

Ilana Szobel

A Poetics of Trauma: The Work of Dahlia Ravikovitch

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reviewed by Sheila E. Jelen

In a memorable comparison of the Modern Hebrew literary establishment to an Orthodox synagogue, Amalia Kahana-Carmon discusses the ways in which Hebrew women writers have been relegated to the “women’s side” of a cultural and intellectual partition (*meḥitzah*).¹ A recent spate of critical attention to the poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch (1936–2005) begs the question of whether it is possible, or even desirable, to read Hebrew poetry outside of a gendered context.² Must renewed attention to Ravikovitch’s poetic corpus and literary legacy be contextualized in light of her being a Hebrew woman poet, and not just a Hebrew poet? The question of when it is important to give up gendered discourse in favor of other stylistic or cultural considerations, and when it is necessary to maintain gender on the critical radar, can be felt palpably in Ilana Szobel’s *A Poetics of Trauma: The Work of Dahlia Ravikovitch*.

Szobel, Assistant Professor of Hebrew Literature at Brandeis University, limns a portrait of Ravikovitch’s career that illuminates the problems of gendered readings, while acknowledging the legitimacy of such readings when performed with skill and sensitivity. In her psychoanalytic analysis, Szobel zeroes in on the personal traumas that contributed to the development of Ravikovitch’s unique poetic voice: the early loss of her father; her sense of homelessness as a young child unable to settle into the collective lifestyle in Kibbutz Geva, where her bereaved mother moved with her three young children; the failure of several marriages; and the loss of custody of her child. Szobel attempts to link a “poetics of trauma,” arrived at via psychoanalytic readings, to Ravikovitch’s renowned political activism and engaged poetry. Ravikovitch’s political outspokenness is said by Yitzhak Laor to have begun as early as the 1960s. It became fully realized after Israel’s 1982 invasion of Lebanon, reaching a crescendo with Ravikovitch’s staunch support, throughout the last decade of her life, of Palestinian rights.³

According to Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, “power and powerlessness is Ravikovitch’s defining subject.”⁴ Szobel’s monograph beautifully articulates Ravikovitch’s engagement with that subject, on the level of the individual psyche as well as in the political domain. Organized around the major stations in Ravikovitch’s personal

and poetic consciousness—"The State of Orphanhood," "The Project of Female Subjectivity," "Mania, Depression, and Madness," and finally "Testimony, Complicity, and National Identity"—it explores personal and political motifs throughout Ravikovitch's poetry as parts of a single biographical and poetic continuum. As Szobel says in her introductory remarks: "Although each of Ravikovitch's poems and stories is open to independent reading, my interpretation focuses on the connections among the texts. Such a reading integrates Ravikovitch's writing into a fragmented novel of sorts, at the center of which is a female protagonist who is portrayed at diverse phases in her life" (p. xvii).

It may sound as though Szobel's intention is to read Ravikovitch's poetry wholly biographically, but in fact Szobel's negotiation of the personal and the political in Ravikovitch's work is far more sophisticated. She articulates the necessity for a gendered reading, insofar as reading the struggle of a poetic self, a gendered self and a traumatized self in the poetry sheds light on the kinds of political, public and literary discussions implicit in Ravikovitch's poetic oeuvre.

Szobel's most significant insight into Ravikovitch's work is construed from a careful reading of it alongside the work of Yona Wallach (1944–1985), the other major female poet of the "Statehood" generation in Israeli literature (the group of writers who established themselves in the first decades after the birth of the state in 1948). The premise for Szobel's comparative reading is that each of these woman writers engages in "subverting" the symbolic order presented by Hebrew poetry and Israeli society. While Wallach, according to Szobel, challenges the symbolic order through a poetics of fractured language, Ravikovitch "expresses her subversive experiences in the language of the symbolic order" (p. 12). Employing a richly allusive Hebrew, replete with intertextual resonances of Bible and liturgy, Ravikovitch, granddaughter of one of the founders of the ultra-Orthodox Mea Shearim neighborhood in Jerusalem, produced a poetry that subverts the dogmas and understandings of the reigning patriarchy in the language of that patriarchy. Ravikovitch, therefore, according to Szobel, "offers a body of work unique in the Israeli context, one that disrupts the symbolic order without necessarily disrupting language." The primary questions articulated by Szobel in her analysis of Ravikovitch's corpus are: "Why does Ravikovitch express political and ideological subversion by adhering to the symbolic order and sustaining a traditional style, both linguistically and formally? Why does the Ravikovitch speaker maintain this ongoing duality of relaying tumultuous and disorderly experience through language that remains broadly lucid and conventional? What kind of psychological aspect of her poetic persona is revealed by this approach? What sort of emotional mechanism does it preserve?" (*ibid.*).

