The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry Series
Jehuda Reinharz, General Editor
Sylvia Fuks Fried, Associate Editor

The Tauber Institute for the Study of European Jewry, established by a gift to Brandeis University from Dr. Laszlo N. Tauber, is dedicated to the memory of the victims of Nazi persecutions between 1933 and 1945. The Institute seeks to study the history and culture of European Jewry in the modern period. The Institute has a special interest in studying the causes, nature, and consequences of the European Jewish catastrophe within the contexts of modern European diplomatic, intellectual, political, and social history.

The Jacob and Libby Goodman Institute for the Study of Zionism and Israel was founded through a gift to Brandeis University by Mrs. Libby Goodman and is organized under the auspices of the Tauber Institute. The Goodman Institute seeks to promote an understanding of the historical and ideological development of the Zionist movement, and the history, society, and culture of the State of Israel.

Gerhard L. Weinberg, 1981
*World in the Balance: Behind the Scenes of World War II*

Richard Cobb, 1983
*French and Germans, Germans and French: A Personal Interpretation of France under Two Occupations, 1914-1918/1940-1944*

Eberhard Jackel, 1984
*Hitler in History*

Frances Malin and Bernard Wasserstein, editors, 1985
*The Jews in Modern France*

Jehuda Reinharz and Walter Schatzberg, editors, 1985
*The Jewish Response to German Culture: From the Enlightenment to the Second World War*

Jacob Katz, 1986
*The Darker Side of Genius: Richard Wagner's Anti-Semitism*

Jehuda Reinharz, editor, 1987
*Living with Antisemitism: Modern Jewish Responses*

Michael R. Marrus, 1987
*The Holocaust in History*

Paul Mendes-Flohr, editor, 1987
*The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig*

Joan G. Roland, 1989
*Jews in British India: Identity in a Colonial Era*
[ VI ]
HOVERING AT A LOW ALTITUDE
Dahlia Ravikovitch

I am not here.
I am on those craggy eastern hills
streaked with ice,
where grass doesn't grow
and a wide shadow lies over the slope.
A shepherd girl appears
from an invisible tent,
leading a herd of black goats to pasture.
She won’t live out the day,
that girl.

5

I am not here.
From the deep mountain gorge
a red globe floats up,
not yet a sun.
A patch of frost, reddish, inflamed,
flickers inside the gorge.

10

The girls gets up early to go to the pasture.
She doesn’t walk with neck outstretched
and wanton glances.
She doesn’t ask, Whence cometh my help.

15

H I am not here.
I’ve been in the mountains many days now.

I gather my skirt and hover
very close to the ground.
What is she thinking, that girl?
Wild to look at, unwashed.
For a moment she crouches down,
her cheeks flushed,
frostbite on the back of her hands.
She seems distracted, but no,
she’s alert.

20

She still has a few hours left.
But that’s not what I’m thinking about.
My thoughts cushion me gently, comfortably.
I’ve found a very simple method,
not with my feet on the ground, and not flying—
hovering
at a low altitude.

Then at noon,
many hours after sunrise,
that man goes up the mountain.
He looks innocent enough.
The girl is right there,
no one else around.
And if she runs for cover, or cries out—
there's no place to hide in the mountains.

25

I am not here.
I’m above those jagged mountain ranges
in the farthest reaches of the east.
No need to elaborate.
With one strong push I can hover and whirl around
with the speed of the wind.

30

35

40

45

50

55
I can get away and say to myself:
I haven’t seen a thing.
And the girl, her palate is dry as a potsherd,
her eyes bulge,
when that hand closes over her hair, grasping it
without a shred of pity.

Barbara Mann

THE PROBLEM OF WITNESSING is at the heart of Dahlia Ravikovitch’s “Hovering at a Low Altitude,” a poem that addresses a universal situation within a particularly Israeli frame of reference. In its vacillating placement of the speaker, who is both omniscient and detached, the poem critiques the position of “hovering” above reality in order to escape the brutality of everyday life. It is also a phenomenological exploration of one woman’s struggle to engage the world through the zone of poetry. The poem should be read against the background of the relation between artistic creation and ethical responsibility as well as the role of literature in the life of the nation. The notion of a more private, individualized self was ubiquitous in Israeli poetry in the 1960s and 1970s and was the hallmark of the work of Ravikovitch’s contemporaries, the poets Yehuda Amichai and Natan Zach. Their poems have been understood as one response to the overwhelmingly collective nature of the first-person voice in Hebrew literature from the turn of the century, and to the enormous ideological and national expectations placed upon the writer. Ravikovitch’s early volumes were critically well received and were particularly noted for their crafted language. These books were followed by a relatively long period of poetic silence, which was broken in 1982 with the publication of “Hovering at a Low Altitude.” On the one hand, then, the poem marks an important turning point in Ravikovitch’s work: it may be read as a self-incriminating reflection upon a poetic self that she was partly responsible for creating. On the other hand, the poem asks us to reconsider this distinction between a collective and an individual voice, compelling us to question our own practice as readers.

The poem’s opening terrain is a dramatically ominous wasteland. We follow the turnings of the last day in the life of an anonymous shepherd girl, who is both doomed and slightly damaged from the start. The poem’s speaker seems comfortably, enigmatically, aloft. Four times the speaker repeats: “I am not here.” This declaration is a performative contradiction: like the Liar’s Paradox, its content contradicts the premises of its performance. The poem’s speaker must be “here,” in order to say that she is not. (The gender of the poem’s speaker is revealed later in the poem.) Likewise,
she must be watching in order to describe what it is that she has not seen. This type of contradiction, and the accompanying impulse to create a reliable narrator, is the driving force of much imaginative expression. This impulse becomes particularly problematic, however, in situations such as that depicted in “Hovering at a Low Altitude,” where the power of the gaze is first denied, then asserted, again and again. In keeping with the self-conscious impossibility of its refrain, the poem’s language is vivid and slightly stylized, as if to foreground the surreal situation it depicts.

The speaker’s declaration of absence is not only a description of physical location; it is a state of mind that persists and deepens throughout the poem, alongside the tragic approach of violence in a desolate and foreboding landscape. At first, the speaker is “not here” but “in the crevices of the eastern mountains,” “not here” but observing a monstrous, devouring sunrise; by mid-poem, she is still “not here” but has “already been in the mountains many days.” Apparently untouched by the extremes of climate or the knowledge of impending violence, she has “seen worse than this in [her] life.” Finally, toward the poem’s brutal conclusion, she is “not here” but “above the wild threatening mountain range,” on the edges of the East, akin to the exotic climes of Ravikovitch’s earlier work. The phrase “I am not here” is a means of coping with the world’s horrors. In the poet’s own words: “I am a witness to things that I haven’t the ability to change, and I hope that this doesn’t dull my revulsion.” However, all the while that she is “not here,” the speaker offers a premonition of future events, which are themselves described as having already occurred: the girl and her herd of goats move toward the pasture at sunrise, while at noon a stranger climbs the mountain, his movements witnessed by the floating speaker, who seems powerless to act. Something about the uneasy cooperation of verb tenses both underscores the inevitability of the violence and enables the speaker’s cagey yet persistent distance from it. The changing relation between the speaker and the girl—and the distance between the speaker and the scene that she “does not see”—allegorizes the position of the writer in the world; the poem questions the ethical possibility of writing that “cushions” itself from a brutal reality. Beyond this metapoetic critique, however, the poem contains a wider, implicit judgment of the society in which the poem was produced, as the reader shares in its privileged and seemingly all-knowing viewpoint. The poem’s power derives from both its self-indictment and this implication of its readers: it insists on the ethical untenability of remaining aloof, a position that fails to act against violence and injustice and leads to a moral erosion of the self. This meditation on the connection between writing and power and between moral outrage and action is complicated by details of the local Israeli context and by Ravikovitch’s position as a woman poet.

“Hovering at a Low Altitude” was first published in the fall of 1982 and has been read in the context of the Lebanese War, a period of great social and political turmoil in Israel. The war itself, and the years immediately surrounding it, provoked an enormous amount of political poetry, as well as literary reflection on the place of politics in belles-lettres. Ravikovitch, like many Israeli writers, participated in public demonstrations against the government and against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Throughout her career, she has commented, in often contradictory fashion, on the relation between poetry and politics. For example, in 1959, on the occasion of her first volume’s publication, she claimed that as a poet she was not preoccupied by the “problems of the generation: the establishment of Israel, the ingathering of the exiles, making the desert bloom, even the atom bomb.”

