishelov, "Is This a Poem? Critical Thoughts about the Institutional Definition of Poetry," *Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature* 17 (1999): 77–97 [Hebrew].

[45] Yehuda Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai's Poems*. Vol. 3 (Schocken, 2003), 306 [Hebrew].

Even though contemporary Hebrew poetry provides some Ready-made poetry, Erasure poetry is virtually absent from the Hebrew literary landscape.[46] Paradoxically, however, the concept of Erasure poetry is relatively well-known in Israel. One can often encounter it as an exercise in creative writing workshops or even in high school literature classes. Moreover, although there are hardly any poetry books of this kind, the technique itself is sufficiently widespread to have earned a colloquial Hebrew name: *Shchir*, a blend of the Hebrew words *Shir* [poem] and *Lehashchir* [to blacken or erase].

Outside the literary field, there are several other examples of erasure as a creative technique in Hebrew, that function similarly to their English counterparts. I will limit myself to two completely different examples. First, in 2008, the artist David Tartakover published a poster to mark the 60th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence of the State of Israel.[47] The poster contained a section full of red marker erasures taken from the opening paragraph of the 'Declaration of Independence', the founding document of the State of Israel written in 1948. In an act of protest, Tartakover erased all liberal and pluralist elements in the paragraph he selected, leaving only its national, religious, and particularistic references visible. 'Declaration' by Tracy K. Smith, a later work, exhibits a similar polemic act by erasing a section of the American Declaration of Independence to protest the United States' treatment of minorities.[48]

The second example was created using an erasure technique similar to Jen Bervin's in *Nets*, but its original text is anti-canonic. The Facebook page called 'Making Yoav's Text Pleasant' was a satirical page that operated between 2016 and 2021 and erased posts by the Israeli far-right rapper Yoav Eliasi, known as 'The Shadow'. Through deliberate

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[46] I could merely find one example, from 2025 – the cover of Dori Manor's book *Babylon's Blessing* (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2025), designed by Talia Baer, and shows a Hebrew poem that has been completely erased. The erased poem is taken from the Hebrew translation by Rita Kogan to two stanzas from Charles Baudelaire's 'Le Voyage' from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857). Via the erasure, the cover expresses a tension discussed in the book between the original poem and its translation, seemingly erasing some of the original work. Another unusual example of Erasure Poetry in Hebrew is an excerpt from a forthcoming book by Talya Asif titled *About Writing and Erasing*. The book includes various writing and erasing exercises, and some pages may look like erasing poetry. The excerpt was published in the online journal *Tefer: Journal of Experimental Literature*, vol. 1, March 2024, https://tzrifmagazine.bgu.ac.il/%D7%98%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%94-%D7%92%D7%95%D7%9F-%D7%90%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%A3/ [Hebrew].

[47] The poster by Tartakover was chosen as the cover of the book *Democracy or Ethnocracy?* by former Israeli Minister of Education Shulamit Aloni (Am Oved, 2008), https://www.am-oved.co.il/%D7%93%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%98%D7%99%D7%94-%D7%91%D7%90%D7%96%D7%99%D7%A7%D7%99%D7%9D.

[48] Tracy K. Smith, "Declaration," in *Wade in the Water* (Penguin UK, 2018). For other political erasure works in the United States, concerning minority rights and the freedom of speech, see the works of Jenny Holzer, Nicole Sealey, Jordan Abel, and Billy-Ray Belcourt. For further reading on protest via Erasure poetry during Donald Trump's first term, see Rachel Stone, "The Trump-Era Boom in Erasure Poetry," *The New Republic*. October 23, 2017, https://newrepublic.com/article/145396/trump-era-boom-erasure-poetry.

misreading and satirical erasure, the page turned Eliasi's political and violent posts 'pleasant' and thus mocked them.[49]

## The Poet Erases Himself – Alex Ben-Ari's *Mayim Mayim*

As opposed Erasure and Ready-made poetry discussed here so far, the meaning of erasure shifts entirely when a poet erases his own texts – thus creating an act of self-erasure. This case is uncommon not only within Hebrew poetry but in general,[50] and therefore provides a particularly illuminating case study of the phenomenon at large, revealing it as an exception that helps to clarify the broader field.

