The Personal and the Political in Dahlia Ravikovitch’s *Mother with Child*

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Abstract

This article examines Dahlia Ravikovitch's book *Mother with Child* (1992), which comprises twenty-five poems largely divided into political and personal ones, whose common ground is motherhood. The personal and the political, the public and the domestic are intertwined, both thematically and poetically. They are reflected in the book in such aspects as structure, imagery, vocabulary, rhetorical situation, and point-of-view. The article further maintains that in *Mother with Child*, while the political protest against Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is plainly addressed and apparent, the domestic issues contain an implicit, subdued dimension of gender politics. Additionally, the personal poems in the book suggest that it is easier for Ravikovitch to identify with the victim than to identify herself as one.

This article focuses on Israeli poet Dahlia Ravikovitch's book *Mother with Child* (1992). Ravikovitch (1936-2005), author of eight volumes of poetry and recipient of several awards, among them the Bialik Prize for poetry in 1987 and Israel Prize for literature in 1998, is one of Israel's leading poets and most likely its foremost woman poet. Her poetry has been translated into twenty languages. Ravikovitch's poems are highly charged with personal experiences and express typical female topics. During the 1980s, she embarked upon writing political poetry, predominantly campaigning for Palestinian rights and advocating the ideas of the Israeli peace movement.

*Mother with Child* comprises twenty-five poems largely divided into political and personal ones, whose unifying element is coined by the book's title: motherhood. This article proposes that the personal and the political, the public and the domestic are intertwined, both thematically and poetically. The political is expressed by means of the private and a network of similarities interconnects them. This is reflected in the book in such aspects as structure, imagery, vocabulary, rhetorical situation, and point-of-view.

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1 Ravikovitch also published short stories, children's books, and Hebrew translations of English poetry and prose.
The article further maintains that in *Mother with Child*, while the political protest against Israeli policy towards the Palestinians is plainly addressed and clear, the domestic issues contain an implicit, subdued dimension of gender politics. The personal poems in the book suggest that it is easier for Ravikovitch to identify with the victim than to call herself one, since the penetration of power-systems into the construction of womanhood and selfhood prevents its acknowledgment.

**Feminine Identity and Political Identification**

Dahlia Ravikovitch’s seventh book of poems, *Mother with Child*, was published in 1992. It reflects a period of personal and national crisis—the loss of custody of her son in the poet’s personal life, and the in the life of the state— the Israeli-Palestinian conflict of the first Intifada. After the book’s publication, the critics generally maintained that the book stood on two separate thematic legs, and accordingly, divided the poems into two different thematic groups, notwithstanding the fact that the order of the poems does not exhibit any distinction between them. Later consideration, drawn by research into Dahlia Ravikovitch’s writings in the past decade, has shown that the position that the poet expressed on public issues always emanated from the personal, and that distinct political poems are also motivated by her personal perspective.

*Mother With Child* is then a book, in which identity and politics are bound together in more than one way; the feminine and maternal identites connect the personal and public poetry so that the public-ideological politics is also connected to the personal, while the personal poetry also contains elements of protest and power struggles in

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2 Most of the translations of Ravikovitch’s poems in this article are taken from Bloch and Kronfeld *Hovering at a Low* (2009), and the page numbers refer to this volume.


regard to gender. However, whereas the political protest is clearly articulated in the book’s poems, the gender protest expressed in the personal and family poems is more muted. The political protest is openly expressed and its moral force is unequivocal; the gender protest is indirect and implicit. The political injustices may be expressed in the discourse, but on the personal level, the poet finds it difficult to attribute her personal difficulty to an oppressive system, although this is clear at every step. Despite the fact that Ravikovitch felt the tyranny of the existing gender order, the oppression of society that suppresses subjectivity to a symbolic structure, it was the matrix of intelligibility\(^5\) that prevents its expression (This is well explained by the concept of the *Différend*\(^6\) as will be discussed later).