At the time of the publication of True Love in 1987, the volume in which “Hovering at a Low Altitude” was eventually collected, she viewed the politics of her Lebanon poems as nothing new: the invasion itself she saw as a continuation of abuses that predated the war. More recently, when asked whether she accepts the definition of political poet, she replied, “I am political to the same degree that I have always been, and I don’t see Mother with Child [published in 1992] as particularly political.” However, “Hovering at a Low Altitude” was written and submitted for publication in the literary journal Siman Kri’ah before the war began. Furthermore, in True Love, the poem is not grouped with the volume’s other poems explicitly connected to the war: “They’re Freezing in the North,” “You Can’t Kill a Baby Twice,” and “Get Out of Beirut.” Instead, we find it in a section called The Window, alongside a poem of that name that describes the self’s withdrawal from external events: “What have I done already? I haven’t done anything for years.” As readers, we thus come to “Hovering at a Low Altitude” in the wake of a critique of the position of viewing a scene from the relative safety of a window. This situation provides one way of understanding the poem within the context of the war, which was in large part witnessed by the Israeli public through the firsthand accounts of soldiers and secondhand media accounts.

The poem itself, regardless of these specific circumstances, raises the question of the worth of poetry during any period of extended public
trauma. Hebrew poetry has often served as a realm in which to record and debate the relation between public trauma and private experience. In this regard, Ravikovitch's poem participates in a rich tradition in Jewish culture. For the poet, one special locus within Hebrew literature may have been a short essay by Leah Goldberg. Hebrew women poets have characteristically relied on this kind of web of intertextual relations. Goldberg—poet, translator, critic, teacher—was a major literary figure from her arrival in Tel Aviv in the 1930s until her death in 1970. Ravikovitch paid homage to her as "hidden yellow rose" in a pool of "toads," who "only because of her wonderful courage/... doesn't look for another pool." In September 1939, Goldberg published an article in response to the friends and colleagues who repeatedly asked, "When will you start writing war poems?" Goldberg objected to poetry that glorified heroism and warfare, contending that the poet's task must always be to celebrate life. Her response to the war in Europe was to write nature poetry: "I have taken upon myself a disreputable role, the role of a fool rushing in, in order to say that I... in September 1939, see myself as obligated... to appear before literature with the opening phrase, for instance, in these words: 'On a September morning / the sea in our land is clear and cool.'" Goldberg's essay was part of a larger debate among modernist Hebrew poets regarding the writing of explicitly political poetry and the role of writers and their work in the establishment of the state. Her declaration is a bit disingenuous; nature poetry in modern Hebrew has historically been connected to the national program of renewal in "Eretz Israel"—the Land of Israel. This is not to claim that modern Hebrew nature poetry is always necessarily polemical; it is simply that landscape description is often mediated by a wider social and political discourse. Goldberg was not unaware of these connections, and we can find more explicit references to the politics of landscape description in other of her nature poems. The poet’s defense of nature poetry and her critique of the heroic mode are meant to problematize the strict distinction between the political import of the two genres. This distinction points to the seeming divide between two more fundamental categories—the individual or private versus the collective or public voice. The collective voice necessarily includes traces of those voices that it represses or masks in its efforts to appear universal. At the same time, the private self must speak in the generalized terms of the collective in order to be understood and effective as a poem. Even Goldberg's seemingly innocuous couplet cited above speaks in the compact, possessive first-person plural—"arsenu (our land)—and refers to the month of Elul, associated with a particularly sacred time of the Jewish calendar year—the New Year and the Days of Awe.

This blurring of the personal and the collective may also be found in "Hovering at a Low Altitude," where the poet embeds biblical allusions concerning the relation between God and the people of Israel in descriptions of the anonymous shepherd girl. Thus, a poem that ostensibly depicts an individual's flight from involvement in the world—"I am not here"—reverberates with the words of the prophets, who, one might say, invented the problem of personal responsibility toward the nation. In its depiction of the violent death of an unsuspecting child on a mountaintop, the poem also skirts a centrally defining motif in Jewish culture and in much modern Hebrew poetry—the binding of Isaac.

Nevertheless, some seed of the sensibility behind Goldberg's "nature-poetry—during-wartime"—its rejection of certain poetic modes in the national arena—became the hallmark of Ravikovitch's literary generation, what she calls "the history of the private individual." Their poetry spoke in the first-person singular, detailing the individual, often esoteric experience of the poet without any ostensible connection to the political or social world within which it was produced. Yet just as Goldberg's nature poetry pushed subtly against conceived notions of collective and individual voice, these poets, Ravikovitch among them, sharply critiqued the social and political structures in which they lived and wrote. Perhaps because of the strong generational identification in Hebrew literature and in Israeli culture generally, implicit and explicit dialogue with other Hebrew poets was one characteristic mode of their work.

In True Love, "Hovering at a Low Altitude" is bracketed by two poems that constitute a kind of testimony to another woman poet, Yona Wolloch, the most influential Israeli poet of the last twenty years, and a controversial figure in her own right. Both poems—"Finally I'm Talking" and "True Love Is Not What It Seems"—meditate upon the connection between Wolloch and her work, her death in 1985, and something called "true love." In these poems, literary inheritance, even a misappropriation, is also a form of love, albeit one that is often confused with, or marred by, self-love. Of the many "heirs" Wolloch left behind, Ravikovitch says: "You gave them permission / but you didn't give them responsibility." Her own poems about Wolloch are hyper-engaged and brutally honest, forcefully addressing the poet in what Ravikovitch calls Wolloch's "new situation"—"you are a dead woman." They also question the degree to which people (including the
poet) "truly loved Yona," asking, "Do we truly love our friends? ... Do we truly love our children?"  What is the relation between this "true love" and "Hovering at a Low Altitude," which describes a violent encounter from a detached, "love-less" position, at the window? The poem's almost anthropological, detached "hovering" records with patience and fidelity the details of even the most brutal scene. What is the proper relation between a poet and her subjects, especially when these subjects are victims, actual or imagined? What kind of ethical complications derive from a voice that repeatedly claims, "I am not here"? What special fabric of relations exists among women poets and their relation to these ideas?

The answers to these questions depend on, to quote Raymond Carver, "what we talk about when we talk about love." Women poets in many traditions have characteristic expectations of women's poetry to be "merely" personal, while fine-tuning a sharp critique of dominant literary genres and societal expectations regarding women, especially women artists. In her essay on nature poetry during wartime, Goldberg also mentions love poetry, arguing that "not only is the poet allowed to write love poems during wartime; he is obliged, because during wartime the value of love is still greater than the value of murder." She cites both the Iliad and David's biblical eulogy of Jonathan as examples of great love poems that have been mistakenly read as war poetry. Just as "true love is not what it seems," and nature poetry may be deeply political, true love poetry is also not what it seems. In Ravikovitch's work, love is about suffering, and suffering is always political. In fanning "Hovering at a Low Altitude" with these questions about love and literary relations, the poet asks us to consider what kind of love hovers absent in a poem that repeatedly declares "I am not here." On the one hand, love is dependent upon genuine sympathy and identification: the shepherd girl is referred to as "the little one," and the speaker tries to imagine "what the girl was thinking." On the other hand, this empathy is complicated by the seeming necessity of aesthetic distance necessary to artistic creation, a distance that often precludes sympathy or involvement and implies a form of power. Unlike some of her poems that are more explicitly connected to the war, "Hovering at a Low Altitude" has been admired as a great philosophical achievement because it simultaneously embraces both the distance of aesthetics and the passion of engagement. Therefore, within the context of the volume as a whole, "Hovering at a Low Altitude" occupies an interesting position: it serves as a kind of intermediary link between the engaged talk of love in the Yona poems and the volume's more overtly political poems, almost as if the poem's detached drama serves as a conduit through which the passion of the Yona poems infuses the war poetry. The narrator in "Hovering at a Low Altitude" seems to be powerless to prevent the violence before her, yet her position may also be construed as voluntary, even necessary as a survival strategy. The poem is an attempt to deal with this self-erasure, to describe it, in effect—to turn it into something else. Pronouncements of victimization or powerlessness are a staple of Ravikovitch's poetry; from the start, it is the orange's adoration of its devourers that is the central focus of her work. Love, even at its most self-destructive, is a form of agency, of power. However, her poems recognize that the space between describing a powerless position and truly occupying one is vast.

