Font Size: A A A

Back from Oblivion: The Nature of 'Word' in Yona Wallach's Poetry*

Zafrira Lidovsky Cohen
Stern College / Yeshiva University

[1] In Israel, Yona Wallach is both a major poet and a well-known personality. The novelty of her poems captivated the literary world as soon as they began to appear in various periodicals and magazines in the mid 1960s.[1] Her popularity soared after her untimely death in 1985 at age 41 following a protracted illness. Mourning her loss, many critics proceeded to praise her ever surprising, ever amazing, forever spirited poetry. Words like mysticism, religion, prophecy, passion, sex and madness were frequently attached to her name and to her poetry.[2] By the 1990s, particularly after the publication of a collection of Wallach's poetry by Hilit Yeshurun in 1992,[3] and a biography by the journalist Igal Sarna in 1993,[4] literary critics began to realize that it was time to cast aside the mythical approaches to Wallach's poetry and began pressing for a serious and mature reading of her wonderful poems.[5]

[2] While her poetry is generally celebrated for its "combination of elements of rock and roll, Jungian psychology, and street slang in a body of work known for its break-neck pace and insistent sexuality,"[6] many scholars believe that Wallach's main contribution to modern Hebrew poetics pertains to her creative use of the language, particularly her ingenious ability to flex it for her highly subjective expression.[7] This extreme subjectivity produces, in Michael Riffaterre's words, a poetic matrix laden with "textual ungrammaticalities [that] displace, distort, or cancel altogether the sense of reality as we know it."[8] As a result, her poetry is quite elusive but not indecipherable, as many argue.[9] Most certainly, only graphomaniacs take their secrets to their graves, as Meir Wieseltier maintains, and Wallach's work (as well as other cryptic Israeli literary works of the 50's and 60's) can be cracked and interpreted from within her own texts.[10]

[3] Set to investigate Yona Wallach's way of transforming words from conventional linguistic "signs" to "living symbols" that authentically represent the poet's personal discernment of her inner world,[11] this study will focus on two key poems in which she spells out her critical perception of "word." Wallach's own texts evince that she was never a "modernist" writer submitting to a vacillating "kaleidoscopic" world, as Dorit Zilberman maintains,[12] or a "postmodernist" ready to relinquish her authentic pursuit of individuality and selfhood, as Lily Rattok argues.[13] The analysis will show that unlike modernist or postmodernist artists, Wallach never abandoned her attempt to represent a world justified by the convictions and sensibility of an individual.[14] On the contrary, her poetic enterprise is deeply rooted in the ever-romantic belief that words can correspond to one's own feelings *bediyuk nimrats* [precisely].

Precisely[15]

A.

1 Hello, you seem very familiar to me,

2 I lived with you about two years ago

3 I saw you almost every day

4 until your visage was almost erased,

5 when people live together very often

6 visage is destroyed, except when

7 a face is particularly festive

8 and you do not have a face like that.

9 You have not changed. Not even the smell.

10 And we met in the same usual place.

11 At first I did not notice that it was you,

12 I mean I did not notice that

13 something has really changed, in other words

14 as if since then until now we have

15 always been together, until something

16 made me realize my mistake, maybe it is

17 that I called you by your name and it came

18 to me like new, by itself.

19 Like that (particular) self precisely

[4] At first sight, part A of "Precisely" suggests a somewhat familiar discourse uttered by a young man who has just run into an old girlfriend with whom he had lived a couple of years earlier.[16] It is, therefore, quite surprising that he barely recognizes her even though she has not "changed" (line 9). It is even more puzzling that his ensuing identification has nothing to do with her most distinguishing feature, her face, but with a set of configurations: the place is "the same usual place" (line 10), the same environment, the same setting, the same background. In addition, he becomes aware of her also because of her very own "smell" (line 9), not an essential but an associative identification determined by some property of the individual. Evidently, the identification that the protagonist of Wallach's "Precisely" makes is therefore strictly "structuralist."[17]Not a distinctly separate essence with her own individual impression (line 7), the girl's presence is affirmed in relation to other components that surround her or are associated with her. She exists, not intrinsically, as a self, and not positively, by her own quintessence but negatively, by her relation to other items in her environment. "I saw you almost every day," the speaker remarks, "when people live together very often / visage is destroyed" (lines 3-6).

[5] Observing the process of cognition, Wallach seems to realize that as presence becomes a routine, perception becomes automatic. We *recognize* our close friends; we don't really *see* them. We see things that regularly surround us "as if they were enveloped in a sack," argues the Russian Formalist Victor Shklovsky, "we know what an object is by its configuration, but we see only its silhouette; the object, perceived thus in the manner of prose perception, fades and does not leave even a first impression; ultimately even the essence of what it was is forgotten."[18] In Wallach's poem, we should notice, the male protagonist is unable to recognize the girl not because of their separation, but precisely because of their *closeness* and the intensity of their *familiarity*. Furthermore, due to this bond, he first "did not notice / that something has really changed, in other words / as if since then until now / we have always been together..." (lines 12-15). Surely, the girl's impression has receded in the man's mind into oblivion, but not forevermore. The state of affairs in Wallach's poem changes dramatically when he is able to call the girl by her name (line 17).