The title of the book presents a distinct feminine trait – motherhood. The motherhood presented is the subject’s source of strength, a condition for the female subject’s self-fulfillment. Motherhood also means a profound commitment to one’s offspring and utter responsibility for it. The motherhood in the book is a mind-altering connection, the existential point of departure for the life stories presented in the poems – the private and general, the personal and national. Ravikovitch’s approach to the national in the poems of the book lacks an historical perspective, but shows that by virtue of the responsibility embodied in the maternal identity, a moral responsibility is also created on the social-political level. Motherhood also means a complete duty towards others, and Ravikovitch expands this duty beyond the individual that is connected by blood. Namely, Ravikovitch shares the ideological framing of motherhood as a universal essence that crosses nationalities and ethnic identities. The elementary bond of mothers and children gives rise to an intuitive identification with the other, unconnected by ties of nationality, religion or language. In the political poems, the

\(^5\) As explained by Judith Butler, this matrix makes gender an effect of discursive and regulatory practices that renders subjectivity to what always-already-is and controls societal gender disorder (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22-34).

\(^6\) Lyotard, *Différend*. 
discussion of the political and public reality focuses primarily on her motherhood. It enables the speaker to enter the public discourse – which is predominantly male – safely, because the gender order includes a perception according to which the world of women is limited to motherhood and the private sphere. The source of this perception lies in the thought pattern that divides the world into the private and public spheres, which are consistent with the distinction between the sexes and deeply rooted in Israeli and Western culture as a whole.⁷

Concerning the private sphere in the lyrical songs of *Mother with Child*, motherhood is capable neither to represent an all-embracing revitalizing force nor to formulate a direct political protest. Although the speaker is a mother whose son comprises her entire world, motherhood does not enable the reinforcement of emotional strength—not only because the loss of custody of her son undermines the realization of her motherhood in practical terms.⁸ Most importantly, the inability to comfortably find one’s place within the gender molds brings the experience of the speaker-subject to a state of constant collapse. The personal poems contain a void, which points to the margin between compliance with gender identity and opposition to or challenging it. That vacuum, which stems from the inability to comfortably find one’s place within gender formation, brings the experience of the speaker-subject to a state of constant collapse.

**Maternal Practices, Public Domain**

The unity of the *Mother With Child* is supported by the poetics, which weaves a network of linguistic interconnections and repeated patterns in the poems themselves, thus foregrounding the two subjects of the book as integral parts of a single whole.

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⁸ The book also discusses the personal tragedy of losing custody of her son and many of the poems depict a mother without a child. Ravikovitch married at eighteen but divorced three months later. All of her subsequent marriages ended in divorce. Her only child was born in 1978; she lost custody of him thirteen years later, after divorcing his father.
This unity is also evident in the opening and closing poems, each of which embodies the thematic consolidation that explicitly and openly connects the private and the public.\(^9\) In the opening poem, “Atypical Autumn,” the personal is connected with the social, and the individual with the general. It depicts tranquility – *shalva* – a word that appears four times in the poem: \(^{10}\) “bucolic tranquility,” “the tranquility within,” “*Savta* sleeps in peace and quiet (tranquility),” “Just peace and quiet (tranquility).”

The tranquility of life is given a detailed presentation in the poem; it consists of landscapes and accessories, which the social-patriarchal structure perceives as a woman’s desire, if not as natural to her: “Potted plants bloom wherever the eye comes to rest,” “Someone is digging with a simple farming implement,” “the whoosh of a hose dragged along.” The people are productive and don’t waste their time:

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Everybody here is raking and cultivating
the fauna and flora.
The women also knit quite a bit,
manual labor stands at the very top.\(^{11}\)
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The point of departure is the dream of a stable, maternal, protected and protecting home, a timeless dream of a beneficial space that is also the expanse of the human mind.\(^{12}\) The home exemplifies a body of images that gives those who reside in it proof, or at least an illusion of stability. The home’s tranquility seems to shift to its inhabitants, thus embodies a human quality.\(^{13}\)

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\(^9\) Such a position is a natural outcome of a particular chronotope, as explained by Yael Feldman: "For contemporary European and American women, issues of selfhood and gender definition are inextricably bound up with feminism [...] but in Israel such an agenda would necessarily collide with the larger political issues that are always at the center of attention” (Feldman, *Feminism under siege*, 318).

\(^{10}\) In the English translation 'tranquility' is substituted twice for the word 'quiet'.

\(^{11}\) Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, 203.