Nonetheless, "Hovering at a Low Altitude" hinges on the degree to which the poem's speaker identifies with the girl. Despite her repeated proclamations of detachment, the speaker follows the girl's actions with rapt attention. Their connection is most strongly suggested nearly halfway through the poem, in line 27, as the speaker gathers up her skirt, and her gender is decisively revealed in the feminine singular verb form: osefet. This banal, almost domestic gesture leads to the fantastic movement of hovering at ground level, like a spirit. There is also, however, in this particular description of flying close to the ground, something vaguely threatening, like the movement of a surveillance or attack helicopter. Despite her surreal position above the earth, the speaker is privy to brutally real and intimate details concerning the girl's body—her cheeks, the frostbite on her hands, and her hair in the poem's closing lines. While the hovering enables the speaker to question and wonder at a comfortable distance—her feet don't touch the ground, she feels neither the cold nor the light—the gathering of her skirt connects her physically to the girl's sexuality. The leisurely gentility of the speaker's gesture—the luxury of gathering her skirt so that not even its hem sweeps the ground below—symbolizes a final attempt to shield herself. She is far away but must watch until the end. Ironically, it is the girl who is alert, though unsuspecting, while the speaker lets her thoughts fail her protectively with cotton quilting. Her aloof position is, however, further eroded as the poem draws to its violent conclusion, a deterioration suggested in the tentative language of the final stanza: one may move at "the speed of the wind," and "I can get away and say to myself: / I haven't seen a thing." Does this disavowal in fact describe her position at the end of the poem? Though the speaker claims that she has seen worse, she seems to be trying to convince herself. As the poem ends, the location of the speaker is multiple and shifting: on the edges of the East, she is also close enough
to view the ostensibly innocent approach of the man as he climbs the mountain. The poem ends as the attack begins; the speaker’s intimate knowledge of the girl’s body—her palate, her eyes, her scalp—places her, and the reader, in a position of heightened, purely omniscient, sympathy. The space in which the poet is “not here” is also the space in which the reader must acknowledge her own silence, and perhaps her own complicity, in the violence unfolding before her.

Notes

1. This repeated “non-witnessing” is a variation on the psychological trauma recorded by Ravikovitch’s nightly witnessing of her father’s death when she was a girl, “Standing by the Road,” in The Complete Poems So Far (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995).
2. For example, “Tirza and the Wide World,” “War in Zanzibar,” “Australia,” and “Chad and Cameroon,” in The Complete Poems So Far.
7. The poem first appears in Hadarim 3 (fall 1982) and is collected in True Love (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987). See Nissim Calderon, The Feeling of Place (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1988), for original publication details.
12. Ibid.
14. See Chana Kronfeld’s essay in this volume.
15. The poem lists series of dates and events, concluding “In all these, I was alone.” “History of the Individual,” in The Complete Poems So Far.

Nili R. Scharf Gold

READING DAHLIA RAVIKOVITCH’S “Hovering at a Low Altitude” as a political poem has become nearly its only reading. So accepted is its understanding as a semi-confessional, Israeli guilt-ridden text, that even careful poetry readers such as Shimon Zandbank refer to its political implications without questioning them. Critics also discuss the poem’s self-referential character, but again, in the context of a debate about the artist’s role vis-à-vis the reality of oppression and war. Even the selection of Ravikovitch’s poems translated into English implicitly shares this reading. In it, “Hovering at a Low Altitude” immediately follows the explicit “On the Attitude toward Children in Wartime.”

True, in 1983, the poet included “Hovering at a Low Altitude” in a joint collection of political poetry protesting the war in Lebanon. She has also made her views publicly known by writing militant antiwar articles and poems. However, these facts do not justify the almost exclusively political interpretation of the text. The reader ought not to ignore other qualifying factors. It is known that the poem was submitted to the magazine Hadarim before the battles in Lebanon broke out; hence, it was not written in direct response to the war. Moreover, when “Hovering at a Low Altitude” finally appeared in the book Ahavah amitit (True love) in 1987, Ravikovitch nestled it among other lyrical poems, under the inside title The Window, and not at the end of the book, under the marked political inside title Questions in Contemporary Judaism. This placement, I believe, is not a coincidence, nor is it an oversight or an attempt to camouflage the poem’s true meaning. It is an interpretative signal from the author, that “Hovering at a Low Altitude” is first and foremost a personal, lyrical poem.

The spectacular imaginary landscape that opens the poem is arid, a space forsaken by God and man (lines 1–5). Although the mountains’ wide shadow (tsel) is described idiomatically by the verb “lie,” or “spread” (natash), it is hard to ignore the echo of that verb’s primary meaning. Natash means “abandoned,” “forsaken,” “deserted,” according to the dictionary (line 5). Nature, then, is not only the locus of events; it also forebodes, even mirrors, them. Abandonment and its terrifying consequences may be at the core of this poem, the emotional wound that motivates this text. The
oxymoron-like declaration at the head of the poem, “I am not here” (line 1), throws the speaker to an existence there, elsewhere, on bald carnivorous mountain gorges. Although the poem's title informs of a disconnected state (i.e. hovering), the speaker, at least at the outset, is on, not above, this ominous landscape (line 2). The mountains’ icy streaks resemble an animal of prey; they are spotted, menumarin, like namer, a tiger (line 3). The speaker's “I,” whose feminine gender is not certain at this point in the poem, in attempting not to be “here,” finds herself in a desolate place of danger. There is no protection “where grass does not grow” (line 4), let alone a shady tree. The absence of a hiding place in the mountains is intimated only through the landscape in the first stanza; yet in the assault that ensues at the end of the poem, it is almost a culprit.

The “I” who utters the poem’s first five words lets the terrain dominate the four lines that follow. When another human being, “a little shepherd girl” (ro’ah ketanah), comes into sight with her flock, she is almost merged with the scenery (line 6). The shepherd burst forth from a tent in a birth-like, or animal-like, emergence (as indicated by the verb hegihah, line 8). She may resemble the black goats in her care, so much a part of the landscape, almost invisible and just as vulnerable. Goats, izim, recall for the Hebrew reader kid or goat, ged-i-izim or se’ir-izim, the quintessential sacrifice or victim (Gen. 37:31; Lev. 31:2; 56:9).

It is important to note that at this point, the speaker and the “little shepherd girl” are both invisible, and they are both there, on the mountains. It is not unreasonable to ask whether vulnerability is a common trait for them both as well. However, the two differ in the level of their awareness. While the speaker sees, the girl does not. The latter part of the poem retroactively suggests the presence of a third, knowing and threatening figure on the mountains, one who the speaker most probably recognizes.

The existence of evil is apparent in the opening stanza. First, in the haunting, horror-movie-like vistas, and then in the irreversible verdict disclosed by the omniscient speaker (“She won’t live out the day / that girl,” line 10). The detachment-refrain, “I am not here,” is repeated immediately after the “verdict.” The knowledge of what is about to happen may drive the urgent need to escape. Yet the “I am not here” means that the speaker is still there, “on the mountains,” where the shepherd girl is unknowingly awaiting her fate. The foretelling of catastrophe is rendered in a language of certainty, not premonition. The “I,” then, is either divine or is collecting an experience. If the latter is true, the text may be read as a quasi-

cinematic flashback. While the chain of events unfolds in the present in front of the eyes of the dumbfounded reader, for the narrating voice, it is but a remembrance of things past.

The second stanza repeats the structure of the first: four lines of eerie mountain-scape follow the “I am not here” refrain. A sickly-looking sunrise is exposed. A flying red ball (kadur) with a whitish spot is turning over in the mountain’s inflamed throat before becoming a hot sun (hamah). The cruel, tiger-like gorges of the first stanza open a devouring, repulsive maw (lo’a) in the second stanza (lines 13–14). In Ravikovich’s poetry, a red, sore throat or a suffocating “ball” or lump in the throat is often connected to a sense of despair and helplessness. The self-declared “detached” speaker, it seems, almost physically feels the danger of this ailing, hostile landscape.

Then the mountains’ prey reappears. As in the opening stanza, she emerges immediately after the picture of her “carnivore.” The cracks in the speaker’s attempt to disconnect herself from the event seem to widen even further. The vocabulary of the third stanza’s opening line betrays the empathy: “And the little one hurried so to rise for pasture” (vehaketenah hishkimah ko lakum el hamir’eh, line 17). “The little shepherd girl” of the first stanza is now tenderly called “the little one.” The verb hishkimah (“rose early”) recalls Abraham’s fateful early rising with his son who was about to be sacrificed (Gen. 22:3), and the adverb “so” (ko) illustrates the girl’s earnest attempt to do her work, thus disclosing the narrator’s compassion.