Alex Ben-Ari was born in the Soviet Union in 1973 and immigrated to Israel with his family at the age of three. After studying mathematics and computer science, he began writing and publishing poetry. Ben-Ari is a 'Poeta Ludens' [Playing Poet] who often writes conceptual and experimental poetry. One of his notable conceptual poetic projects is *Hatikvah 69*, in which he worked with the Israeli anthem 'Hatikvah' [The Hope] for the 69th Israeli anniversary. With a writing technique that Ben-Ari took from the French OuLiPo group, he created 69 variations of the Israeli anthem by replacing all the nouns in it with different nouns. Thus, he made an ironic and comic disruption of the anthem that challenges its canonicity.[51]

Addressing his engagement with conceptual poetry, Ben-Ari once wrote: 'conceptual writing is more than a genre, it is a collection of fundamental insights about the world, language, and art, from the internalization of which new modes of expression grow.'[52] He later refers to the power of conceptual poetry to change the relationship between the author and the work:

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[49] https://www.facebook.com/makingyoavpleasant.

[50] I have identified only a few English poets who have employed the technique of self-erasure in their poetry. The most notable among them is Alicia Cook, whose three poetry collections are structured like old-school mixtapes with two sides: the first part of each book contains 'traditional' poems, while the second part features 'remixes', i.e. blackout poems derived from the poems in the first part: *Stuff I've Been Feeling Lately* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2017), *Sorry I Haven't Texted You Back* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2020), *The Music Was Just Getting Good* (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2024). Two other poets using self-erasure as a poetic technique are Sam Taylor, who uses Jen Bervin's typographical technique to erase his own poems, and Kristina Marie Darling, who created some erasure projects with other's text, such as the erasure of Nabokov's *Lolita*, alongside self-erasure: https://coloradoreview.colostate.edu/2016/07/erasing-the-self-rescuing-the-lyric-a-conversation-about-self-erasure/. Finally, it is worth mentioning Muriel Leung's essay on erasure, which includes a 'standard' text on erasure as an artistic method, followed immediately by the same text with most of it erased. See Muriel Leung, "Erasure in Three Acts: An Essay," *Poetry Foundation*, 2021, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/featured-blogger/85446/erasure.

[51] Alex Ben-Ari, *Hatikvah 69* (Makom Leshira, 2018) [Hebrew].

[52] In 2015, Ben-Ari edited a collection of conceptual poetry in Hebrew, which includes some Ready-made poems and some pattern poems, which I did not mention in this work. The quote is taken from the editor's foreword to this collection. See Alex Ben-Ari, ed. *Nanopoetica*, vol. 8 (Makom Leshira, 2015) [Hebrew].

> There have been, and are, in the past and present, modes of expression that turn their attention to 'the great' and do not place the writer hegemonically at their center. Examples of these are Haiku and classical Greek poetry, as well as writers such as Shakespeare and Tolstoy, and others throughout the ages to the present day. In this sense, conceptual poetry can be seen as a contemporary incarnation of these writing traditions, even if its products seem very different at first glance.[53]

**Figure 4:** Alex Ben-Ari, Mayim Mayim cover (2020). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Indeed, Ben-Ari's experimental book *Mayim Mayim* [Water Water, 2020] challenges the author's hegemony and the relationship between the poet and his poems. The book, which comprises 29 poems, was made by erasing Ben-Ari's own poems from his first book *Yamim Smuyim* [Hidden Days, 2008]. Like *RADI OS* or *Nets*, the book's title is a short Erasure poem; the new book's title is carved from the old title (see **Figure 4**).