\(^{12}\) Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 12.
However, this tranquility is an illusion, continually undermined by the personal-individual and social-public dimensions. In the personal dimension of the speaker’s spirit, tranquility appears after she awakens “following a night-long vigil” that does not console and does not rescue her from the distress; on the contrary, she is imbued with a sense of being closed in, “how I was trapped here,” the speaker explicitly complains. The social dimension is also accompanied by imagined tranquility because it conceals reverse tendencies that seethe beneath the surface, and only ideology can conceal them:

This diligence and urge to be of use
beget an illusion of the idyllic.
If not for their terror of Labor Movement values,
Every man would swallow his friend alive.14

The speaker’s viewpoint is directed at both the public and personal, and both are the product of a social structure that enforces a particular way of thinking from which the action is derived. The speaker belongs to a society whose structure situates the woman in the private sphere, in a domestic environment, expecting her to be satisfied with that. The power and significance of the maternal position is evident in the willingness to overcome the authentic thoughts of non-existence and to beware and warn the son, who fears lest his grandmother has fallen into an eternal sleep:

And yet, without sowing fear,
I tell myself
sleep everlasting is the best sleep of all.15

However, this contemplation persists and nothing can overcome it, not even the adaptation of external behavior that results from the responsibility deriving from her identity as a mother.

14 Ravikovitch, Hovering at a Low Altitude, 203.
15 Ibid., 203-204.
The first poem in the book has a programmatic status, determining that the connection between the personal and public is a dominant feature. The concluding poem, “The Captors Require a Song,” also marks a place where the personal and private clearly and explicitly meld. The poem is introduced by a caption that cites directly from Lea Goldberg’s “Songs of Zion.” The intertextuality embedded in the poem is twofold: the Bible (Psalm 137) and Goldberg’s poem. In the biblical psalm, the yearning for Zion is perceived in its simple meaning, i.e., the captives who were exiled to a foreign land cannot sing the songs of their homeland because they are not on its soil. This is a psalm sung about the inability to write a poem, and its very existence undermines its content; it is a lament about the exile and the loss of the homeland. In Goldberg’s poem, the inability to sing from the songs of Zion when one is on its soil, serves as a meta-poetic metaphor, expressing the difficulty to create out of a direct connection to the place of one who has just recently arrived from a foreign land. In Ravikovitch’s text, the two intertextualities intersect in a grim context, in a poem that talks in a bitter collective voice in an age that no longer speaks in the voice of the collective.

According to the title of the poem, the speakers in the rhetorical situation are captives, however in the poem itself, the collective speaker replaces the representation and speaks in the voice of the captors instead. Nevertheless, the poem does not define the identity of the captors or captives, and the question of which of the spheres they function in remains unanswered. The captors are cruel and harsh, they have “a savage need to cause pain / to torture.” The captives are in pain, overcome with grief, their voices are cracked, are hated by their captors. The identities of the captors and

16 The quote from Leah Goldberg’s poem is not precise. The introductory caption of Ravikovitch’s poem is “How shall we sing of the songs of Zion when we as yet hear not?” whereas the exact words in Goldberg’s poem “Night” from the series From the Songs of Zion are: “How can we sing a song of Zion on the land of Zion / When we have not yet begun to hear? (Leah Goldberg, Poems, 219.

17 “For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ”Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Psalms 137:3-4)
captives can be deciphered on two levels at the same time: On the personal level, the poem is perceived as dealing with the individual and his relations with society, and understood as giving voice to the rigid social order, the oppressive power structure, which forces itself on the individual; on the public level, the poem is perceived as political, dealing with the oppressive force wielded in the occupied territories, and is read as an allegory. Either way, violence has a strong presence in the poem. This violence is evident in the use of the reversal of the biblical image of the hanging of the harps, which is a symbolic act expressing helplessness and an inability to react. In the biblical text, the captives hang up their harps, whereas here, it is the captors who do so: “We hung your harps / far, far away/ upon the willows.” In this way, the captors bring about the powerlessness and hopelessness of the captives by robbing them of their means of expression. The captives are subject to the captors’ authority, who oversee not only their bodies but also their souls – as can be concluded from the captors’ demand that they sing: “Sing us some insider songs / that the soul will recoil from singing / beyond the innermost circle / of the Home. And they add: “Quick, sing us a new song / a song we will yank from your throat with pliers (227-228). When the inner becomes public – it too becomes subject to the authority of the dominant, overseeing and brutal force.

