



## Friend, Robert (1913-1998)

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An American-born Israeli, Robert Friend was both an accomplished poet in his own right and also an exceptionally skillful translator of poetry from many different languages. His rather small corpus of poetry reflects an introspective personality and an increasingly more open sexuality.

### **Early Life, Education, Early Career**

The son of poor Yiddish-speaking Russian immigrants who had settled in Brooklyn, New York, Friend was the first of their five children. He was born on November 25, 1913.

The family's already precarious financial situation grew even worse when Friend's father abandoned them. Friend's mother struggled to provide for the children, but there were days when she could not put food on the table.

Friend's interest in poetry began early. When he was fourteen, he published a poem (written in English) in a Yiddish children's magazine.

After graduating from Franklin K. Lane High School in Brooklyn in 1930, Friend went on to Brooklyn College, from which he received a baccalaureate degree with a major in English and a minor in education in 1934.

Since good job opportunities were scarce in the Depression era, Friend signed on with the Civilian Conservation Corps and spent a year doing construction and forestry work in the western United States. He next taught remedial English in New York as part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA).

After a year of elementary school teaching in Puerto Rico, Friend returned to New York in 1938 and spent two years in another WPA project, teaching English to immigrants.

He returned to Puerto Rico in 1940, first as a payroll typist for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and subsequently serving as an instructor of English at the University of Puerto Rico for a semester in 1942. During this time he published his first volume of poetry, *Shadow on the Sun* (1941).

### **Love of the Caribbean**

Friend was enchanted by the beauty of the Caribbean, which was in stark contrast to the neighborhood where he had grown up, "a slum where a tree was rare and wonderful, and there were no such things as gardens." The lush, sensual tropical environment led Friend to explore and appreciate not only the natural world but also his own sexuality.

In one of his poems from this period, "Ars Poetica," Friend has poet William Carlos Williams deflate his youthful intellectualization of experience by taking him "by the elbow / affectionately, but firmly" and telling him to appreciate "the bathers / running along the beach / and sporting in the waves." The direct

apprehension of sensual experience that he discovered in the Caribbean altered both his poetry and his life.

Friend extended his stay in the Caribbean, working as a professor of English at the University of Panama from 1942 until 1946. He then returned to the United States to enroll at Harvard, from which he received an M.A. in 1947. His master's thesis was a study of E. M. Forster.

Friend spent the next academic year as an English instructor at Temple University in Philadelphia. During that time he successfully applied for a better position at Queens College in New York. To celebrate his good fortune in getting the job, he decided to vacation in France for the summer.

### **European Sojourn**

On the voyage to Europe he befriended Edward Field, then a young aspiring poet. In 2003, Field acknowledged an immense debt to Friend, remarking that "When I read the poems of Robert Friend, I always sense the relationship to my own poetry. He was the father who passed on to me the key, and his own poetry the mother ground I started from."

Field recounted that on the voyage to Europe, Friend, "a natural teacher," quickly attracted a group of young men who spent the trip "discussing literature and ideas" with him in the lounge of the ship.

Friend and Field continued to socialize that summer in Paris. Field "studied [Friend's] poems through draft after draft and in that way learned from him how poetry was made."

Many of Friend's poems dealt with love for other men, but, as Field recalled, his sexual orientation caused him to see himself as "the outsider--or, in his lower self, even as a cripple or hunchback"--a response that is not completely surprising considering the homophobic tenor of the time.

Friend found the atmosphere in Europe more congenial than what he had experienced in the United States. He decided to give up the job at Queens College in order to remain there. When his funds ran low in 1949, he took a teaching job at a U.S. Army school in Germany to support himself.

Shortly thereafter Friend learned that because he had for a brief time some ten years before been a member of the Communist party, his passport was going to be rescinded and he would have to return to the United States. Fearful of what might ensue there, in 1950 he went to Israel instead.

### **Emigration to Israel**

Although Friend anticipated only a temporary sojourn, he wound up spending the rest of his life there except for a period in 1954 and 1955 when he studied Moral Sciences at Cambridge University in England.

Upon arriving in Israel, Friend worked for a time on a kibbutz, then moved to Jerusalem, where he became an instructor of English literature at Hebrew University. He also did graduate studies there, earning his doctorate in 1970. Once again he wrote a thesis on the work of E. M. Forster. Friend was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor in 1979 and remained at Hebrew University until his retirement in 1984.