This sequence of questions nicely articulates both the strengths and the weaknesses of Szobel's book. On the one hand, her observation about the preservation of conventional linguistic norms in order to subvert the existing social and symbolic order is quite profound. In direct contrast to traditions such as those championed by the French feminists, according to which the very bases of language need to be deconstructed in order to revolutionize a masculinist culture, Szobel observes a key element born

of the confluence of language and gender in much of the Hebrew work of the twentieth century. The very use by a woman of Hebrew, a modern language comprised of ancient patriarchal values and codes, is subversive in and of itself. The poetics of the statehood generation are distinguished by a commitment to colloquialism in poetry, as can be discerned clearly in the streamlined conceits of Yehuda Amichai or the free verse and minimalism of Natan Zach. By contrast, Ravikovitch's wide-ranging poetic style, not confined to the minimalism or vernacularism of her generation, even if at times she dabbles in it, articulates a lack of affiliative anxiety, a lack of concern for the judgment and dismissal of her poetic peers. Despite the complexity of her poetics, the fact that she is considered a mainstay of the poetic movement of her time, a key member of the "Statehood Generation," speaks to the very subversion identified by Szobel. Ravikovitch rejects the imperative toward minimalism while still maintaining a distinctly modern and populist voice in her poetry.

On the other hand, Szobel's book, at times, is too concerned with Ravikovitch's psyche. In treating a poetic corpus as a novel narrated by a unified speaker with a unified consciousness, one can easily fall into the trap of becoming overly invested in the poetry as an expression of the personal and neglect to see beyond it to the political and the public domain. So much of Szobel's time is spent on the psychology behind Ravikovitch's poetry, on the theoretical infrastructure facilitating a psychoanalytically informed reading, that the analysis feels, at times, too invested in Ravikovitch herself and not invested enough in what her style reveals to us about her relationship to peers, to discourses, to politics—all of which Ravikovitch embraced as definitive of her poetic vocation. Relegating the section on "Testimony, Complicity, and National Identity" to the end of the monograph could be viewed as the culmination of the psychoanalytic discussion—or it could be seen as an afterthought.

Szobel's monograph is the first on Ravikovitch available in English. It serves as a crucial companion to the translations of her poems published by Bloch and Kronfeld in *Hovering at a Low Altitude: The Collected Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch* (2009). Unfortunately, Ravikovitch's rich intertextual fabric does not fare in translation quite as well as the universally popular translations of Yehuda Amichai or Natan Zach, whose minimal poetics and streamlined imagery lend themselves more easily to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural translation. Nevertheless, Kronfeld and Bloch do well in preserving the formal complexities, rhymes and allusions of Ravikovitch's poetry, and they are well matched in this by the theoretical rigor of Szobel's *A Poetics of Trauma*. Szobel's book comes at just the right moment to enhance the discourse on Ravikovitch in English.

In Ravikovitch's poem "Delight," we read:

There did I know a delight beyond all delight,
And it came to pass upon the Sabbath day
As tree boughs reached for the sky with all their might.

Round and round like a river streamed the light,
And the wheel of the eye craved the sunwheel that day
Then did I know a delight beyond all delight.

The heads of the bushes blazed, insatiable bright
Sunlight striking the waves, igniting the spray.
It would swallow my head like a golden orange, that light.

Water lilies were gaping their yellow bright
Mouths to swallow the ripples and reeds in their way.
And indeed it came to pass on the Sabbath day
As tree boughs lusted for the sky with all their might,
And then did I know a delight beyond all delight. (*Hovering at a Low Altitude*, p. 69)

The synthesis of the metaphysical and the carnal in this poem limning the joy of a sexual encounter on the Sabbath day exemplifies the delight of reading Ravikovitch. Her survival as a poet who preserved the formal pleasures of intertextuality in a generation of colloquial bards speaks to the vision with which she pursued her own unique poetic and her own unique message as a poet, and a woman, within Israeli society. Ilana Szobel's *A Poetics of Trauma* gives the English-reading audience tools with which to begin a serious engagement with a poet who is just coming to be read in English.

Notes:

1. Amalia Kahana-Carmon, "The Song of the Bats in Flight," in Naomi Sokoloff, Anita Norich, Anne Lapidus Lerner (eds.), *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992).
2. Dahlia Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude* (English transl. by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld; New York: Norton, 2009); and Hamutal Tsamir and Tamar S. Hess (eds.), *Sparks of Light: Essays about Dahlia Ravikovitch's Oeuvre* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010).
3. Bloch and Kronfeld, in Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude* (above, note 2), p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*

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