But the “The Captors Require a Song” also talks about the dependence and intricate relationship between the captors and captives, which could be interpreted as co-dependency: “For what are we without the cup of your sorrows? / A broken potsherd. / A broken potsherd too the loathing in your throat.” The expression “a broken potsherd” is borrowed from the High Holy Day poem Unetaneh Tokef, which is associated in Jewish tradition with the execution by torture or amputation of the limbs.

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18 In a recent research on violence in modern Hebrew literature, Shai Rudin maintains that feminist radical writing often presents violence against the Other (sexual, gender, national, ethnic) as being interconnected. The connection between one form of oppression and the other exposes the existence of institutional violence, intended to protect the social arrangements that privilege one population while depriving the other. See Rudin, Violences, 10-23.
of R. Amnon of Magence, the first of which is related to this poem, having his tongue torn out of his mouth.

This twofold reading of the text, as both a personal and political poem, is reflected in the internal reference to other poems in the book. Thus, the lines “insider songs / that the soul will recoil from singing / beyond the innermost circle / of the Home appear in another version in the personal poem “State of Alert Drill”: “There are things I keep hidden inside me to baffle the eye of others” (209). In both cases, there is a distinction between public and inner speech, which are antithetical to one another. Further, reference to the political poetry is created via the word “their captors,” which explicitly appears in the poem “Lullaby:” “Papa wrecked, coughing up / blood from his lung / his son of fifteen embracing his frame [...] True loves / sweet doves/ thus did their captors make mock of them” (219). Finally, the phrase “Songs of Zion” also appears in the poem “What a Time She Had!” in which “They sang her the songs of Zion / between one death and the next” (214) as a gesture of official national condolence to someone who lost her son in an act of hostility.

The opening and closing poems appear to frame the entire book, determining the way in which the poems between them should be read. Although the other poems can apparently be divided into two thematic groups, both are manifestations of the same sensitivity that determines the point of departure for observing both the poet’s private life and the public reality surrounding her. The very “mixing” of the poems, without dividing them into sections, challenges the boundaries between the private and the public. In both cases, this involves a traumatic encounter between the subject and the private reality, on the one hand, and the public reality, on the other.

**National Charge**

Ravikovitch combines the political and the private levels using highly charged images that reappear in both the national and personal context. Images of one type are those

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19 In Hebrew, the word is in the singular.
that clearly belong to one domain and have been shifted to the other, thereby creating a link between the outside, public world and the inner, personal one. Images of the second type are those that are repeated in both contexts, thereby strengthening the link between the two spheres. Among the images moved from one domain to the other, the city of Jerusalem appears—an image that belongs to the public-national sphere—as an invocation, on the personal level, to restore the poet’s son to her in the poem “When the Eyes Open:” “Come down O Jerusalem / and return my child to me” (225). In this poem, the bottomless personal despair in which she finds herself causes the speaker to turn to the monotheistic deity, as represented metonymically by the cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and to the pagan divinity, as represented by natural phenomena, the high mountains and the flooding streams. However, the use of the name Jerusalem, and no less so that of Bethlehem—the causes of disagreement, whose results are described in the political poems—connect the national and personal. Similarly, the name of the poem, “A State of Alert Drill,” which is taken from military parlance and used in a poem that describes the speaker’s close personal surroundings and her daily life. The term “destruction of the house” [which refers to the destruction of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem], is a national metaphorical image that is automatically perceived as belonging to the public sphere. It is not used in its literal sense of the destruction of a physical home in the poem “History of the Individual” (226), but rather in a personal sense because the home that has been destroyed is that of the poet, whose son was taken from her. The phrase “great tranquility” is one of the images that serve in both areas. As noted, it appears in the poem “Atypical Autumn” in a personal context, and also in “What a Time She Had,” which deals with the death of a young person, who fell in battle. The image of burning is prevalent in the book in varied contexts: in the personal context in the poem “To Everything There Is A Season,” where it describes the destruction of her home because of the loss of her son’s custody: “My house is divided against itself / one half polished and well arrayed / the other burnt black as coal,” (224); in the poem “Rina Slavin,” burning serves ironically as a metaphorical expression for personal difficulty: Rina “all afire toward the new
day, / but does not raise her body / from her lair” (222). In other places, the image can be found in a political context: “Summer’s hellfire blazing as usual” in “What a Time She Had” (213), “His own body kept feeding the blaze” in “The Story of the Arab Who Died in the Fire” (217). Burning is a commonly used image in Ravikovitch’s poetry, an image that constitutes a sense of existential danger, both internal and external, posed to the speaker, threatening to destroy her. In Ravikovitch’s earlier poetry, the image originally expressed the personal-internal price that the speaker paid for upsetting the social order; in this book, Ravikovitch broadens the range of meanings of the image to the political-public too. A further image that links the different reference domains in the book is that of the broken potsherd, which evokes a feeling of fragility and worthlessness in the personal sphere in the poem “A Bottle on the Waters” (215). It also appears in the context of protest in the poem “The Captors Require a Song.” Also noteworthy are the images of the mother and grandmother in the poem “Lullaby” (219) and “Atypical Autumn” (203), as an image that creates an internal link among the different thematic parts of the book: the speaker’s mother and grandmother of her son, on the one hand, and “Mama and Grandma / a mournful old tune / will sing in Jabalya’s cordon of gloom,” on the other.