The lines most densely packed with biblical allusions in the poem are found here. The polarity between the shepherd girl, the essence of innocence, and the cruel world surrounding her is too grave, so to speak, for one poet’s words. Ravikovich turns, then, to the ultimate text, representative of divine justice. Only by negating the Psalmist’s assurances of the reign of justice, only by deconstructing the prophets’ notion of right and wrong, will the fate of this pure creature gain its appropriate dimensions. Biblical vanity is juxtaposed with the girl’s humility and absolutely pure intentions. She does not “walk with an outstretched neck and wanton eyes” (lines 18–19) like the “daughters of Zion” (Isa. 3:16), nor does she “enlarge her eyes with paint” (line 19) like Zion, the sinner (Jer. 4:30). Yet no god helps her. Following the deconstruction of the prophets’ negative female portrait is the negation of the Psalmist’s deliverance. While the Psalmist lifts his “eyes to the mountain,” asking, “Whence cometh my help?” (Ps. 121:1), the little shepherd girl, unaware of the approaching threat, does not. While the Psalmist’s mountains contain God, her slopes are without mercy.
The inverted allusions to the Scriptures intensify the sense of God's abandonment and injustice, which now dominate the scene.

"She doesn't ask, Whence cometh my help" (line 20). The quintessential call to God "Whence cometh my help?" (me'layn yavo 'ezri) carries here, through the line's punctuation; an added possibility for interpretation. If indeed, the desired reading of this line is that the little, unaware, shepherd girl is not asking about her own source of help, the punctuation would read: She doesn't ask: "Whence cometh my help."

Instead, the quotation marks are missing, as if to imply that she, the girl, is not "not asking" for her own help, but rather, she is "not asking" about "my," meaning the narrator's, salvation. In other words, the line suggests that the girl is not wondering from where the speaker's (the "I") help would come. Although this meaning is only implied here, one may argue that the ambiguity, created by the punctuation, deliberately blurs the boundaries between the girl and the poem's "I." For that fleeting moment in the poem, the adult who is recounting the story and the helpless girl become one and the same. As the poem progresses, the narrator identifies increasingly with the little girl, and the text intimates that it is a reworked reconstruction by an adult of her own childhood experience. As the adult looks back, she may ask questions about the event, but the child undergoing the trauma does not. This reading explains why the girl did not ask about the continued survival of the woman she was to become; it makes sense of the girl's obliviousness of the adult's need for help; and it adds another layer to the almost obsessive refrain and its insistence on distance and detachment.

The passage from the third to the fourth stanza mirrors the leap from the first to the second ("She won't live out the day, / that girl. / I am not here," lines 10–12). The greater distance of the "I" to the girl's fate, the more urgent is the need to escape. That need is echoed in the refrain and magnified, in the fourth stanza, by a declaration of immunity to suffering ("the light will not scorch me. The frost will not touch me," line 23). The "I" admits that past trials and tribulations are responsible for her apathy: "I've seen worse things in my life" (line 25). The reader ought not to ignore the possibility that the story told here is actually the speaker's own, one of the "things" she has seen, or rather, lived through.

The fifth and central stanza is choreographed to be the most revealing and longest in this seven-stanza, sixty-one-line poem. Themes from the first and third stanzas are replayed here with greater intensity. The girl's quasi-feral, primitive character and her pure, unpretending nature are now observed from a closer vantage point and are graphically delineated. Unaware of being watched, she crouches, unwashed, wild, almost animal-like, a victim in a few hours (lines 29–30). Furthermore, this stanza's first line, "I gather my dress and hover" (line 22), finally reveals the gender of the hovering entity (osefet, "gather," is in the feminine form of the verb). The greatest physical proximity between the woman who narrates and the little girl occurs at this point in the text. For the first time, she is "very near to the ground" (line 27). So close is the "I" that she can read the seemingly absentminded expression on the girl's face and is able to see the cold sores on the back of her hand. She can almost touch "her cheeks, as soft as silk" (lines 31–33).

This intimate portrait of the girl recalls another. Although I am aware of the pitfalls of such connections, I suggest that the girl's features bear resemblance to Ravikovitch's persona. Hers is the concentrated / distracted look; the porcelain and silky skin; the hand rashes and the sensitivity to the cold.15

The eighth and ninth lines of this stanza blur the reader's perception of the girl's countenance. Depending on how one reads the punctuation and line division, she is either attentive or dreaming. "Absentminded, seemingly/attentive, as a matter of fact" (lines 33–34) is the literal translation that follows the original punctuation and line division. If read according to the punctuation, the girl is absentminded; she only seems attentive. However, the same lines, read according to Ravikovitch's line-division, lead to the opposite conclusion: she is truly attentive, she only seems absentminded. Earlier in the poem, the suggestive punctuation binds the woman and the girl with the call, "Whence cometh my help." Here, too, the punctuation plays a similar role, pointing to the adult's and the girl's duality and unity at once. The girl is oblivious, while the recollecting adult is watchful as she counts the hours until the assault. "And there still remain just a few hours" (line 35).

The counting of the remaining hours is followed by a variation on the refrain: "I, I was not thinking about that matter" (ami lo ba'inyan hazeh hagiti, line 36). This "substitute refrain" agrees with the pattern, already established in the poem, where excessive closeness to trauma is followed by an intensive attempt to detach or deny. However, at this pivotal point, a mere "I am not here" does not suffice. An added cotton-wool padding is required to insulate the speaker from the horrific vision in store. The text
refers to itself, interpreting, and finally repeating the title. Hovering, it claims, is a simple solution to existential problems. “Neither feet touching the ground nor flying” (line 39). Hovering at a low altitude allows the speaker to survive despite the heart-wrenching sight. The poem could have neatly ended with the reiteration of the title. Instead, a slow-motion playback follows.

“That man,” seemingly innocent, climbs the mountain. The man, who, on the surface, appears in the sixth stanza for the first time, is called ha’ish hahu (“that man,” line 44). By referring to him in this way, the narrator discloses, perhaps, a previous encounter with him. The preposition ke, “as if,” intimates a knowledge of the man’s intentions and of the story’s end. Even the hovering ceases now. “That man went up the mountain / as if he were innocently climbing” (lines 44–45). When he reaches her, there is “no one else around” (line 47). One must wonder to where the “I” had disappeared. If the entire “plot” were to occur in the poem’s here-and-now, the “I” would be present, at least through the “I am not here” refrain. But in this sixth, laconic, stanza, even the speaker’s declaration of “non presence” is missing. While up to this point, she reported every step in great detail, including the girl’s tent and goats, skin, posture, and facial expression, now there is a void. The sixth stanza closes with “And if she tried to hide or screamed / there is no hiding place in the mountains” (lines 48–49). Why did the hovering speaker not hear the scream? Not see the desperate search for refuge?

It seems to me that the only way to understand the “if” in “if she tried” is to believe it. The narrator is truly uncertain of what had happened at that climactic moment. It is blocked out from her memory. Even now, years later, when the story is reconstructed, that moment is too painful to revisit. The careful account is that of “screen memories,” details that surround the main incident, but are not the actual event.

What is described in the poem as “Hovering at a Low Altitude,” then, is a psychological defense mechanism that enables a survivor of trauma (or a victim in the midst of an assault) to distance herself from the pain. In the case of this poem, it is as if the speaker leaves her body and is able to look down on it from above, at one of the worst moments in her life.

The price of this “hovering” is revealed only at the end of the poem. The mountains are more dreadful then ever. Only through a violent hurl, taltelah ‘azah, through swift circling in the wind and self-implying is the

“I” capable of removing herself from the scene of the crime (lines 54–57). The actual execution of the very deed committed by “that man” is absent in the poem. “The little one’s” bulging eyes and dry mouth and the man’s merciless hand grabbing her are the only evidence (lines 58–61). The oxymoron reaches its height at the end of the poem. The narrator claims, “I haven’t seen a thing” (line 57), yet she sees (or perhaps feels) the girl’s eyes popping out of their sockets and her palate “as dry as a potsherd.” Although the separation between the “I” and the “girl” is maintained with great effort throughout the poem, there remained slips—traces, if you will—for the careful reader to unveil and fill in the gaps.