As aforesaid, in *Mayim Mayim*, Ben-Ari erased all the poems of his first book, *Yamim Smuyim*, by blackening them, leaving only a few words from each poem. Ben-Ari's first work is a 'standard' book of poems in a traditional style, which appeared prior to Ben-Ari's engagement with conceptual poetry.[54] *Mayim Mayim* transformed the earlier work, its erasure technique capturing the essence of each original poem and leaving something that resembles a concise Haiku, as if he reveals the poetic kernel of his own poems. The idea of rewriting through erasure and revealing an essence of his original poems is associated with another aspect of Ben-Ari's work – namely, his writing and translation of Haiku poetry. This Japanese genre, famous for its remarkable concision, likewise pushes the boundaries and challenges the prevailing Western conception of poetry by asking: what is the minimal requirement – in this case, the minimal number of words – for a text to

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[53] Ben-Ari, *Nanopoetica*, 3–7.

[54] The sole exception in Ben-Ari's first book is a single poem in which a thought arising in the speaker's mind is described at the poem's conclusion as 'sudden as a sparrow'. The poem ends with the word 'sparrow' repeated thirteen more times, scattered across the page in a manner that simulates the skipping of a bird. At this single point in the book, which resonates with the spirit of Concrete poetry, it is possible that the conceptual seeds were sown from which Ben-Ari later traced his creative path as a conceptual poet.

be considered a poem? In the case of *Mayim Mayim*, some of the erased poems left only two or three words.

For instance, this is one of the poems from*Yamis Smuyim*: 'Villa Rufolo. A cliff / laps at the water. / A tree soaring. / Light and shadow intertwine / on a bench. / The easel of the world is ready. / The pen of the horizon rests / upon the sheet of the sea'.[55] This poem, set on the Amalfi Coast in Italy, paints a still life that metaphorically depicts nature as the blank page, in the moment just before the artistic act. In *Mayim Mayim* Ben-Ari erased almost all of it, leaving only three monosyllabic words: 'Or / Al / Et' [light / on / pen].[56] The short poem, sculpted out of the material of the previous one, still presents a simple still life image, but this time it is an everyday and domestic one. And yet, the symbolic dimension of writing remains; only now it is no longer expressed through metaphors (the nature writes or paints) but through a non-figurative image. Nevertheless, this minimalist description can also be read on a symbolic level that gestures toward writing itself (the pen) and the literary inspiration (the light) that gives rise to it.

Although Ben-Ari did not invent the erasure technique, his choice to erase his own already-published poems rather than other textual sources is groundbreaking. The erasure may indicate an attempt to change the work from the past, perhaps even correct it or oppose it, and sometimes almost deny it with the blatant traces of the black marker, like many other authors who return to the themes and ideas of their early books in rethinking or even self-editing.[57] Ben-Ari does so, too, but in his case, the return is accompanied by an active and visible act of change, correction, and creation of a new version.[58] Thus, *Mayim Mayim*'s self-erasure might be read as a unique form of self-parody and rewriting.[59] The parody manifests itself in the fact that his act of editing is

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[55] Ben-Ari, *Mayim Mayim*, 56.

[56] Ben-Ari, *Mayim Mayim*, 57.

[57] A famous example of this in modern Hebrew poetry can be seen in the poems of Nathan Zach about birds. His debut book from 1955 includes his poem 'I Saw a White Bird in the Black Night'. About a decade later, in 1966, his poem 'A Second Bird' appeared, stating that 'I will never see such a beautiful bird again / until the day I die'. Years later, in 1996, Zach published two later poems that correspond with his early romantic and vivid poems, in a self-parodic tone. In the first, 'The Bird', he writes that 'the bird no longer sings', and in the second, 'Another Bird', he writes that 'the fact that I am still sitting here / is a coincidence like other coincidences'. See Nathan Zach, *Shirim Rishonim* [First Poems] (Hamasa, 1955), 18 [Hebrew]; Nathan Zach, *Kol Hachalav Vehadvash* [All the Milk and Honey] (Am Oved, 1966), 95 [Hebrew]; Nathan Zach, *Keivan She'ani Kan Basviva* [Since I'm Around] (Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996), 116, 156 [Hebrew].

