

# Ha'aretz      הארץ

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## Beyond all delight

By Hagit Grossman

"Hovering at a Low Altitude: The Collected Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch," translated by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld, W.W. Norton & Company, 272 pages, \$29.95

On nights tangled by lack of sleep I would dream of going to Dahlia Ravikovitch's house, knocking on her door, sitting with her, being in her presence, listening to what she has to say and asking to be her assistant. I would try to imagine what exactly the position of poet's assistant would entail and I hoped she would allow me to organize her papers. This is the only assistance a poet needs. At least that is what I thought back then.

During that same period, I would visit the home of a friend, who had the poet's red book, "Kol Hashirim Ad Co" ("All the Poems Till Now," Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), on the shelf in his room. Every week I'd visit him and sit across from him on the sofa, and I'd ask him to read me the poem "The Viking." He always agreed to. He would sit up straight in his armchair and in a low, attentive voice would read about Richard, the mad child: "Even great gardeners / who have hothouses filled with orchids and exotic plants, / who have in their ponds / white swans and black, / will never be able to grow / anything so beautiful as Richard, / my love."

"Hovering at a Low Altitude" is all splendor and beauty, and dark and bright skies grace its cover in warm earthy tones. It contains translations of all of Ravikovitch's books of poetry, including "Maim Rabim" ("Many Waters," Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006), published posthumously.

The poems' translation is so fine because it was done by a poet. Chana Bloch is a professor of English literature and creative writing at Mills College, who lives in Berkeley, California. So far Bloch has published three books of poetry.

She has translated "The Song of Songs" and "The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai" and has also written books of literary criticism.

The book is also deserving of the highest praise thanks to Chana Kronfeld, a professor of comparative literature, Hebrew literature and Yiddish literature at the University of California, Berkeley, who has written an important introduction to Ravikovitch's poems and about how her work was received abroad. The introduction contains a succinct biography that sums up the poet's life. The professors worked on the translation for many years and also consulted Ravikovitch herself, who was an active partner in rendering her poetry into English.

The book's pages are pale yellow, stimulating to both eyes and fingers, and the poems printed on them appear as new and fully formed works that allow the reader to connect to an important and unique poet's unsettling and disturbing world. For those familiar with Ravikovitch's Hebrew works, the English translation creates a distance that allows them to read her poetry in a completely new manner and with an ingenuous eye, which is familiar with the poems' tones and overtones, but not with the order of words and their appearance. Reading her poetry in translation is a voyage into something that is both familiar and unknown. Thus, for example, the reader discovers that the title of the religious poem "Hemda" has been translated as "Delight":

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.

The successful translation of the word "hemda," which strays from the original meaning in that it excludes the connotations of covetousness and desire associated with the Hebrew root, lies in capturing the light in the word that reflects the essence of the poem's main sensation: pure and breathtaking light. In English, albeit not in Hebrew, the word "delight" rhymes with the word "light," capturing the Eros in the harmony and encapsulating the splendor that bursts forth from it and threatens to engulf the mind that is contemplating it. The poem glows and even in translation does not lose any of its splendor.

### **Universal souls**

Kronfeld notes Ravikovitch's connection to the English canon, her wonderful translations of Scottish ballads and poems by Edgar Allan Poe, William Butler Yeats and T.S. Eliot. Though her poetry was mostly influenced by the Hebrew tradition, she also conducted a dialogue with William Shakespeare, William Blake and William Butler Yeats, with Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins, as well as Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath.

An example of her close connection to the spirit of English poetry can also be found in the first stanza of her famous sonnet "Clockwork Doll" ("The Love of an Orange," Machbarot Lesifrut, 1959):

I was a clockwork doll, but then  
that night I turned round and round  
and fell on my face, cracked on the ground and they tried to piece  
me together again.

Emanating from these lines is the voice of Sylvia Plath in the poem "Daddy" ("Ariel," Faber and Faber, 1965):

They pulled me out of the sack,  
And they stuck me together with glue.

It is fascinating to see how the two lines from Plath's "Daddy" could easily follow the first quatrain of "Clockwork Doll." The soul that is depicted in Ravikovitch's poems is universal, as is Plath's, which is why the pain is so similar: The body that is coming apart is like the body that is cracked across the sea, a partner to its fragility and now to its language, too. The soft body is facing violent forces, stronger than it is, and the soul knows that sometimes the weak's only strength lies in the choice of how to die.

One of the most important things in this book are the explanations and footnotes detailing biblical and cultural allusions and connotations that inspired Ravikovitch. In this way a beautiful mosaic emerges that, above all, stresses poetry's intertextual nature. As such, the title of the first poem in "The Love of an Orange" was influenced by a surrealistic comic opera by composer Sergei Prokofiev, "The Love for Three Oranges" (which premiered in Chicago in 1921).

The notes give many references, mostly to the Bible, the Mishnah, the piyyut tradition (of liturgical poetry) and Jewish prayer. It would be worth translating all the notes into Hebrew and adding them to the next Hebrew edition of "All the Poems Until Now."

Although the poems' English translation is very successful, of course there is no substitute for reading Ravikovitch's poetry in the original language. Were I not a Hebrew speaker, I would want to learn her language, if only to be able to read her poems. Thanks to a book like this, I have the opportunity to sit beside her every night, to forget everything that has happened and to remember only her poems, just as she wished.