The recurring appearance of these images sheds light, based on the harmony and continuity, on the focal points of interest in the book, and demonstrates the extent to which the public and personal planes are inseparable, entwined as a result of a single identity. In this matter, the image of the biblical Rachel is one of the most salient links between the different focal points of the book. Its symbolism encompasses both focal points: As a woman, she is connected to motherhood in its individual and personal sense – “Give me children, or I’ll die!” (Genesis 30:1) – and she is also the mother of the nation “Rachel is weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted – for they are gone” (Jeremiah 31:14). Ravikovitch mentions her in these two contexts: The poem “But She Had a Son” offers intense expression of the story of a bereaved mother.

coping with her loss (212). The speaker notes: “She is Rachel. Which Rachel? / The one who had a son.” The central character in the poem is defined and identified as a mother; she refuses to stop being a mother even after her son no longer lives, and the reference to the biblical character bolsters this identification. In the protest poem “Lullaby,” Rachel appears in her symbolic image as the mother of the nation protecting her children, except that the children that she is protecting are the children of the enemy, which the Israeli nation is fighting. Ravikovitch removes the biblical Rachel from her national image and recruits her for political criticism, while at the same time giving her the status of a universal symbol, like an ancient goddess who provides protection to all oppressed people everywhere.

Images of Motherhood

The political manifestation, in the sense of dealing with governmental authority, which controls people’s lives, and in particular, the authority of military force, as the occupier in the territories, appears in political poetry. That is why Ravikovitch’s political poetry is understood as artistic expression that protests against governmental authority, criticizes the status quo in the public sphere, opposes it or offers an alternative to it – dissident poetry, as Brian McHale maintains. Hannan Hever defines political poetry similarly:

When the reader reads it as expressing a confrontation between positions that at a given historical moment are posed one against the other, with each trying to claim for itself the premiere position. [...] The prevalent representation in the political poem organizes reality so as to serve the political tendencies of the poet and the political camp to which he belongs. To that end, the political poem usually carries out parallel actions: One is to undermine the

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21 In this case, the poem is dedicated (and relates) to a specific woman named Rachel Melamed-Eitan, and tells the story of her life.

22 Here, there is also an allusion to the writing of Rachel the poet, the one who did not have a son, who personally identified with the biblical Rachel on the background of her yearning for a child.

23 McHale, *Will the Revolution be Televised?* 162.
Ravikovitch departs from these views in her book, because the position from which she is speaking is seemingly not a political-ideological identity par excellence, but is rather a maternal identity – and in fact, a politicization of motherhood in the name of morality as a whole. The unique nature of Ravikovitch’s political poetry in this book can be based on Simone Weil’s claim in her essay “The Iliad or the Poem of Force,” in which she argues that anyone that is subjected to violence is turned into a thing. Based on this assertion, it would appear that Ravikovitch sought to restore the thing’s face. The political texts in the book are mainly images of suffering – the torment of a person burning (“The Story of the Arab Who Died in the Fire,” 217), the moment of the death of a father lying broken and injured in the arms of his fifteen-year-old son (“Lullaby,” 219), and a pregnant woman who lost her baby (“A Mother Walks Around,” 214). The images of suffering document specific citizens and reflect identification with them; they do not depict a military confrontation and do not express explicit political views. Less than inviting the reader to examine the reasons for these scenes, the portraits turn the object into a subject. Generally, Ravikovitch’s political poem is not a narrative, but rather a painting. It frames a picture, containing images or situations of suffering. The visual materials, which on the one hand are the simple reality, and on the other, visual metaphors of suffering, become emblematic; through them, the poems express political judgments and positions towards values and behavior. The object presented in the poem serves then to retroactively confirm the credibility of the political protest.