The two options available to Ravikovitch’s personae in earlier works were either flying high in “the sky’s amazing blue” (“In the Right Wind,” line 29), or touching fire, being in the place of danger. Taking off to the heavens often ends with a catastrophic fall. So is the fate of a man who “falls from an airplane in the middle of the night” (“The End of the Fall,” line 1), or of Saint-Exupery, who disappeared over the Mediterranean, or of others who “fly in the right wind / and die suddenly” (“In the Right Wind,” lines 36–37). Reaching to the depth of experience, touching, and living passion and pain to their fullest are equally as hazardous as flying. Ravikovitch’s female personae: the daughter who must return to the place where her father was killed; the young woman who reaches for her “Dress of Fire”; the lover so consumed by desire that she is either swallowed or drowned—all are destroyed physically or emotionally.

The horrific feeling of abandonment by a parent who dies or by a remaining not-good-enough parent, as well as the continued vulnerability of the child, may be replayed in “Hovering at a Low Altitude.” The words bemakom she, meaning “in the place where,” which curiously appear in the opening stanza (in the place “where grass does not grow,” line 4), recall the very early line “In the place where he stands, there is fear of danger” from the autobiographical poem “On the Road at Night” (line 9). That early poem is Ravikovitch’s only direct retelling in verse of how she became orphaned. Its speaker is an “eldest daughter” (line 4) who is obsessively compelled to return “to the place where” her father was run over by a car. As mentioned above, flying is merely an alternate danger route to encounter the dead father.

In “Hovering at a Low Altitude,” however, a new strategy is being tested, a method for survival: Hovering. It is preferable to physically touching
danger or to flying high above. Hovering is “a very simple method, / neither feet touching the ground nor flying” (lines 38–39). Yet the trauma, either of loss or of its consequences, still haunts the “I,” who repeatedly insists “I am not here.”

“Hovering at a Low Altitude” may represent a poetic stand or even a political one. But it ought to be read first as a text that touches hidden corners of the soul, a struggle to confront a memory, this time without being consumed or destroyed by it and not by escaping or repressing it.

Notes

1. The quotations from “Hovering at a Low Altitude” in this essay do not always follow Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch’s translation reprinted in this volume. For the purpose of analysis, I often use my own, more literal, translation, which also follows the original’s line and stanza division. The line numbers provided throughout the essay correspond with the Hebrew original and its complete, literal translation given as an appendix to this essay. All references made to poems in Hebrew refer to Kol hashirim ‘ad ko’ (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995).

2. “The political poem is, simultaneously, a political tool that employs poetic means, as well as a literary text that evokes and promotes political action.” Hannan Hever, Paytanim uvimronim: Hashirah hapoliti b’aretz Yisra’el (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994). 14. (My translation N.G.)


5. See 102 n. 1.


11. The fifth stanza is divided into two in the English translation.


Appendix

HOVERING AT A LOW ALTITUDE

I am not here.
I am on eastern mountains' crevices
striped with bands of ice
where grass does not grow
and a wide shadow is spread on the slope.
A little shepherd girl with a flock of goats
black
burst forth there
from an invisible tent.
She will not live her day that girl
in pasture.

I am not here.
In a mountain's maw a red ball sprang up,
not yet a sun.
A frost patch reddish and sickly
is turning over in the maw.

And the little one hurried so to rise for pasture
her throat not outstretched
her eyes not enlarged with paint, not winking
she is not asking, whence cometh my help.

I am not here.
I am already in the mountains many days
the light will not scorch me. The frost will not touch me.
I am not stricken with astonishment anymore.
I've seen worse things in my life.

I gather my dress and hover
very near to the ground.
What did she think to herself that girl?
Wild-looking, unwashed
for a moment bending down crouching.
Her cheeks as soft as silk
cold sores on the back of her hand.
Absent minded, seemingly
attentive, as a matter of fact.
And there still remain for her just a few hours.
I, I was not thinking about that matter.

My thoughts padded for me a cotton-wool padding
I found myself a very simple method,
neither feet touching the ground nor flying.
Hovering at a low altitude.

But as noon was approaching
many hours
after sunrise
that man went up in the mountain
as if he were innocently climbing.
And the girl very close to him
and there is no one besides them.
And if she tried to hide or screamed
there is no hiding place in the mountains.

I am not here.
I am above wild and dreadful mountain ranges
in the far edges of East.
This is a matter upon which there is no need to dwell.
It is possible with a violent hurl and with hovering
to circle at the speed of the wind.
It is possible to leave and convince myself:
I have not seen a thing.
And the little one, her eyes only popping out of their sockets
her palate as dry as potsherds,
when a hard hand clasped her hair and seized her
without a shred of pity.

(literal translation, N.G.)
Chana Kronfeld

Perhaps it is precisely the ripeness of the lyrical "I," so sensitive it may appear excessive at times, which makes it possible for quite a few Hebrew poets to respond in their work to the human suffering that cries out to us from across our northern border and from behind the Green Line. This individualist sensibility can serve as a substitute for the sense of a national collective that shattered before our very eyes in such a brutal fashion. Gradually an alternative national consensus is emerging. A superior example of the way such a distanced "I" gets confronted with the inmeasurable cruelty brought on by the Lebanon War is offered by Dahlia Ravikovitch's poem "Hovering at a Low Altitude." This poem illustrates with sharp concreteness the terrible pressures exerted upon the lyrical consciousness and the literary patterns suitable for it when they find themselves defenseless amid the horrors of war.

Hanan Hever and Moshe Ron

A LEBANON WAR POEM?

MORE THAN ANY OTHER POEM by Dahlia Ravikovitch, with the possible exception of "You Can't Kill a Baby Twice," "Hovering at a Low Altitude" has come to represent Israeli poetry's return to an ideologically engaged poetry of protest.† It is often singled out—for praise or condemnation, depending on the reader's point of view—as the paradigm example of the antiwar poetry written in the wake of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Yet, as Nissim Calderon has pointed out in A Sense of Place (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1988:12 [Hebrew]), the poem can't be taken to actually refer to wartime events because Ravikovitch first submitted it for publication (in the literary journal Hadarim) before the war started.

The poem's somewhat confusing history of publication is only superficially a matter of dates. Nor is it merely a mark, as several critics have suggested, of some deep-seated ambivalence about writing political poetry.† By the late seventies and early eighties, the political was once again established as a legitimate mode of literary discourse. It engaged, interestingly enough, not just the new generation of writers but even the same Statehood Generation poets who some twenty-five years earlier had struggled to make room—in the collectivist spirit of the times—for a personal, modernist "skeptical and ironic poetics," almost to the point of valorizing any distance from direct "social engagement as a form of cultural heroism."†

By the early eighties, Dahlia Ravikovitch was in a unique position to lend literary and moral legitimacy to the return of the political. She was the youngest of the Statehood Generation poets and therefore more likely to be identified with a literary change of guard. And she was the only female poet of the group to have achieved a central place in the canon and to have become an influential model for younger female and male writers alike. Moreover, having recently become a mother for the first time, she had just attained what was still in Israeli society the culturally sanctioned condition for a woman's ethical right to speak out. Indeed, Hever and Ron's antiwar anthology, where "Hovering" appears roughly one year after the war, ends with a photograph, taken during the invasion of Lebanon, of Dahlia Ravikovitch holding a "Begin, Resign!" plaque and standing next to the gray-haired veteran poet Amir Gilboa at a writers' demonstration in front of the Ministry of Defense in Tel Aviv.

The different frames within which Ravikovitch herself positions this poem suggest that it is a somewhat more complex example of the turn in her work, a turn marked thematically by a triangulation of concerns with war, woman, and child. The female subject in Ravikovitch's later poetry can be described as hyphenating the titles of her 1986 book, True Love (Ahavah amitit) and of her 1992 collection, Mother with Child (Ima 'im yeled). That the true love of these later poems is now the love between mother and child need not be reduced to the accidents of personal history, although the temptation to read women's poetry as mere biography is as great in Israeli critical circles as it is elsewhere.

Politically explicit, yet far from being merely a political statement or a one-dimensional facilitate, "Hovering at a Low Altitude" has come to occupy an emblematic position in contemporary Hebrew poetry. The poet's self-critical account of her own—and her generation's—"disengaged" aestheticism resonates with the urgency of ethical condemnation and extends to the culture of political detachment and escapism. For many Israelis who have grown up on Ravikovitch's work, this poem reads at times as an unflinching self-criticism, even self-parody, of the signature poetic scenario of her early work: a young woman fleeing from an oppressive reality to exotic
regions of the globe and to the far reaches of the poetic imagination (me'ozar hadimmeyn). But this is not all there is to this new turn in Dahlia Ravikovich's poetry. The meshing of the poetic and the political in her later work is also informed by a heightened sense of the genders of grammar and the grammars of gender. It is a mistake, I would argue, to account for it in purely political or biographical terms.