[58] Although it is not an Erasure poem, I found a similar example in modern Hebrew poetry. David Avidan republished one of his poems, 'And it shall come to pass in the last days', in a kind of self-parody or self-pastiche, adding a few words to the original poem, scrambling the typography of his own poem in the new publication, and retitle it: 'And it shall come to pass in the last [alsosix] days', referring the Six Days war of 1967. See David Avidan, *Kol Hashirim* [Collected Poems], vol. 2 (Hakibbutz Hameuchad and Mossad Bialik, 2009), 79 [Hebrew].

[59] Gärard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Vol. 8 (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 124–128.

consistently one-directional – toward condensation and the diminishment of language itself, almost as if he is mocking his earlier book for being excessively verbose. In this way, the new poems are created within the old book, and the poet becomes a kind of sculptor, carving his sculptures not from an existing block of marble but from his own prior sculptures.[60]

The book's epigraph explains this poetics with a variation of a quote by the Jewish poet and philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol, who lived in Muslim Spain in the 11th century. The original quote is taken from a self-praising poem ibn Gabirol wrote in Hebrew when he was 16 years old, which begins with the line: 'Ani Hasar – Vehashir Li Le'eved' [I am the master, and the verse is my servant]. Ben-Ari used a minor, almost invisible, modification that completely changes the quote's meaning: 'Ani Hasar – Vehashiyar Li Le'eved' [I am the master, and the remnant is my servant].[61] by this change, at the beginning of his book, Ben-Ari subtly presents his poetic innovation: unlike the traditional poetics, exemplified by ibn Gabirol, in which the authoritative poet masters the verse, Ben-Ari claims mastery over something else. Through a pun that replaces 'verse' with 'remnant', two words that look almost identical in Hebrew, he declares that what he commands are not verses but the remnants, the residues of his earlier poems. As such, the epigraph formulates a reading guideline for the book and a new Ready-made poetics of recycling and renewing existing materials, creating a new sculpture from an old one. In this way, unlike all the earlier examples of Erasure poetry discussed here, Ben-Ari makes possible an endless poetic sculpting and a dynamic poetry perpetually subject to transformation – truly like a sculpture made of water.

Unlike the usual two paths of Ready-made and Erasure poetry, as discussed above, Ben-Ari did not choose either a canonical text to work with (i.e., the *Mona Lisa*) or an insignificant everyday text (i.e., a porcelain urinal) like his predecessors. In this sense,

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[60] In March 2025, as I was completing my work on this article, it appeared that another Hebrew poet had responded to Ben-Ari's call. Possibly inspired by the *Mayim Mayim* project, the poet Noa Shakargy – who is also engaged in publishing and research of conceptual poetry – published a limited edition of only 50 copies featuring an Erasure poetry version of her second poetry collection *Na* [a Hebrew word meaning both Raw and Please]. Like Ben-Ari, Shakargy erased her own poems, creating both a self-parody and a dynamic act of renewal from the very material she had composed approximately two years earlier. Moreover, Shakargy manually erased every copy of the edition, sculpting, with her own hands, a series of unique, one-of-a-kind poetic works. Furthermore, between the publication of her original book in 2023 and the release of its erased version in 2025, Israel experienced the October 7 massacre and the war that followed. In this context, Shakargy's poetic act – rooted in the black death rows, the silences, and self-censorship – becomes, to a great extent, a political gesture, metaphorically engaging with the words and silences surrounding the Hebrew language during these two years. See Noa Shakargy, *Na* (Makom Leshira, 2023 & 2025) [Hebrew], https://www.poetryplace.org/product/%d7%a0%d7%90-%d7%9e%d7%94%d7%93%d7%95%d7%a8%d7%94-%d7%99%d7%93%d7%a0%d7%99%d7%aa-%d7%9e%d7%a8%d7%a5-2025/.

[61] Ben-Ari, *Mayim Mayim*, 5.