[6] In everyday use, names, as we know, are meant to identify, to set one person apart from another. In the communicative process, a name may not have any signification. The name *Yona*, for example, would identify the person *Yona Wallach*, but would not signify any relation to a "dove," which is the lexical meaning of *yona*. Yet this is not the case in literature, where aside from their semiotic functioning, names may have additional connotative signification. This is clearly the case in the Bible where the correlation between the name and a person's (or place's) character or destiny is highlighted.[19] Furthermore, in the biblical process of creation, as rendered in the book of Genesis, naming is an integral part of the act of creation and/or distinction: "... and God said, let there be light: and there was light... and God called the light Day..." (Gen. 1:3). In other words, naming, or the Hebrew *qara'*, gives the thing-in-itself its marked identity, that is the Hebrew *yihud*, and like its semantic association with the word *'ehad* [one], signifies the uniqueness of the thing, or being one of a kind.

[7] In Wallach's poem, calling the girl by her name (line 17) clearly results in restoring her individual identity (line 18-19), and the first part of "Precisely" ends with a strong impression of singularity and exclusiveness that is implicated with naming: "it came / to me like new, by itself / like that (particular) self precisely."

B.

1 You were always in me

2 sometimes without sometimes within

3 suddenly you dashed out of me

4 but, you are not startling.

5 You are so familiar

6 that it takes time to see

[8] The narrative of part B of "Precisely" appears to follow part A perfectly. The speaker seems to argue that he actually never forgot the girlfriend he was barely able to recognize in part A, all the while repeating his argument that proximity and familiarity breed effacement. Yet this ever-romantic statement hardly coincides with the callousness of the speaker's initial reaction to the girl's presence and the structural process of cognition that restored her identity in his mind.

[9] Other subtle inconsistencies pervade the narrative structure of part B as well. The most obvious one is the logically irreconcilable assertion of the first two lines: "You were always *in* me / sometimes *without* sometimes *within*..." (emphasis added). Likewise, the act of "dashing out" (*hegiah*), commonly associated with a startling appearance, is hardly reconcilable with "you are not startling" (line 4). Also, it is somehow perplexing to find in the first line the Hebrew compound *bi* [in me], rather than *betokhi* [inside me], which would concur better with the end of the third line, *mitokhi* [out of me], as well as with the speaker's entire argument. In literary criticism, such inconsistencies usually mean that the initial interpretation of the poem needs to be modified and that most likely a referent from without this text needs to be linked with the poem augmenting its matrix with extra significance.[20]

[10] As Riffaterre argues, leaping the hurdle of reality and discovering the significance of a poetic matrix is the real challenge of poetry reading.[21] In the case of Yona Wallach's poem, the task is formidable since the verbal sequences elegantly veil an elaborated network of references. As a result, the inconsistencies of part B remain virtually unresolved until parts C and D of the "Precisely" reveal that the underlying issue of the poem is not human relationships but the use of language and the source of words' meaning.

C.

1 Now I must admit,

2 I spoke to myself.

3 It is not a shame

4 speaking to oneself as long as

5 you call everything by a right

6 name. And I still did not

7 name this unwelcomed

8 feeling and I shall name it as

9 I please and this time *Tsipora*.

[11] While part C hardly follows part B, the speaker of "Precisely" readily concedes that the vivid scene that has been depicted in the first two parts of the poem is in fact an internal discourse and therefore not monitored by rational processes. Never referring to the forgotten intimate affair that seemed to trouble him in the first two parts of the poem, the main argument of part C is that personal inner feelings and emotions can be labeled as one "pleases" through one's peculiar sensibility (line 9). While the word that the speaker chooses to describe the "unwelcomed feeling" within (lines 7-8), the female first name *Tsipora,* or the Hebrew lexeme *tsipora* [bird], is once again enigmatic -- as a bird is usually associated with loftiness, singing, freedom, and spirituality -- it is nevertheless obvious that for Wallach the name is never "arbitrary or casual."[22]For, as her speaker argues defiantly in this part of the poem, a common name/word, in addition to its general and public signification, can be used to impart life's sensation and human's private emotions as they are felt individually from within.[23]

[12] Within Wallach's poetic world *Tsipora*/*tsipora* is never a positive image. In the poem "Oyoy" that opens the collection *Shenei Ganim*, *Tsipora*/*tsipora* is a female stifled by old societal conventions[24]and in Wallach's

first collection *Devarim* (1966)[25] she is the ultimate image of a used, abused, and finally abandoned feminine victim of male sexual indiscretions.[26] "Precisely" is hardly a feminist manifesto, but the underlying "unwelcomed feeling" that the speaker of this poem identifies is quite the same. It is the feeling of growing meaninglessness; of being smothered by conventions that ignore human's feelings and emotions all the while devaluating the individual and one's own designation.