THE DILEMMA OF WITNESSING

Thematically, "Hovering at a Low Altitude" dramatizes the dilemma of witnessing: how can the speaker—as woman, as Jew, as ethical subject—observe in harrowing detail the rape and murder of a young Arab shepherd girl in the mountains of Lebanon and not share in the responsibility for the crime? And beyond that, how can the poet aestheticize such violence through the very process of making it the subject of the poem, without being implicated herself? As always in Dahlia Ravikovich's poetry, it is through resistance to the realistic mode that she makes the reality of the violence unavoidable; it is through insistence on the first-person singular that she implicates the collective; and it is through a series of negations, or a poetics of litotes, that she affirms the innocence of the victim and the guilt of both perpetrator and witness. Common to all these strategies is the subtle but relentless work of Ravikovich's craft, of her extraordinary command of Hebrew as a language of poetry. In a series of radical uses of ambiguity and metaphor, and equally radical reversals of the topos of the nation-as-woman, Ravikovich rejects any possibility to mitigate or ignore the rape-murder, or the larger analogy between sexual and national violence. In the process, the Arab girl is constituted as a subject, even while the speaker—and her implied audience—risk losing their own subject position.

The title, "Hovering at a Low Altitude" (Rehifah begovah namukh), uses media or army Hebrew in the style of the all-too-familiar news bulletins of the late 1970s and early 1980s. These would typically refer to low-flying helicopters in hovering formations, perhaps patrolling over southern Lebanon. Only in the beginning of the fifth stanza does it become unambiguously clear that what does the hovering in this poem is not the military chopper but, quite surreallyistically, the female speaker floating in midair as in a Chagall painting: "I gather my skirt and hover very close to the ground." The title, which appears just once in the body of the poem, at the end of this crucial fifth stanza (lines 41–42 in the English; 40 in the Hebrew) establishes the fantastic "dramatic situation" within which the speaker observes and narrates (in the present tense and the first-person singular) the events of the last day in the life of the little Arab shepherd girl. The speaker cuts short her eyewitness account right at the point where the violent attack begins. The poem reverses the popular conventions of narrative suspense by telling us from the start in no uncertain terms that the little girl will die before the day is out, but also by alternating between the girl, the landscape, and the female speaker, and focusing away from the "plot." In leaving off exactly where a horror movie would be reaching its climax, Ravikovich resists the obscene exploitation of violence against women in the imagery of mass culture. This resistance is crucial if the poem is to collapse the distance between eyewitness and victim, and turn the reading process itself into part of the inescapable witnessing.

Temporally, the poem spans the hours between the early-morning prediction of the girl's death (stanza 1), and the afternoon when "that man" first appears on the mountain, and the girl is unable to hide or find refuge from him (stanza 6 in the Hebrew; 7 in the English). Although a close reading suggests that the girl is raped before she is murdered, both actions occur outside the boundaries of the poem's narrative. And whereas we are told by the speaker in the first stanza (lines 10–11 in the Hebrew; 9–10 in the English) that the girl will die, it is only by engagement with larger issues of social and textual history that we may infer that the girl was raped as well. Ravikovich asks quite a lot of the reader here: first, to reject the biblical metaphor of the nation as promiscuous woman; and second, to extrapolate from this rejection an invalidation also of the tendency to accuse rape victims of having brought it upon themselves (see discussion of stanza 3 below). But no such close interpretive work is required in the poem in order to identify with the girl's experience of extreme physical terror. It is from the girl's internal, embodied perspective that Ravikovich conveys this terror, even to the point of focusing on her palate feeling "dry as a potsherd." The man is reduced to a disembodied metonymy of "the hard hand," which may be all the little girl could see at eye level, as that hand "closes over her hair, grasping her" (lines 60–61 in the Hebrew; 59–60 in the English). The Hebrew makes it clear that it is her body that the hard hand grasps, not just her hair, "without a shred of pity": kesheyad kashah lafatah et se'arah ve'ahazah bah lelo kurtov hemlah; since se'ar (hair) is masculine, the third-person feminine singular pronounal preposition bah
must refer anaphorically back to haketanah ("the little one," line 58 in the Hebrew; "the girl," line 57 in the English).

Structurally, the poem starts with a joint focus on the speaker and the girl (stanza 1), a focus that is then split, in the following three stanzas, between the landscape (stanza 2), the girl (stanza 3), and the speaker, all three characterized primarily by what they are not (a variation on the classical litotes). This insistence on separation and negation is, I think, not accidental. It supports Ravidovich's attempt to destabilize the powerful cultural topos of the land as woman, and with it the sexual or erotic figuration of both. This is related to, though not identical with, Ravidovich's critique of the cognate biblical topos of the nation as woman, an equally powerful foundational metaphor that also has its roots in biblical poetry. Note, for example, that stanza 2 depicts the moments before sunrise as a "not yet sun[fem.]," adayin lo hamah, an unusual enough way to describe dawn, which, when taken literally, means "it / she is not yet a [fem.] hot one." This is a subtle analogy to the argument in stanza 3 that the girl was just that—a girl, and not a seductive woman who brought the attack on herself. Note that Ravidovich could have used here the ordinary word for "sun," which is masculine (she'mesh), but chose instead the feminine (and less common) noun hamah, which is identical to the feminine singular form of the adjective "hot." Furthermore, sunrise on the mountaintop is not presented as a moment for aesthetic contemplation but as an ambivalent site connoting childhood, danger, and disease, metaphorical implications that are evident primarily in the Hebrew. The red ball of the not-yet-sun makes the mountaintop look like the mouth of a volcano; the reddening frost—like the cheeks of a tuberculosis patient. (See the analogous depiction of the girl in stanza 5. The English translation underscores this analogy "her cheeks flushed / frostbite on the back of her hands," lines 32-33 in the Bloch translation, perhaps to avoid what would be a sentimental cliché in English: "Her cheeks are soft as silk," in a more literal translation; lines 31-32 in the Hebrew.)

The fifth stanza, which in the Hebrew is also the longest in the poem, brings the speaker and the girl together in the same poetic space, inscribing in the poem's structure the speaker's growing identification with her perspective, just before "that man" appears. But even as the speaker starts to panic in empathetic terror because she knows what is about to happen, she begins to mouth the clichés of her culturally sanctioned prejudice (against women and against Arabs), in a futile attempt to make herself feel less complicit in the girl's horrible murder. A clear example is line 28 in the Hebrew (29 in the English), whose sustained ambiguity supports—indeed, calls for—two contradictory readings. The first could be paraphrased roughly as "What was it she was thinking about, that girl?" namely, a genuine attempt on the part of the speaker to look at the girl closely and empathically (her silky soft cheeks, her frostbitten hands), to understand her state of mind and to see things from her subject position (this is reinforced by lines 33-34 of 34-35 in the English: "She seems distracted, but no / she's alert"). The second reading construes the question as rhetorical, and is something quite different: "What [the hell] was she thinking, that girl?"—the Hebrew uses the past tense and the dative of reference (lah) after the verb—which together can reflect a dismissive or defensively angry tone. The implied accusation is a familiar one: if something terrible happens, it will only be her own fault. What is she doing out there on the mountain all alone, a young girl like that, and so forth. Some of the speaker's other stock reactions of this sort are also articulated here for the first time. She focuses on the girl being "unwashed," and "wild to look at" (the Hebrew is literally "half-wild," suggesting the racist notion "semi-savage").