A poem that depicts the existence of suffering is “A Mother Walks Around” (214-215). Ravikovitch provides details of the life that has been taken from the infant that will never be born (“and he won’t wave his arms about or cry his first cry…”) – but

24 Hever, Reading a political poem, 81.

25 Simone Weil is cited in Susan Sontag’s Regarding the Pain of the Other, 16.
the focus is placed mainly on the mother, who has been viciously robbed of her motherhood. The poem consists of a catalogue of actions and feelings typically experienced by a mother upon the birth of her child. An entire system of human relations is depicted via a litany of actions:

His mother will not be calm and proud after giving birth
and she won’t be troubled about his future,
won’t worry how in the world to support him
and does she have enough milk
and does she have enough clothing
and how will she ever fit one more cradle into the room.\(^{26}\)

The identity of the mother is established in an earthly and realistic manner by means of the comprehensive catalogue of universal behaviors. The repeated use of the negative word “not” shocks the reader because the trivial reality described here will never be actualized. The knowledge that this life is not possible is what underscores the connotative function of the statement. The end of the poem, which aspires to sum up the “history of the child” that never was, is a euphoria not lacking in sarcasm,\(^{27}\) yet reflects an attentive observation of the other, out of a complete sense of maternal solidarity.\(^{28}\)

The poem “Stones” also views its object as lacking hope, aspiration, and desire. The poem is based on twofold rhetoric: On one level, the poem sounds like a simple maternal appeal expressing an interest in a child who is throwing stones. On a different level, the wording is cynical and sarcastic because from a particular political perspective, the answers to these questions are obvious. In fact, there is one answer to

\(^{26}\) Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, 214.

\(^{27}\) On the ironic dimension in Ravikovitch’s poetry and the seeming deafness of the criticism toward it, see: Frenkel Alroi, *On Irony in Dahlia Ravikovitch*; Yitzhak Laor, *To be at the center of the world*. See also Raveh, *Comparative study of Ravikovitch*.

\(^{28}\) According to Blumrosen-Sela, this is associated with the traumatic experience of an abortion that the poet went through at the age of twenty. See Blumrosen-Sela, *Dahlia Ravikovitch and the Lost Child*, 98.
a single question, succinctly worded: “Why are stones all you have in your head / and in your hands?” Ravikovitch ironically describes the boy’s anticipated future, the great world at whose door he stands – “Between one arrest and the next / perhaps also a truncheon blow / maybe also a wounded head, / a broken hand, / everything open to them.” – but she does not abandon the perspective of the stone-thrower as a child. Her appeal to him as a child turns the questions (why he is not afraid and does not fear for his future) into seemingly matter-of-fact, direct and normal ones, and embodies the disparity between the linguistic formulations, suitable for the expression of content relating to a mundane reality and the reality that exists here. Despite the fact that aggressive and offensive use of language is one of the traditional tools of political poetry, Ravikovitch prefers to use articulate and formal language when describing the suffering of the other, because writing the suffering in the proper language of the dominating power emphasizes her powerlessness in properly transmitting the experiences of the described object. 29 The suffering is understood to be the result of the political authority, and the criticism towards it could not be doubted.

Ravikovitch reinforces moral judgment through the use of highly charged language from Jewish sources, although she applies it to a completely different and unexpected context. Thus, for example, in the poem “Lullaby”:

The grief of Jabalya thou shalt not forget
the torment of Shati thou shalt not forget,
Hawara and Beita,
Jelazoun, Balata
their cry still rises night after night.”30

29 On Ravikovitch’s use of proper standard language, see Keren, The Silent Cry. In her view, the official language is unable to silence the unexpressed subversive language. “Under the surface of the official ‘proper’ text is another text, one that subverts it, threatens its hegemony, challenges its credibility, refutes its version” (198).