[13] The realization that, for Wallach, a name or a word that is casually used from *without* can bring back to life veiled *inner* meanings that are unique to one's personal experiences finally resolves the riddle that still lingers in part B of "Precisely." Evidently the grammatical subject of the statements "you were always in me / sometimes without sometimes within.../ you are not startling" etc. is not the assumed girl after all but rather the word that by its uttering made "it" reappear "like new, by itself" (part A, line 18).[27]

[14] This interpretation is reinforced when one realizes that the common present day Hebrew word for "word," *mila,* appears in the Bible in poetic texts only[28] often implicating the sense of an external manifestation of the life giving spirit of God that speaks from *within* mankind.[29] In addition, turning to part D it finally becomes clear that in spite of its pseudo-romantic lure, the issue of "Precisely" is language, and language alone.

D.

1 It is impossible to end like this.

2 It is very distressing. There are words

3 that are hard to say. There is a need

4 to openly investigate the system.

5 The word loneliness is hard to say.

6 When desire is satisfied it is dismissed.

7 Unless the magnitude of its claim

8 is ingenious.

9 The feeling contains its destruction.

10 As opposed to the verb, the adjective

11 is the stability of the feeling.

12 Suddenly it can go on.

13 Therefore it is better to use the verb

14 to mark the feeling

15 and that's what was hard for me.

[15] While the opening lines of this part of "Precisely" still suggest the discourse of a human love affair gone wrong, it is nonetheless clear that Wallach now confronts her subject matter directly. The repeating syntactic structures that are noticeably impersonal and passive[30] certainly suggest that unlike the insubordinate and rebellious free spirit encountered in part C, the speaker in part D is extremely burdened by the language he uses. The issue, as Wallach forcefully argues elsewhere, is that grammatical structures that are artificially and arbitrarily imposed on language imperiously imprison its speakers in a world predetermined by that them.[31] In part D of "Precisely" the problem specifically seems to be that the "system" (line 4) makes it impossible to render feelings in real time as they occur (line 9) and, therefore, it may look as though in the end the speaker realizes that he is "unsuccessful in his attempt to be precise, or that he is unable to go beyond signification and grasp the thing as it occurs," as Zilberman argues.[32]

[16] This, of course, could have been a plausible conclusion of this part had it been an independent poem. As we have seen, beginning with part A, the speaker of "Precisely" notices that even though everything close and familiar tends to fade into oblivion, "naming" (part A, line 17) brings the object back "like new, by itself. / Like that (particular) self *precisely*" (lines 18-19; emphasis added). This is argued again in part C when the speaker asserts that "there is no shame in speaking to oneself as long as / you call everything by its *right* / name..." (lines 3-6; emphasis added). In part C the speaker argues further that he is free to name any feeling "as I please" (line

9), in other words, he is not burdened by the "system" that he allegedly is set to "investigate" in part D (line 4), and certainly feels that he can render his feelings as they occur by bringing out a word that defines that feeling *precisely*.

[17] To settle these conflicting arguments within the different parts of "Precisely," we have to recognize, as Wallach does, that language powerfully influences the way people perceive and adjust to the world outside them, but language is not only a key, it can also be a fetter, limiting perception and thought.[33] This, in turn, is what "*was* hard" for the speaker in this poem (line 15; emphasis added). Yet, neither in "Precisely" nor elsewhere can Wallach's voice be associated with typically postmodern passivity and resignation. We cannot conclude, as David Gurevitz does, that "Wallach knows that words have a long history and that their meanings are determined by context only."[34]

[18] Even though she often observes that the common language that presents reality to the individual also predetermines and totally controls one's conception, Wallach always proceeds to uncover yet another language, an internal and eternal one, in which words are not dissolvable signifiers but symbolic pictures that spring from within and allow for poetic creativity and individual expression.[35] Part D of "Precisely" comes to finally settle this separation in a proper manner (line 4). It is, furthermore, an open investigation (line 4) in which the grammatical structures of the language are blamed for hindering the speaker's expressiveness, not the individual words or the language *per se*.[36]What is indeed "hard" (line 15) for this poetic voice is precisely the fact that its expressive tools are already coded, but it remains convinced that what is revealed from without conceals yet another world of hidden wisdom and profound knowledge.

[19] Wallach is not a postmodernist skeptic overwhelmed by a language system that veils the human subject from his or her individuality and Self. She certainly believes that words can escape the constraints of their structural meanings. She believes in the so-called "magical" powers of words (lines 2, 3, and 5),[37]and is convinced, as Walt Whitman was, that all words are spiritual, and as Victor Hugo thought, that "le mot, qu'on le sache, est un etre vivant... le mot est le verbe, et le verbe est Dieu."[38]This is clearly expressed in "*Ten la-Milim*" (Let the Words) -- the poem that opens Wallach's 1985 collection *Tsurot*.[39]

