On a hot day in May 1977, a 27-year old underground poet from Leningrad (St. Petersburg), happily in love with his young and beautiful wife and full of high hopes, landed in the Land of Israel. So began the twisted and often bizarre saga of Mikhail Gendelev—a journey that included first-hand battlefield experience as military medic during Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, years of impoverished bohemian existence in a Jerusalem attic, cramped editorial rooms of Russian-language émigré newspapers, travels to the then-Soviet Union on behalf of then-secret Israeli Nativ organization and lavish life in post-Soviet Moscow where the poet rubbed shoulders with Russia’s rich and famous. It came to an abrupt end in March 2009 at the Beilinson Hospital in Israel where Gendelev died after protracted illness and an unsuccessful lung transplant. By the time, he was widely hailed as one of the most important contemporary poets writing in Russian and a foremost exponent of what he termed “Israeli Russian-language literature”.

Recent years marked an upsurge in interest in the poet’s heritage, academic and non-academic, culminating with the regular Gendelev Readings held in Jerusalem in November 2011-May 2012 by the Mikhail Gendelev Memorial Foundation. Of note are several eloquent essays devoted to him by Maia Kaganskaia; Mikhail Weisskopf deserves a special mention for his pioneering study of Gendelev’s poetics.¹

¹ For more detailed bio-bibliographical information (in Russian) consult the poet’s memorial site (http://gendelev.org). Its contents, compiled by the author of this study, include a comprehensive corpus of articles and book reviews as well as wide-ranging accompanying material devoted to M. Gendelev.

Many authors of recent studies on Gendelev have focused on the later period of his work (1990s–2000s) and on what M. Weisskopf appropriately describes as the “theology of Mikhail Gendelev”. Indeed, Gendelev’s mature texts abound in striking examples of that ‘theology’, a post-Holocaust construct, built upon memory of the Shoah: he is haunted by visions of future Holocaust threatening the Jewish state. In Gendelev, the Jewish people’s ruin is equal to a downfall of God. The poet indulges in heated arguments with and accusations against the Almighty whom he blames of abandoning His people and thus de-facto committing suicide. These instances fall within a well-developed Jewish tradition of ‘arguing with God’. Gendelev’s recurrent motive of God’s self-contraction and disappearance from universe bears outward resemblance to the concept of tsimtsum in Lurianic Kabbalistic systems. The divine vanishing process, however, acquires a Gnostic turn with Godhead emanating an ‘anti-God’ or being substituted for by an antagonist here personified by Allah. The narrator-poet is the last survivor to bear witness to the Jewish people’s doom: ultimately he accepts features of God himself. So, Gendelev’s later ‘theology’ may be, perhaps without the poet’s conscious knowledge, a Jewish derivation of the so-called “God is Dead” theological movement devised by Thomas J.J. Altizer and other thinkers.

The present study attempts to elucidate true foundations of Gendelev’s poetry, its visionary basis. It will be done by examining some of his texts, primarily the poem *Vavilon* [Babylon], exposing the internal structure of his poetical world. It belongs to his ‘earlier texts’, composed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, contained in two books, *Poslanii k lemuram* [Epistles to the

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3 Weisskopf, “Teologia”.

4 Of particular note is the practice and style of prominent Hasidic leader R. Levy Yitzhak of Berditchev (1740–1809), whose so-called *Kaddish of R. Yitzhak* Gendelev has partially translated into Russian. See Mikhail Gendelev, “Voina, govorite?”, *Vesti-2* (Tel Aviv), December 7, 1995, p. 5.


6 Gendelev has always insisted that he constructed tightly structured ‘books’ of poetry, as opposed to issuing ‘collections’ of assorted poems.