30 Ravikovitch, Hovering at a Low Altitude, 220.
These lines are based on the formulations of biblical language in syntax and context, especially the final line, which is based on a common formula in the Bible to express crying out to God (e.g. Exodus 2:3; Psalms 34:16; Psalms 145:19) to come to his people’s aid; the cry is voiced by the Children of Israel who seek salvation and protection from their enemies. The defamiliarization of the language underscores the political claim that the Israelis have become persecutors.

The introduction of the English word stones in the Hebrew poem fulfils its role in expanding the conceptual context of the dramatic monologue. The word in English is connected to the inarticulateness of the speaker in the poem: The line “What’s with you throwing stones at soldiers?” is substandard language, blurring the clear distinction in regard to the origins of the speaker: Is it an Arab or Jewish woman speaking? In any case, the use of a word in a foreign language, one that is foreign both to Hebrew and Arabic, is indicative of a word that is foreign in the expanse in which it is being used, a word that points to a condition in principle, one that is appalling in essence. This hints at a situation in which the real circumstances when the situation is also a conceptual counter-space, a heterotopia in which hell reverberates as a child is required to use those stones in war. Based on this understanding, the English word stones, which replaces the Hebrew equivalent avanim, is used in order to disconnect the elusive meaning of the stone as part of the story of David and Goliath, which is related to the local expanse, in order to point to a conceptual context of space. Similarly, in this form, the word appears to refer more to the culture of popular music (the Rolling Stones, or just the Stones, for short), which represents the opposite of the heterotopia presented in this case when the speaker asks “Why are stones all you have in your head / and in your hands?” The irony is revealed in all its intensity. Instead of the stones being the famous rock group for the boy, they become a weapon.

31 Foucault, Heterotopia, 7-20.
In the name of motherhood, Ravikovitch expresses general disgust at the dominant political force and at the Israeli society for allowing such scenes. According to her, women’s responsibility for the life of an individual decrees that violence is perceived as not having a side, that is, it claims victims on both sides. This is evident when both sides suffer from the devastating effects of violence, as stated in the poem “What a Time She Had” (213-214), which speaks about the Israeli victims of the conflict: “In the valley, the army was hunting down human beings/ Fire in the thicket.” Death is described as something that ideology cannot justify despite all attempts: “They sang her the songs of Zion/ between one death and the next.” Ravikovitch uses consensual Israeli symbols and even classic Jewish terminology to present them ironically, as a symbolic system that does not justify the toll it exacts. Even the idyllic picture, created by the terms of the naïve Zionist discourse over which there is a consensus, is unable to camouflage the violence that the Israeli political force creates. In the poem “Free Associations,” the text juxtaposes these elements:

Well, in our country we have such lovely landscapes, vineyards perched on the mountainside, the shadow of clouds on the plain and light and a fenced-in plot of land; and three rows of olive trees too, uprooted as a punitive measure.33

Ravikovitch does not act as a radical critic of the prevalent political system; publicly, she does not develop a coherent political ideology, but rather writes out of empathy

32 Ravikovitch posits herself in the name of motherhood as responsible and accountable for these Palestinian women. This is the poetic symptom of what Simona Sharoni describes as the centrality of motherhood in women's attempts to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: "In the context of the relationship between Israeli-Jewish and Palestinian women the experience of motherhood has been one of the primary commonalities used as a basis for dialogue." (Sharoni, Gender and Conflict, 139).

33 Ravikovitch, Hovering at a Low Altitude, 220.
with the victim to express an internalization of human suffering.\textsuperscript{34} However, this criticism is no less valid or effective than a verbal protest.\textsuperscript{35}

**Confessional Rhetoric**

The personal poems in the collection also deal with actuality, that of the poet. They are situated in a real time span, landscape, and specific location. In this way, they confirm their realism, and perhaps also their biographical veracity, as well as the speaker’s willingness to remove her mask and get closer to the poet/author, to emphasize the “truth on paper.” Ravikovitch repeats the intensifier \textit{mamash} (really, absolutely) in various places, thereby seeking to emphasize the authenticity of what she is saying, the fact that they are an ethnographic of the day-to-day, both literal and metaphorical. This impression is received upon reading the columns of poetry: “And I refuse to believe / I absolutely refuse to see” (“Signs and Portents,” 207). The word \textit{mamash} is perceived also as an attempt to convince herself of her actuality, or of the interpretation that she gives it. The emotional crises in the personal poems are formulated in rational language, summing up the situation: “In the year one thousand nine hundred and ninety/ the life drained out of me [...] That was the very worst year of my life” (“Leafy Greenery,” 224); “The child is gone for a hundred years,/ a hundred years commence today./ He may come back for an hour or a day/ but he won’t stay” (“To Every Thing There Is a Season,” 225). The poems are situated