Let the Words

1 Let the words act in you

2 let them be free

3 they will enter you inside

4 making forms upon forms

5 will form in you that experience

6 let the words act in you

7 they will do in you as they please

8 remaking new forms in the thing

9 they will make in your thing

10 exactly the same thing

11 for they are the thing they make

12 you will understand that they revive

13 for you that experience and its meaning like nature

14 because they are nature and not an invention

15 and not a discovery for they are yes nature

16 they will make the thing nature in you

17 like giving sex is life to the word

18 let the words act in you

[20] Unlike the passive numbing patterns in part D of "Precisely," the voice that comes out of "Let the Words," while advocating passivity and submission, is nevertheless effervescent, promising in return the rewarding discovery of novel and gratifying experiences (line 5, 12-13). The speaker of "Let the Words" does not seem to have the difficulties that impede his or her counterpart's impressiveness in part D of "Precisely" (line 15), nor does he or she feel burdened by language's systematic network of signification. This speaker absolutely does not perceive language as alienating individuals from their own personal experiences, nor does he or she imply that language involves "an original murder of the thing,"[40] as the speaker of "Precisely" seems to argue (part D, line 9). All through this poem we hear a glowing voice enthralled with freedom and creativity, yet in Wallach's pervasive use of the Hebrew verb `asah [act, do, form, create (lines 1, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 16, 18)], creativity, for her, inheres in the linguistic sign itself.

[21] The literal meaning, *peshat,* of the Book of Genesis determines that language precedes everything. Prior to man and the universe there was language and by its uttering things came into being from non-being: "...and God *said*, let there be light: and *there was* light" (Gen. 1:3). The ensuing divine creation in this chapter bolsters the interconnection between divine speech and action: "And God *said*, let there be a firmament... and God *made* the firmament..." (vv. 6-7) etc. In what follows, God's speech, *va-yomer Elohim,* and the Hebrew verb `asah, interchangingly with *bara',* stand for all divine foremost creations. The verb `asah relates to the creation of the "firmament" (v. 7); "the two great lights" (v.16), and "the beasts" (v. 24). As many biblical exegetes argue `asah means shaping particular forms or appearances out of the newly created (*bara'*)[41] heaven and earth, implying in turn that heaven and earth are only raw materials from which the formations of further *potential* things are yet to appear, *yesh mi-yesh*[42]

[22] Wallach, it seems, is fully convinced of the concealed potentialities that were introduced to the universe in the process of Creation. For example, in her poem "*Neshimah"* (Breathing),[43] an instructive voice, similar to the one we hear in "Let the Words," while imploring the same passivity and receptiveness, makes the following observation: "let the breathing bring unfamiliar gases / different from the familiar ones.../ let it bring the unfamiliar.../ all kinds of gases that nobody knows.../ *the air is filled with unfamiliar materials*.../ the air is filled with mysterious materials..."[44] In "Breathing," nevertheless, the speaker's objective is limited to awakening the addressee from the numbing affects of all repeating human motions which result in the production of "anesthetic gas" (*gazmardim*), "poisoning gas" (*gaz mar`il*), or "suffocating gas" (*gaz mahniq*). In "Let the Words," the promise extends to a wonderfully creative experience that comes with submission to the essentially impregnating, life giving nature of the words (line 17). In both poems, as it is in much of Wallach's poetry, it requires a poet's willingness to let go of everything one knows and setting the culture free of all man made imposing structures.[45]

[23] This is what Wallach not only says, it is what she does. While the imagery of a care free gratifying sexual encounter and impregnation dominates the opening of "Let the Words," and the reader's eyes scan through the lines, it may go unnoticed that Wallach's contextual usage of the Hebrew *milim* [words] is utterly non grammatical. In spite of its structural suffix -*im*, usually associated with masculine nouns, *milim*, as mentioned above, is grammatically a feminine noun and, therefore, the second line of the poem should have said: *ten lahen* [let them-female] and not *lahem* [let them-male], as written. Beginning in line three, however, Wallach's "words" not only return to their normative feminine grammatical gender, but their femininity is actually highlighted as she employs the archaic future structure *tikanasna* and *tavo'na* [will enter (line 3)], *ta'asena* [will do (lines 7, 9, 11, 16)], *tehayena* [will revive (line 12)] that formally distinguishes the feminine from the masculine, rather than the more modern, and more prevalent, future form *yikansu,yavo'u, ya'asu, yehayu* used for both genders.

[24] Since Wallach, as we have seen above, believes in one's freedom to name feelings "as he pleases" ("Precisely," Part C, line 9), it is plausible to posit that at the time of uttering the words *ten la-milim* [let the words] neither the Hebrew grammar nor the conventional definition of 'word' were on Wallach's mind. In fact, within the metaphoric infrastructure of this poem, words are equated at first with human seeds (*zera`im* -- which is grammatically masculine in Hebrew) and as such considered a primary material from which new things are formed. The highlighting of the feminine gender of words thereafter underscores their *inherently* procreative power, for all living things come into being from the female, as written: "Look unto Abraham your father, and to Sarah that bore you (*teholelkhem*)" (Isa. 51:2). This very same verb evidently appears in "Let the Words" precisely where the promise is the inception of a singular, distinctive experience, *yeholelu bekha 'otah havayyah* (line 5), that is essentially one's own (lines 12-13).