### **The Poet of Jabotinsky Street**

In Jerusalem Friend became known as "the poet of Jabotinsky Street" and one of Israel's leading writers of poetry in English, but the quality of his work had been recognized even earlier. His writings began appearing in *Poetry* magazine in 1937; in 1940 he was awarded the Jeannette Sewell Davis Prize for Poetry; and the first of his seven slim volumes of poetry had been published in 1941. But in Israel his poetry became deeper and more introspective, and gradually more openly expressive of his homosexuality.

Gabriel Levin calls Friend "preeminently a poet of desire" who, throughout his life, became "increasingly bold in portraying, not without humor, the darker, lustful side of love." Jay Shir compares Friend to C. P. Cavafy, describing both as in "thrall to sad gay lusts."

A personal sadness for Friend was that despite having many lovers he never found a life partner. The only beings who shared his lodgings on Jabotinsky Street were cats--as many as thirteen at a time--to whom he was greatly devoted and who also turned up in his poetry.

Friend's poetry evolved over time. Though he may have early viewed himself as an outsider, toward the end of his life, according to Shir, his writings evince "self-acceptance, a quality perhaps reminiscent of Auden's late work." Given Friend's great admiration for Auden, he would no doubt have appreciated this observation..

In a 1995 interview Friend described the development of his own poetry. His work in the 1930s and 1940s was formal verse, but he later attempted free verse and found success with it even though, as he stated, "free verse is more difficult because you do not have a framework. One must establish an inner framework, which is more difficult; your ear must be more finely tuned." He called the poems of his later years, which are generally short, "a kind of epigrammatic poetry." An example of this later poetry is the rueful but pithy "Heart Failure": "Since other hearts have failed me, / Why not my own?"

Friend's poetry ranges over a number of topics, especially mortality and frustration in love. At the center of nearly all the poetry is the endlessly analytical, nearly always critical, observer who, in the words of one poem, "sits / and studies in the mirrors / how well his hunchback fits." In another he describes his "lower self" as "Nose picker, peeker through a bedroom shutter, / farter in a suburban swimming pool, / . . . a perfect fool." Some of the poems--such as the ten-part sequence "The Teacher and the Indian"--recount love affairs, while others dissect memories of brief dalliances.

Friend also wrote poems about gay literary figures, such as Oscar Wilde and A. E. Housman. In "Housman's Venetian Visits," Friend imagines the poet's commercial affair with "Andrea, / a young and handsome, one-eyed gondolier" and contrasts it with his unrequited love for Moses Jackson, "for whose love returned, he said, he would have happily / given up the fame, the poems, the classical scholarship, / content to serve his lover all life-long, / if only as a servant."

Some of Friend's most remarkable poems are focused on old age and the approach of death. Among these is "The Divorce" in which the soul addresses the body: "I knew, I knew from the start / you would prove a faithless lover."

### **Translator**

Friend's skill as a poet, combined with his facility for languages, allowed him to excel at the exceedingly difficult task of translating poetry. He translated some 800 works first written in Hebrew, Yiddish, Spanish, French, German, and Arabic.

He is best known for his translations of Hebrew poetry. These include *Leah Goldberg: Selected Poems* (1976), *Natan Alterman: Selected Poems* (1978), *Gabriel Preil: Selected Poems* (1981), and *Flowers of Perhaps: Selected Poems of Ra'hel* (1995) as well as a children's book by Nobel Prize winner Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Agnon's Alef Bet* (1998).

With his translation of *Flowers of Perhaps*, stated Lois Bar-Yaakov, "Robert Friend has succeeded in retrieving Ra'hel from the cozy folksy corner into which she has been thrown by contemporary literary criticism . . . Through an act of great empathy, combined with consummate poetic intelligence, he has rescued [her language] from what now seems like cliché and romantic diction, to show again how genuinely subversive she was in her own time." Bar-Yaakov likens this accomplishment to the work of feminist scholars

like Adrienne Rich in rereading the poetry of Emily Dickinson and revealing the true depth of her work.

Diagnosed with cancer in November 1997, Friend died in Jerusalem on January 12 of the following year.

In 1999, a posthumous volume of Friend's translations, edited by Gabriel Levin, was published as *Found in Translation: A Hundred Years of Modern Hebrew Poetry*; and in 2003 a volume of his poetry, edited by Edward Field, was published as *Dancing with a Tiger: Poems 1941-1998*.

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