Ben-Ari's book undermines the conventions of the genre, especially as they were shaped in Hebrew poetry in Israel, and does not produce a protesting political text but rather the opposite – a text that turns inward towards the poet's own work and not towards the outside world. By doing so, Ben-Ari raises a different set of questions about poetry: Does publication seal the poem? Can a poet use his own poem as a marble block? What is the minimum number of words needed to make a poem? And what does the blackout technique signify if one erases their work? Moreover, Ben-Ari's extraordinary book forces its readers to challenge some fundamental assumptions about poetry – the concept of linear writing and reading, and poetry as an intentional product with a distinct author.

Ben-Ari's book uses several methods to place the erased poem alongside the original. Sometimes, the original poem appears in light and faded font alongside the erased poem. Other times, the poems are covered with the erased poem printed on transparent paper, which is pasted over and can be lifted to reveal the originals in their full form. These methods almost turn *Mayim Mayim* into an interactive and playful children playbook. Due to the variety of methods employed to conceal the original poems, the reader participates more actively in the reading process than in other erasure works, continually moving between the faded or hidden source and the new text born from the erasure. Moreover, unlike other works which present the reader with a monolithic erased work, Ben-Ari's book displays the movement between presence and absence, between the raw material and the sculpture carved from it. It invites the reader to take part in the creative process and even urges them to pick up a black marker and erase the original work in their own way. This renders the work even more dynamic and open to multiple possibilities, as if this particular version, erased in this particular way, is merely one proposal among many.

Only once does the erased poem appear without the echo of the original text beside it. This occurs in a short poem titled 'Poetry', which originally consisted of two lines, both of which have been fully erased, leaving no words visible. The result is a declarative poem that, in its title seems to promise an answer to the age-old question: What is poetry? And yet its answer consists of two redacted lines, as if to suggest that the erasure and concealment of the answer is the answer, or perhaps that there is no answer at all.

These diverse techniques of erasure required special printing work, and as a result, the book was published in a limited edition of 100 copies, some of which were handcrafted by the special imprint of 'Dfus Bayit' [Bayit Printing House]. The book's limited edition, along with the readers' acknowledgment that Ben-Ari himself invested considerable time in erasing each poem individually and by hand, also positions the book as a kind of

counterpoint to the age of mechanical reproduction, as Walter Benjamin termed it – an era in which poetry books can be easily printed and digitally replicated in hundreds or even thousands of copies.

The reading experience of Ben-Ari's book almost forces the reader to constantly move between reading the newly erased poem and searching for the remnants of the original poem, which no longer exists in its complete form. In other words, while in Ben-Ari's early book from 2008, each poem had an autonomous existence and could be read as a complete work, in his 2020 book, each poem's full understanding is only possible in light of its being an Erasure poem. The new poems respond, to a certain extent, to the original poems they were carved in, becoming an inseparable part of them even though they were mostly erased.

The work is an emblem of the artist's return to his work from the past. The book is a polyphony of voices, originating from a poet who created at different times – the voice of Ben-Ari from the past, which remains faded but still exists, and alongside it, the voice of Ben-Ari from the present, a voice that manages to take over and be heard through the dominant black erasure marks, that also creates new poetic life.


**Figure 5:** Alex Ben-Ari, no title, from Mayim Mayim (2020). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

Alex Ben-Ari's Erasure poetry is somewhat similar to Concrete poetry because it also uses the visual features of erasure: the relationship between the black stripes, the white page, and the words the poet left visible. It reveals that, in fact, every erasure poem contains a certain aspect of Concrete poetry. One example of this is found in a poem that initially describes the funeral of Elisheva, a fellow poet. The original poem includes an objective, unemotional description of the funeral, which gives off a restless atmosphere and tone. The erased poem left only two words visible: 'Ga'aguay / Tzfufim' [My longings / are dense].[62] The short metaphor for loss is undergoing a realization when the reader sees it on the page (see **Figure 5**) – the blackened stripes surround the Hebrew word 'dense' seem to squeeze it, while the visible word remains

[62] Ben-Ari, *Mayim Mayim*, 38–39.

lonely and surrounded by black, dense mourning. In this poem, the reader may first notice the abundance of black ink on the page, which leaves almost no space for exposed words, and thus sense the stifling, dense grief even before reading the two words that remain visible on the page.