By the time the title recurs in the closing line of this crucial stanza, hovering can be understood, in a brilliant Ravidovich double-take, as a typically Israeli version of a detached "cool," a state of mind actually referred to in the slang of the period (particularly in Tel Aviv "with it" speech) as "hovering," lerenah. This disengaged mode of presence marks the attempt to dissociate oneself from the political "situation" (hamutsev), its pressures and moral implications. It invokes a personal and collective defense mechanism that is perceived as necessary in order for life to go on as usual. Ravidovich selects the feminine term for hovering (rehifah) rather than the more common masculine noun from the same root, ri'yaf, because of the military connotations. This allows her to grammatically signal ever so slightly how inevitable is the identification of perspectives between the speaker and the girl, an identification that the poem's structure evinces as well. The grammar sets off a rich orchestration of nouns, adjectives, possessive pronouns, and third-person singular verbs—all with the feminine ending -ah, or endings that sound as if they were; and the pattern runs through the poem like a persistent wall that reaches its apex in the attack scene (line 60): rehifah begovah (title), ro'ah ketanah (6), hegibah (8), yomah, hayalchah (10), belo'a (13), hamah (14), sanukah (15), belo'a (16),
vehaktanah hishkinah (17), gronah (18), einenhah (19), einah (20), yigah (23), mah, tahlmah (24), hakarka (27), mah, hashvah lah hayaldah (28), rehutsah (29), bikhri'ah (30), lehayeiah (31), yadah (32), kashuva (34), lah (35), birfidaah (37), shithah psutah (38), rehifsah begovah (40), hazri'ah (43), alah (44), vehayaldah krovah (46) nistah, is'akah (48), betalelah azah uveherefah (54), vehaktanah eyneiah (58), hikah (59), kashah lafiah, se'arah ve'alazah bah (60), hemlah (61).

Witnessing the violence is articulated from a physically impossible, literally surreal vantage point, hovering above the scene, which, paradoxically, makes it visually inescapable. The reiteration of the title at the end of stanza 5 (6 in the English) thus also describes the poet's self-conscious self-criticism about aestheticizing the horrors from the "comfortable, gentle" distance of poetic imagination. The Hebrew here (line 37; corresponds to line 38 in the English) uses overtly excessive and inappropriate poetic diction, a pasteiche of the luxurious erotic imagery used in the Song of Songs (2:5 and 3:10), and nowhere else in the Bible. But here it appears not in the context of love but to describe the speaker's anxious attempts "to think pleasant thoughts," to add extra padding (literally, "a down lining") to her insulation from the brutality she knows she is about to witness.

Ravikovitch ironically adds the realistic touch of the speaker tucking her skirt tight around her legs (line 26 in the Hebrew; 27 in the English) just as the speaker tries to rationalize her surreal solution to the dilemma of witnessing as collaboration. A woman's automatic defensive gesture of modesty resonates here with psychological nuance. It suggests, for example, that the speaker has been identifying with the Arab girl, who, at this moment, is still unaware of the imminent danger she is in. And that she realizes that as a woman, she, too, could be vulnerable to the same murderous male gaze if it were to be turned upon her. From her panoramic, omniscient point of view, the speaker/narrator cannot but see and feel, nor can we: she is not only all-knowing but also all-telling. As Ravikovitch has her "unconsciously" project the consequences of the male gaze onto her own body, the reader is included in her cycle of knowledge and terror. The irony of her foreknowledge—and ours—is already established at the end of the first stanza, as the speaker asserts: "She won't live out the day / that girl." In this manner, Ravikovitch undermines from the poem's very beginning the sincerity of her persona's—and projected audience's—predictable excuses that they didn't know and didn't see what was happening. By the time the speaker explicitly invokes this familiar line, in the final stanza of the poem, she is clearly understood as infelicitous: "I can get away and say to myself: / I haven't seen a thing."

The poem's recurring mantra and refrain, "I am not here," ani lo kan, marks two contradictory forms of dissociation, both of which, strictly speaking, are impossible, since the semantics of the deictic pronoun "here" (kan) by definition precludes the absence of the speaker. Typical of Ravikovitch's ideological uses of grammar, it is the ambiguous reference of "not here" that makes this impossible assertion meaningful. The speaker is either "not here" in her normal Western Israeli context, but is instead hovering (in the surreal or fantastic sense of flying low) over "craggy eastern hills"; or she is "not here" with respect to the violence on the craggy eastern hills, "hovering" psychologically and emotionally (in the slangy, escapist sense, somewhat similar to the English "floating"), not allowing what she is witnessing to affect her.

These attempts at being not here, wherever the "here" happens to be, are exposed as ethically and poetically insupportable in the last three lines of stanza 5 (stanza 6 in the English), one brief poetic moment before the violence begins to unfold. Ravikovitch ironizes the speaker's attempts to justify her hovering as a "compromise solution" between involvement and dissociation:

I've found a very simple method,
not with my feet on the ground, and not flying—
hovering
at a low altitude.

(Bloch and Bloch translation, 211)

This ironic bit of self-characterization generates some of the poem's most potent social critique of the "Tel Aviv state of mind." Enlisting several arrays of idiomatic meaning and biblical allusion, Ravikovitch depicts and subverts with mock precision the impossible "physics" of her persona's solution. "Hovering at a low altitude" is not a feasible compromise between excessive attachment to political reality and a complete flight from it, not only because of the laws of gravity but also because of biblical law. "Not with my feet on the ground" translates here a Hebrew idiom that is more or less analogous to "having no foothold in" (lo midrakh kaf regel). This idiom appears only once in the Bible (Deut. 25), in a context whose contemporary political implications for an Israeli readership are an unmistakable condemnation of the Occupation. Speaking through Moses, God commands the
Israelites not to attack the lands of “your brethren the children of Esau”: “Meddle not with them [al šigaru bami]; for I will not give you of their land, no, not so much as a foot breadth [ad midrakh kaf regel].” Similar echoes saturate the linguistic texture of the entire poem, much as they did in Ravikovich’s earlier poetry, which is often construed, quite erroneously, as apolitical? I will only be able to focus on a few brief examples, all combining to predict and subvert a stereotypic reaction to the Arab girl and the “hard hand” [yad kashah] that murders her.

The poem never names the victim or the victimizer, nor are they identified ethnically in any explicit ways. The place is also only indirectly referred to, but the history of the poem’s publication and the geography of the region, where only in the north and northeast are there any ice-capped mountains, encourage the reader toward a rather specific identification of the locale as Lebanon (though “eastern mountains” doesn’t quite fit and could actually be typological rather than geographic—mizrahyim in the sense of “of the Levant”; see line 2). Yet, Israeli readers, even those who are upset by the poem’s ideology—and perhaps especially those—would undoubtedly agree that the victim is Arab. Moreover, I would venture to suggest that many Israeli readers would see her attacker, while literally just “that man,” as representing metonymically armed forces of one type or another. Ravikovich depends on the readers’ cultural and political knowledge—indeed, on their stereotypes—to perform this identification. It is important, however, that in refraining from labeling the girl, the man, or, for that matter, the speaker, Ravikovich also resists reducing her poem to simplistic “identity politics.” Similarly, as I suggested above, it is significant that she leaves the narrative of the rape-murder incomplete, “off stage,” and the rape, in fact, only as an inference. Yet it is equally important to note that her use of implication and nuance does not result in any moral equivocation, nor does it make the power relations represented by the figures of the girl and the man any less unequal.

The girl first appears in the poem in the middle of the first stanza. A more literal translation of these lines (6–11 in the Hebrew, 6–10 in the Bloch translation) will underscore the cultural materials the poet invokes only in order to subvert them. Ravikovich undermines our expected responses, and interpolates instead a reader’s identification with the Arab girl.

A little shepherdess with a herd of goats
black ones
emerged there

from an invisible [unseen] tent.
Won’t live out the day this [young] girl
in the pasture.

But even this literal rendition cannot convey to the English reader the force of stereotype reversal in the Hebrew, beyond some added emphasis on the shepherd’s youth and ethnicity. The Hebrew describes her first as “the little shepherdess” and again as “that girl.” The term used here for girl, yaldah, makes it clear that she is indeed quite young, not even an adolescent. Unlike “girl” in English, yaldah cannot be used colloquially to refer to a woman. More saliently, however, “the little shepherdess” invokes a beloved folksong and dance, a classic of the popular Israeli nostalgic return to the music of early statehood. The girl’s youth and the positive cultural echoes of her depiction make it harder for the Israeli reader not to feel some affection for her. Hebrew word order, where the adjective follows the noun, enables the enjambed one-word line (7 in the Hebrew), first deferring and then disclosing through coded language the shepherdess’s ethnicity by emphasizing the black color of her goats. Black goats as metonymies for the Palestinians have been part of the “national narrative” since the early stages of the Yishuv, the pre-statehood Zionist settlement in Palestine. They have become the almost mythic “bad guys” of popular history, blamed for the deforestation of the land and contrasted with the pioneer goats that are prototypically portrayed, of course, as white. This is a technique practiced throughout the poem: Ravikovich has the girl constituted as Arab and as “other” by the cultural stereotypes only after the reader has found it difficult to ignore her humanity—in other words, can no longer emotionally accept her as other. It is therefore the fact that she is just a little girl—rather than an Arab, or a shepherd, or a tent dweller, for that matter—that the female persona emphasizes (“this girl!”) as she exercises her omniscience, telling the reader what will happen before the day is out. As the poem progresses, the shepherd girl is referred to twice as “the little one” [haktanah], a term of endearment used to talk about a young family member (in line 17, and again, just before the murder, in line 58).