[25] The idea of returning words to their embryonic, amorphous state in order to have them recombined in pursuit of cosmic mysteries is a well-known Kabbalistic practice. The ability to combine (*le-tsaref*) and make forms (*la-tsur*), tells us *Sefer Yetsira,* is a unique gift that allows one to emulate the act of creation (*bri'ah*).[46] In Wallach's "Let the Words," the wondrous recombination and reformation (lines 4 and 8) appear as a self-acting response in the depths of the poet's bosom (line 7), but the result is an equally phenomenal revival of the initial nature and quality of the thing as named (line 5). Echoing a well known Kabbalistic conviction that "words are nature not an invention / and not a discovery" (lines 14-15), and that they "are the thing they make" (line 11),[47] Wallach clearly agrees with her eminent predecessor H.N. Bialik that "language contains no word that

the hour of its birth was not one of powerful and awesome *self-revealment*, a lofty victory of the spirit" (emphasis added).[48] She certainly agrees with one of Bialik's cardinal assertions in his 1915 essay "Revealment and Concealment in Language" that individual language precedes public language. Against the unifying nature of the common language, its abstract essence, triteness and triviality, she believes that prior to becoming public property devoid of essential meaning, all words come to life as a *personal* expression of a compound soul impressing its sensual experiencing of the world (lines 5, 9-10).[49]

[26] As Ruth Kartun-Blum observes, "Let the Words" is a dazzling example of a meta-poetic poem that proclaims and demonstrates the creative force in language itself.[50]

[27] While the preliminary, "heuristic reading"[51] of "Let the Words" may insinuate the quintessential postmodernist proposition that "language creates reality,"[52]a second, "hermeneutic reading" that recognizes the wealth of allusive references in the poem's matrix reveals a rather *counter*-postmodern, essentially Romantic slant in Wallach's self-reflexive poem. Much as the poet submits to the words, letting them pass through her or perhaps, as Kartun-Blum suggests, through the poem itself -- it is nevertheless crystal-clear that Wallach feels neither burdened nor trapped in an all imposing "symbolic order" (Jacques Lacan's term) that, according to postmodernist thought, predetermines one's perception, desire, imagination, thought, experience, and reality.[53]Against the postmodernist argument that we are spoken for more than we speak or that we are like little robots echoing language and recycling petrified meanings,[54] for Wallach common words categorically have an innate propensity to reveal that which has vanished into oblivion by the ever consuming process of cognition.

[28] The belief in words' power to break though the metaphysical barrier where an unfettered self may discover nature and authenticity runs through all Wallach's poetry. Sometimes appearing as a raging Id in pursuit of the "light of the soul.../ the infinite.../ the secrets of creation",[55]Wallach unceasingly attacks all cultural boundaries that, as she believes, guilefully conceal a dazzling spiritual reality locked inside of human consciousness. Arguing that "real life is hidden,"[56]her poetic expression shatters prosaic language that Bialik describes as the "hard sheet of ice" that stabilizes human's existence. Traveling through "the sealed walls...on route to some feeling / that will recover the possibility / that will penetrate the possible..." her "teary and weary eye," as his, is looking for a "lucid passage" that will take her beyond the "daily practices" to where the vision is different than what "culture reveals" and from where she can write "about her language that is seen in her very own mirror."[57]

[29] The influence of Bialik's "Revealment and Concealment in Language" on Wallach's perception of words and consequently on her poetic art cannot be underestimated. Revisiting the enduring philosophical question pertaining to the nature of language and words' meanings,[58]Wallach's conception in "Precisely" and "Let the Words" is an admixture of Kabbalistic lore and Renaissance Neoplatonism. It is the same supposition that Bialik argues forcefully in the first part of "Revealment and Concealment," namely, that language is genuinely natural and words directly reveal the essences of things. What Bialik does best in prose, Wallach renders in poetry. After cracking the "sheet of ice" that obscures singularity and distinctiveness as part A of "Precisely" shows, Wallach, like Bialik, realizes in part B that every individual word in-and-of-itself and prior to turning into a conventionally spoken casual sign is a living spirit within mankind. Observed in isolation and from within, as part C reveals, the meaning of the word is no longer arbitrary and casual as it appears from without. Every single word has a natural material essence that corresponds precisely to a dormant yet living sensation as it occurs. Enveloped in the abstractions and generalizations of conventional language that Bialik articulates in his essay, Part D of "Precisely" contemplates the structural obstacles of the "external language" that impede words' creativity. Finally, in "Let the Words," Wallach asserts that the "sheet of ice" melts away with desire allowing, in Bialik's words, "an internal language, that of solitude and the soul" to come forth.