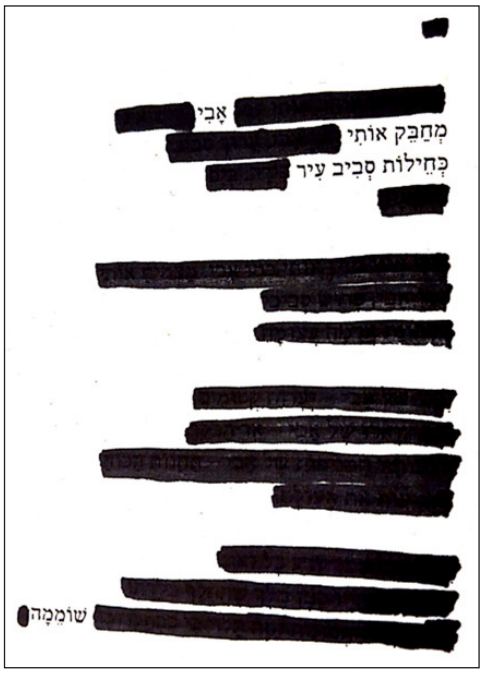


**Figure 6:** Alex Ben-Ari, no title, from Mayim Mayim (2020). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

A similar phenomenon is found in another poem, where, after the erasure, the visible words remain: 'Avi / Mechabek Oti / Kecheilot Sviv Ir / Shomema' [My father / embraces me / like armies / around a city / deserted].[63] The erased poem uses the poetic power of Enjambment. Its meaning completely changes twice throughout the short poem: the first time, the father's embrace becomes violent, more like a military siege, and the second time, the last word in the new poem, 'deserted', which is also the last word in the old poem, changes the poem's meaning again when the embrace becomes futile and therefore pathetic or even tragic, like a military siege around a deserted city. The typographical design of the poem leaves the last word far from the rest of the poem, and it is almost possible to miss it, even though it completely changes the poem's meaning. Also, the word 'deserted' undergoes a visual realization because of the black stripes surrounding it, and the word itself becomes deserted (see **Figure 6**).

The book's title, *Mayim Mayim*, echoes Rabbi Akiva's warning in the mystical story from the Babylonian Talmud about the four sages who entered the orchard:

> Four entered the Pardes [Orchard, i.e., dealt with the loftiest secrets of Torah], and they are as follows: Ben Azzai; Ben Zoma; Acher [the other]; and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva told them: When you reach pure marble stones, do not say: Water, water because it is stated: 'He who speaks falsehood shall not be established before my eyes' (Psalms 101:7).[64]

[63] Ben-Ari, *Mayim Mayim*, 28–29.

[64] Babylonian Talmud, Chagigah tractate, 14b, Wiliam Davidson's translation.

At the entrance to the mystical sphere, one must be careful not to confuse marble with water. The solid marble from which Michelangelo carved his statues is static, while water constantly flows. According to Ben-Ari's book, Erasure poetry differs from creating a sculpture from a marble block; it is more similar to sculpting with ever-changing water. The finished and printed poems in his first book, seeming like marble, become water, changing, reshaping itself, and constantly flowing.

This idea explains the book's opening poem, a prolegomenon to the entire book that completes the epigraph. The original poem deals with the ability of language or poetry to sometimes create bridges across the chasm that separates people. In *Mayim Mayim*, after its erasure, the remains of the opening poem read: 'Milim / Miba'ad / Tnuatan' [Words / through / their motion] (see **Figure 1** above),[65] meaning that words can be transparent and move and thus reshaped, just like water and unlike marble.