SHE DIDN’T ASK FOR IT: THE NATION IS NOT A WOMAN

Ravikovich performs her most nuanced work in the radical use of biblical allusions to undo stock interpretations produced by the culture. This work is most pronounced in giving the lie to the “she asked for it”
reaction to a woman’s rape, while at the same time implicitly establishing the rape as part of the narrative. The crucial point is that in order to upend the modern misogynist reaction of blaming the rape victim, Ravikovich chooses a rather large target: she challenges the validity of the foundational biblical metaphor of the nation-as-woman. In this metaphorical system, which has become a central topos for Hebrew literature throughout the ages, the nation is figured as woman or wife; God, speaking through the (male) prophet-poet, is figured as the husband, and the nation’s ethical and religious conduct determines whether it will be figured as a beloved, faithful, and obedient wife or as a loose woman whose behavior must be punished. The most familiar extension of this metaphor in the prophets maps a woman’s deviations from traditional sexual norms such as modesty and fidelity onto the nation’s deviation from the norms of biblical monotheism. Even as Ravikovich invokes this topos, however, in the first three lines of stanza 3, she introduces a sustained allusion to Isa. 3:16–17, an allusion that inverts not only the language but also the metaphorical basis of the biblical text.8

In Isaiah the sins of Israel are metonymically projected onto “the Daughters of Zion,” who parade their seductive bodies in public. The (literal) rape and murder that the poem describes alerts us to the disturbing rhetoric of sexual violation that recurs in the prophets’ condemnation of Zion. But in Isaiah the figurative women of the nation are accused not of unfaithfulness but of “haughty” (today, we’d say “assertive”) behavior. In the process, the poet draws attention to the harrowing sexual brutality of divine retribution, represented in the less familiar conclusion of this famous verse:

Moreover the Lord saith, because the daughters of Zion are haughty, and walk with stretched-out necks [netzot yaron] and wanton eyes [mesakrat ‘eyynayim], and making a tinkling with their feet. Therefore the Lord will smite with a scab the crown of the head of the Daughters of Zion, and the Lord will discover their secret parts [pot’hen y’areh, which could also mean “their vaginas he will empty or destroy”].

On one level, the point of the allusion is to affirm via negation the innocence of the shepherd girl, leaving no room to accuse the victim: She “doesn’t walk with neck outstretched and wanton glances,” as in Isaiah, nor does she “rent [her] face with painting,” as in Jeremiah (line 19 in the Hebrew; allusion not included in the English translation). On another level, however, given the power and dominance of this cultural topos and its profound effect on the discourse of the nation, a reversal of the biblical metaphor is bound to be rife with implications: the Arab girl is not a metaphor. As an Arab, she is not a metonymy for the Jewish nation. Literally, she is not even a woman, never mind a whore. She is simply a hardworking young shepherd who gets up so early in the morning (the Hebrew uses the emphatic koh, subtly establishing the speaker’s sympathy for her), to take the goats out to the pasture (line 17). All aspects of the stock metaphor are negated one by one.

The last line of stanza 3 brings the rejection of the normative stance of the national/religious subject, helplessly seeking—and receiving—God’s help. In the Psalms verse “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills [el heharim], from whence cometh my help,” the hills (in Hebrew, “mountains”) are a metonymy for God. In a sardonic twist, it is “that man,” not God, who appears on the mountain, and the girl can find no refuge from him “in these mountains.” The supplicant’s question in the psalm is not only negated but reduced here to a rhetorical question, reflecting common Hebrew usage, where ma‘alin yavo ‘etzir (“whence cometh my help”) can be used simply to express helplessness, forgetting that in the Bible the question has a real answer in the next verse: “I will lift mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth” (121:1–2). Grafting the allusion to Psalms onto the allusion to Isaiah (and Jeremiah) allows Ravikovich to go beyond the argument for the girl’s innocence to a critique of both the discourse of the nation and of patriarchy, exposing the tacit links between the two in the textual archive of the culture. The Arab girl does not fit the sexual seduction model, she doesn’t represent other stereotypes of normative “feminine” behavior, and she doesn’t express dependence on a higher authority.

Finally, the juxtaposition of the girl’s rape-murder with the biblical metaphor of sexual punishment itself has far-reaching implications because the allusive process works both ways: If Isaiah is reread through the intertextual lens of the rape-murder of the shepherd girl in this poem, then the implicit analogy between the sexual brutality against women by God and by “that man” becomes inescapable. As usual in Ravikovich and other Statehood Generation poets, the most crucial segment of the intertextual dialogue is absent and must be supplied by the reader, down to the parallels between the details of the female anatomy that both God and “that man” attack.

Read in its intertextual context, “Hovering at a Low Altitude” is not just
a political protest poem where the rape and murder of the Arab girl represent metonymically the larger ethical implications of the Occupation. It is also, even in the strictly ideological realm, a poem that rejects the view of the national subject (as Jew and male) on the metaphorical model of female sexuality, and suggests instead the flesh-and-blood shepherd girl (as Arab and female) as a (literal) national subject, a subject who can no longer be dehumanized by an ethics and aesthetics of "hovering."

Notes


   By the sewage puddles of Sabra and Shatila,
   there you transported human beings
   in impressive quantities
   from the world of the living to the world
   of eternal light.

2. The issue of Hadarim where "Hovering" was first published appeared only after the war and contained many protest poems, among them by Rami Ditzani, a wounded soldier who published his first poems during the war. The editor, Hilil Yeshurun, featured "Hovering at a Low Altitude" prominently as the opening poem of the journal, followed immediately by a selection of Ditzani’s work. See Hadarim 3 (1982/83): 4-6. The poem was also included, with the poet’s consent, in There’s No End to the Battles and Slaughter: Political Poetry of the Lebanon War, ed. Hannan Hever and Moshe Ron (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1983), 90-92 [Hebrew]. But when Ravikovich subsequently published it in her own 1987 and 1995 collections of poems, she placed “Hovering” in the section The Window [nachalon] among poems concerned with a woman’s voice and a woman’s life and death, and not in the section of national-political poems ironically named Issues in Contemporary Judaism [sugiyot beyahadut bat zmanenu]. For the poet’s purported ambivalence about writing political poetry, see, for example, Yochai Oppenheimer’s “Political Competence: On the Lyrical and the Political in the Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovich,” Siman

Kriah 22 (1991) 422-24 [Hebrew]. New information that enhances the argument of this essay came to light as this volume was going to press and could not, therefore, be included here.


4. The fifth stanza is divided into two in the English translation, where this line therefore occurs in the sixth stanza.

5. Simply “that hand” in the English translation. The Hebrew plays off the images of dryness and hardness in re-creating the attack scene with curt palpable detail. But idiomatically, the language replicates the analogy between sexual violence against women and political violence against Palestinians, echoing perhaps the phrase used to describe the government “policy of the hard hand” (mediniyut hayad hakashah) against Palestinian resistance.

6. Note that the Hebrew alternates between the impersonal (efshar lehitalek, lit., “it’s possible to escape”) and the first-person singular used in the rest of the sentence, again suggesting that feigning ignorance is more of a collective escapist response. “Say to myself” translates here the biblical form of the idiom (ledaber ‘al lev atsmi, lit., “talk upon the heart of myself”), meaning both to coax and to comfort. See, for example, Isa. 40:2 in reference to Jerusalem. The ironic implication is that the speaker would have to exercise extraordinary measures of self-persuasion to be able to claim that she hasn’t seen a thing.


8. Within the primary allusion to Isaiah, Ravikovich embeds a secondary allusion to Jer. 4:30, “And when thou art spoiled [= ravaged], what wilt thou do? Though thou clothest thyself with crimson, though thou deckest thee with ornaments of gold, though thou rentest thy face with painting [ki tikre’i ba’apukh eynayikh], in vain shalt thou make thyself fair; thy lovers [lit., those who were after your sexual favors; ogvim] will despise thee, they will seek thy life.”

9. I have proposed in On the Margins of Modernism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 114-40, that bilateral allusions are especially typical of the radical modernism of biblical intertextuality in the poetry of the Statehood Generation.