[30] Prescribing to Bialik's romantic portrayal of the poetic quest, Wallach is always in pursuit of the personal property of things. Always fleeing that which is fixed and inert in language, she uses words as unique "working tools" to penetrate her consciousness,[59]in search of the "living I inside"[60]and its cognition of things as perceived in the fleeing, never to be repeated moment.[61] Under her hands, in Bialik's words, "long established words are constantly being pulled of their setting... new combinations and associations are introduced... the profane turns sacred and the sacred profane." Only the sense of ontological nothingness that turns to dominate Bialik's essay beginning with part II of his "Revealment and Concealment" never befalls Wallach's poetic scheme. In fact, Wallach leaves Bialik's essay just at the onset of it's ultimate conclusion: "It is clear that language with all it's associations does not introduce us at all into the inner area, the essence of things, but that, on the contrary, language itself stands as a barrier before them..."

[31] Indeed, Wallach's relentless pursuit of the primordial sense of the word, Bialik's *hargashat bereshit*, and her faith in words' power to reveal natural wonders that laws of nature conceal sets her apart from her eminent predecessor and the nihilistic attitudes that resonate thorough his "Revealment and Concealment."[62] Never subscribing to the "unbearable void" (*tehom*) or "perception of ontological nothingness" that language conceals,[63]Wallach argues passionately in "Let the Words" that for her words are always pregnant with meaning and their ability to secure indefinitely authentic experiences and self-knowledge is never in doubt.

[32] Wallach's attachment to Bialik's romantic perception of words as containers of vital essence, *milim bi-gevuratan,* and her detachment from his modernist, nihilistic attitudes ("language conceals...nothingness") has a far-reaching, and rather paradoxical, significance. While Hebrew poets since Bialik have been deliberately indifferent to their traditional roots, progressively viewing the past as a hurdle to the development of contemporary Hebrew poetics,[64]Wallach's "extreme innovativeness" characterized as a "violently huge tear in the sequence of Hebrew poetry"[65]shows a marked affinity for the "remarkably traditionalist" overtones the architect of Modern Hebrew poetry, H.N. Bialik, is known for.[66] Her perception of language is all but optimistic, teleological, and redemptive, and is firmly grounded in a supernaturalist, essentially Romantic conviction that a spontaneously uttered, unadulterated word manages to disengage a sentiment long imprisoned in the depth of the human soul.[67]

<center>* * *</center>

Notes

[1] Wallach was an active participant in the circle of "Tel-Aviv poets" which emerged in the 1960s and was a frequent contributor to Israeli literary periodicals. In the early 1980s, she wrote for and appeared with an Israeli popular rock group and a record was released.

[2] E.g., Ilan Shinefeld, "Ke'ev Naki u-Mevudad" [A Clean and Isolated Pain], *Al Hamishmar*, 2 October 1985; Heda Boshes, "Mavet ba-Mishpahah" [Death in the Family], *Haarets*, 8 October 1985; Menahem Ben, "Yona Volakh: Nes Gadol Haya Poh" [Yona Wallach: A Big Miracle was Here], *Yediot*, 11 November 1985; Gavriel Moked, "Totaliyut shel ha-Havayot ve-ha-Safah" [The Totality of the Experiences and the Language], *Yediot,* 11 November 1985; Lily Rattok, "Malkhut Halom Ani Rotsah Livnot" [I Want to Build a Kingdom of Dream], *Hadoar,* 29 November 1985; Yoram Bar, comp., "Shenat ha-Yona" [Yona's Year], *Kol ha-`ir Yerusahlaim,* 26 September 1986.

[3] Yona Wallach, *Tat Hakarah Niftahat Kemo Menifah* [The Unconscious Unfolds Like a Fan] (Tel-Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-meuhad, 1992).

[4] Igal Sarna, *Yona Wallach: A Biography* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993).

[5] E.g., Ariel Hirschfeld, "Leolam Lo Eshma et Kolo ha-Matok shel Elohim" [I'll Never Hear God's Sweet Voice], review of *Tat Hakarah Niftahat Kemo Menifah*, by Yona Wallach*, Haarets,* 25 September 1992; Raffi Weichert, "Ein Shelitah Al ha-Dam" [No Control Over the Blood], review of *Tat Hakarah Niftahat Kemo Menifah*, by Yona Wallach, *Moznaim* 61 (1992), 20-22.

[6] Gershon Shaked, ed., "Yona Wallach," *Hebrew Writers: A General Dictionary* (Israel: The Institute for the Translation of Hebrew Literature, 1993).

[7] E.g., Gavriel Moked, "Shirah ke-Hidush Mashmaut" [Poetry as a Way of Renovating Meaning], *Proza* 10 (October 1976): 30 & 40; Rpt. in "Akhshav 61 (1990): 95-99; Dan Miron, Hadashot, 4 November 1985; Aaron Shabtai, "Al Yona Volakh [About Yona Wallach], *Hadarim* 5 (1985/6): 15-22; Weichert, 1992; Hirschfeld, 1992; Lilakh Lahman, "Kidmut ha-Siba Demut ha-Panim -- Yona Volakh" [As the Image of the Reason the Image of the Face Yona Wallach], *Hadarim* 10 (1993): 143-154.

[8] Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1978), 2.