Further evidence of the tension between the visible and the hidden, between the original and its erasure, can be found in several pages in the book that show only the marks of the black marker used to erase the poems. The marks left on the paper after the poet has finished erasing his poems enter the book as remnants, or even scars, of the erasure process (see **Figure 7**).

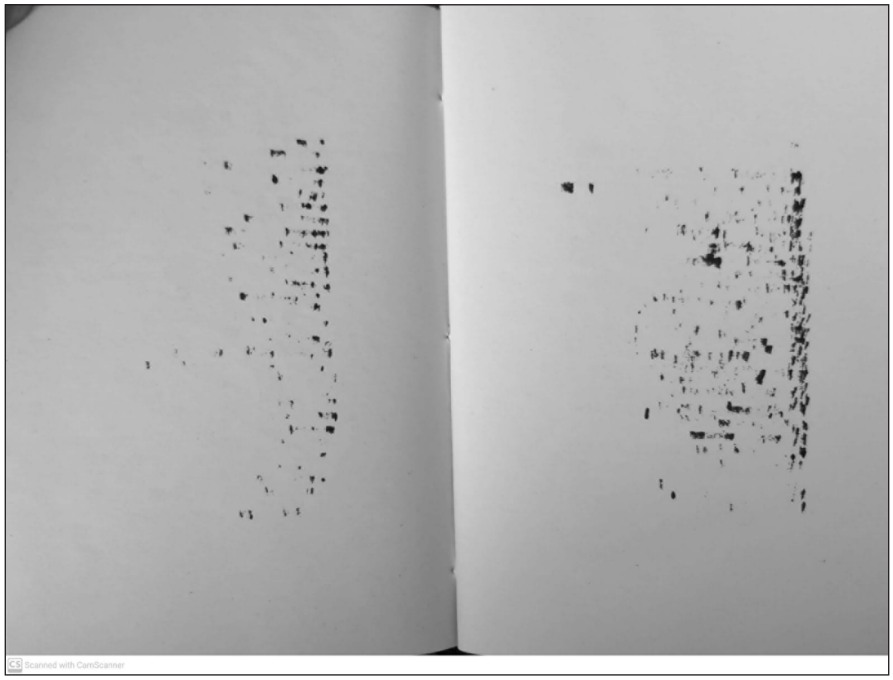

**Figure 7:** Alex Ben-Ari, no title, from Mayim Mayim (2020). Reproduced with permission of the artist.

[65] Ben-Ari, *Mayim Mayim*, 7.

Is it a text? Is it poetry? At first glance, the answer seems obvious: of course not. But this is precisely the power of conceptual poetry's context. In a daily context, these black marks might seem just as insignificant as random marks on a page. Instead, knowing what they are, the black marks become the other side of poetry itself, a negative photo of the poems in this book. More than that, the black marks become a remnant, a sediment of the act of erasure itself, which are manifested in the poet's distinctive signature, one that is neither mechanical nor technical. The pieces of marble were carved and discarded while making the new sculpture out of the old one, and the drops of water that might look like marble fell on the blank page. These ink marks themselves might look like text, like calligraphy. The poem and the page become a space for designing a poetic play, a dance between the white page and the black ink. Is it a text? This is certainly an invitation to expand the conventional concept of what a text is: not a one-dimensional block inviting a single receptive experience, but a dynamic creation with multiple layers and diverse modes of reading – both visual and textual – one that possesses a past, present, and future, along with traces and remnants of each phase.

Alex Ben-Ari uses his own poems as the raw material for poetic erasure, and by subtracting and blackening most of them, he creates a playful fusion of text and visual art that can be read in several different ways and challenge the boundaries of poetry as a simple text. The very existence of Ben-Ari's book may compel readers and poets alike to reconsider their understanding of poetry as an art form. Unfortunately, the Hebrew poetry reader community is not large, and few are interested in experimental Hebrew poetry. Nevertheless, now that poetry has one pioneering example that proves that poets can take their own poems at any time and erase them anew, we might notice that poetry strives to become a dynamic art form, like water, and not a solid piece of marble.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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