[9] E.g., Dorit Zilberman, *ha-Ivrit Hi Ishah Mitrahetset* [Essays on Yona Wallach's Poetry] (Tel-Aviv: Yaron Golan, 1993), 5; Lily Rattok, *Angel of Fire: The Poetry of Yona Wallach* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-meuhad, 1997), 9.

[10] Meir Weiseltier, "Piyah Nitmale Dam ve-Hi Metah" [Her Mouth Filled with Blood and She Died], *Haarets*, 9 July 1993. Weisltier, a renowned poet himself, was very close to Wallach. They met in the early sixties in Tel-Aviv's literary circles and were active in shaping the future of Hebrew poetics.

[11] Following C.G. Jung's definition, a linguistic "sign" only denotes the subject to which it is attached. A "symbol," on the other hand, is "a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown or hidden from us." C.G. Jung, *Man and His Symbol* (New York: Laurel, 1964), 3.

[12] Zilberman, *ha-Ivrit Hi Ishah*, 6.

13 Rattok, *Angel of Fire*, 116.

14 For a comprehensive review of modern literary history and the characteristics of modernism and postmodernism, see Douwe W. Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1984).

15 "Precisely" first appeared in Yona Wallach, *Shnei Ganim* (Daga, 1969). *Shenei Ganim* was later collected in Yona Wallach, *Shirah* (Tel-Aviv: Mifalim Universityim, 1976), 88-91, and reprinted in *Tat Hakarah,* 74-76. All English translations of Wallach's poems are my own Z.L.C.

16 Note that the Hebrew grammar clearly identifies a female addressee *at* (female "you").

17 "Structuralist" theory contends that things do not assume their meaning due to any essential characteristics. Instead every individual thing is defined only in relation to other components that either surround it or are associated with it. See Terence Hawkes, *Structuralism and Semiotics* (Berkeky: University of California Press, 1977), 17-18.

18 Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," in *Russian Formalist Criticism,* trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 11-12.

19 E.g. Gen. 3:20 "And the man called his wife's name Havva, because she was the mother of all living [*hay*]; Gen. 11:9 "Therefore is the name of it called Bavel; because the Lord did there confound [*balal*] the language of all the earth"; Gen. 29:34-35 "And she conceived again and bore a son and said, Now this time will my husband be joined [*yilaveh*] to me because I have born him three sons; therefore was his name called Levi. And she conceived again and bore a son and said, Now will I praise [*'odeh*] the Lord: therefore she called him Yehuda..." See also Hillel Barzel, *New Interpretations of Literary Texts: From Theory to Method* (Hebrew) (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1990), 29-30.

20 Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, 2.

21 Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry,* 7.

22 Zilberman, *ha-Ivrit Hi Ishah*, 8 (my translation).

23 Note that the root of the Hebrew verb *mithashek* (*h.sh.k*) is etymologically linked to the semantic field of close attachment and in modern Hebrew commonly signifies whimsical desire.

24 Wallach, *Shirah*, 75.

25 Wallach's first collection *Devarim* (1966) appears *Shirah* (7-29).

26 "See How The Bird [t*sipora*] Is Doing," *Shirah*, 26.

27 Note that the Hebrew *mila* (word) is a feminine noun.

28 The common biblical word for 'word' is *davar.*

29 E.g., 2 Sam. 23:1-2 *ruah Elohim diber bi / umilato al leshon* , " The spirit of the Lord spoke in me / and his word is on my tongue."

30 "It is impossible" (line 1); "it is very distressing" (line 2); "there is a need" (line 3); "the word loneliness is hard to say" (line 5); etc.

31 On Wallach's struggle with the "system," see "Ivrit″ (Hebrew) in Yona Wallach, *Tsurot* (Tel-Aviv, ha-Kibuts ha-meuhad, 1985), 17-16. For my detailed interpretation of "Ivrit," see Zafrira Lidovsky Cohen, *Loosen the Fetters of Thy Tongue Woman: A Study in the Poetics of Yona Wallach* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilm, 1997), 209-219. See also Arnold Band, "Regelson, Pagis, Wallach: Three Poems on Hebrew Language," in *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots,* eds. Z. Zevit, S. Gitin, and M. Sokoloff, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 505-522.

32 Zilberman, *ha-Ivrit Hi Ishah*, 8 (my translation).

33 Edward Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1963), 127.

34 David Gurevitz, *Postmodernism: Culture and Literature at the End of the 20th Century* (Hebrew)

(Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1997), 155 (my translation).

35 Cf. H.N. Bialik's contention in his 1915 essay "Revealmenat and Concealmeant in Language": "... the human language has become two languages... one an internal language, that of the solitude and the soul... - the domain of poetry; the other the external language, that of abstraction and generalization... - the domain of logic." H.N. Bialik, "Giluy ve-Kisuy ba-Lashon" [Revealment and Concealment in Language], in *Kol Kitvey H.N. Bialik* [*The Collected Work of H.N. Bialik*] (Tel-Aviv: Devir, 1953), 191-193. The English translation by Jacob Sloan appears in Robert Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature* (Philadelphia: Berman House, 1975), 130-137. The influence of Bialik's essay on Wallach's perception of language is discussed later in this article.

36 See also Wallach's end of "Ivrit" (n. 31) where she writes: " I love her [language] now without language covering (*kesut lashon*)."

37 The magical approach to meaning maintains that there is an intrinsic association between the word and its referent and that words have the power to affect reality. See C.K. Ogdan and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (San Diego: A harvest/HBJ book, 1989), 24-47.

38 Cited in C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 24.

39 Wallach, *Tsurot*, 5. Reprinted in *Tat Hakara,* 171.

40 Jacques Lacan, *Le Seminaire III* (Paris: Seuil, 1981), 196. For a comprehensive analysis of Lacan's statement, see Eve Tavor Bannet, *Structuralism and the Logic of Dissent* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 19.

41*bara'* signifies creation *ex nihilo*.

42 See Sara Klein-Beraslavy, *Maimonide's Interpretation of the Story of Creation* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: ha-Hevrah le-Heker ha-Mikra' be-Yisrael, 1978), 96-99.

43 Yona Wallach, *Mofa`* (Tel-Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-mehuhad, 1985), 156-7 (my translation).

44 Emphases added.

45 It is interesting to note that while this claim certainly coincides with Jacques Derrida's assertion that poetry involves the shattering of cultural dogmas, Wallach certainly departs from his postmodernist conviction that a poem is "always other, produced by an other which is never present in the poem" (see below). Jacques Derrida, "Che cos'e la poesia," *Poesia* (Milan), 1.11, (1988): 5-10 (in French and Italian). For a Hebrew translation, see "Mahi Shirah," trans. Michal Guvrin, *Hadarim* 9 (1989): 49-50. For English and French, see *A Derrida Reader*, edited, with an introduction and notes, by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia UP, 1991): 221-237.

46 Gershom Scholem, *Elements of the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1976), 391-2. For a English translation, see *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism,* by Gershom Scholem, translated (from the original German) by Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, [1965] 1996).

47 See Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 15-16.

48 H.N. Bialik, "Revealment and Concealment" (n. 35).

49 In one of the most exalting paragraphs of his essay, Bialik contends that words come to the world as single syllables to which he refers as "the seed of the future word [that] embraces a complete volume of primordial emotions, powerful in their novelty and their vigorous in their savagery" and that at that moment "[man] was ... an intuitive creator of an expression, a very faithful expression, for himself, at any rate pointing to a deep and complicated inner disturbance..." Bialik, "Revealment and Concealment" (n. 35).

50 Ruth Kartun-Blum Ruth, *Self-reflexive Hebrew Poetry* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: ha-Kibuts ha-meuhad, 1989), 19-20.

51 On the two levels or stages of reading a poetic text, see M. Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, 5-6.

52 Rattok, *Angel of Fire*, 112.

53 Jacques Lacan, *Le Seminaire II* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 43. See also Tavor Bannet, *Structuralism*, 17-23.

54 Lacan, *Le Seminaire II,* 353.

55 Wallach, *Tsurot*, 31.

56 Wallach, *Shirah*, 156.

57 All quotes in this sentence are from Wallach poem "Derekh ha-Qirot ha-'Atumim" (Through the Sealed Walls) that seals her collection *Tsurot*, 182-190 (my translation).

58 On the history of the study of language in modern times, see Hans Aarsleff, *From Locke to Saussure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

59 See the epigraph of this article.

60 Wallach, *Tat Hakarah*, 300.

61 See Wallach's poem "Lihyot bi-Mehirut ha-Biyografyah" (To Live at the Speed of the Biography), in *Tsurot*, 104-106. For an interpretation of this poem, see Zafrira Lidovsky Cohen, *Loosen the Fetters*, 271-281.

62 Nathan Rotenstreich, for example, concludes that the key element of the essay [Revealment and Concealment] is skepticism [*safqanut*] toward language." See Nathan Rotenstreich, "Revealment and Concealment," in *Bialik: Critical Essays on His Works, an Anthology* (Hebrew), Gershon Shaked, comp. (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1974), 323-333. Cf. Robert Alter's assertion that "'Revealment and Concealment' gives us Bialik the Modernist." Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, 127-8.

63 Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, 127-8.

64 On the Hebrew literary establishment's dialectical attitude toward its past, see Zohar Shavit, *The Literary Life in Eretz Israel 1910-1933* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Porter Institute, 1982), 86-88. See also Nathan Zach's rejection of the poetic standards established by his predecessors in "Le-Aqliman ha-Signoni Shel Shenot ha-Hamishim ve-ha-Shishim be-Sifrutenu" (The Stylistic Climate of the Fifties and Sixties in Our Poetry), *Haarets,* 29 July 1966.

65 Rattok, *Angel of Fire*, 11 (my translation).

66 As Alter notes, up to "Revealment and Concealment, " for a writer who was immersed in the turbulence of twentieth century experience, Bialik was remarkably a traditionalist in his poetry, fiction, and ideology of culture. Alter, *Modern Hebrew Literature,* 127.

67 See M.H. Abrams, *The Miror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 90-91.