\textsuperscript{34} Shimon Sandbank and Avidov Lipsker are reluctant to call Ravikovitch’s poetry political and prefer to view it as protest poetry, Sandbank because of “the empathy with suffering, empathy that is cheapened by being called ‘political’” (Sandbank, \textit{A world of Disappearance}, 131); Lipsker maintains “They are not political because they do not seek to achieve anything” (Lipsker, \textit{Golden Combs}, 101).

\textsuperscript{35} On this matter, Lipsker wrote that this is “the quality that enables Dahlia Ravikovitch’s poetry to be embraced by the Israeli consensus, even among those parts of it who oppose her political positions.” (Lipsker, 102). Nissim Calderon also hails Ravikovitch’s political poetry because of “her ability to create an alchemy between the personal and political poem” (Calderon, \textit{Protest}, 1986). Yohai Oppenheimer takes the opposite tack, arguing that Ravikovitch lacks political competence, for exactly this reason. See Oppenheimer, \textit{Political Competence}. It should be noted that the articles by Calderon and Oppenheimer appeared before the publication of \textit{Mother With Child}. 
within Ravikovich's poetic landscape, the local Israeli landscape (the agricultural sector in “Free Associating” and “Atypical Autumn,” Tel Aviv in “Lying Upon the Water”), or other concrete sites (such as the piazza of Santa Maria Novella in “Attempt to Express an Opinion”). Nevertheless, the concrete space parallels the heterotopic space in the political poems – an integrated site of crisis.

A considerable share of the texts in which the personal element is dominant is written in accordance with the model of the metonymic and direct confession. The direct expressive nature of the confessional poetry is connected to the political poetry stylistically, because both contain poetics of formal rationality, expressing the subject of speech using explicit linguistic gestures, which often do not require modes of coded or figurative techniques. However, in the personal area, although the speaker expressly and clearly formulates her emotional situation, the direct language expresses situations for which reason is not strong enough and fails to protect from the intensity of the emotional crisis and vulnerability.36

The clarity of expression in Mother With Child as part of confession poetry is interpreted as a direct result of the definition of the maternal identity, because the concern for the other involves directness and responsibility, which may explain the clarity of expression in the book in general. Motherhood means having to withdraw oneself from the hermetical circle of the self, which is why the book has no signs of egocentric introspection, and daily life, although unglamorous, is presented as the right option: “An unhistoric morning/ within the borders of house and yard” (“The Cat,” 208) and the speaker explains: “Oh, my dear, don’t let these things be trifling in your eyes,/ though they're hardly grand, to be sure.” (“Poem in the Arab Style, Perhaps,” 209-210). A second system expresses a more dispersed authentic existence,

36 Feminist criticism of Ravikovitch’s poetry views the high register and disciplined poetic language, or proper, standard language, as compliance with the laws of the symbolic order. From time to time, the rational language is disrupted, which is a fracture that makes it possible to expose, beyond the official text, the subversive subtext underlying it. See: Szobel, ‘She Tried to Escape’, and Hess, Poetics of a Fig Tree, 36.
one that exposes the fragility of the first system, because any random crack in the framework awakens a feeling of complete collapse in the speaker, that “the matrix doesn’t hold” as she describes in her poem “Signs and Portents” (207-208): “A stirring in the air. The matrix doesn’t hold./ Perhaps I’m the one who is falling fast.” Ravikovitch often discusses the feeling that the matrix does not hold:

When a glass drops,  
a chip darts,  
a scrap of paper slips  
and something stirs or starts  
out of bounds  
one had better beware.37

And in “Poem in the Arab Style, Perhaps” (209-210): “Even the smallest thread on the floor can rob me of rest.” The poem “State of Alert Drill” (209) describes the speaker’s domestic environment, but it is not a relaxed account; it depicts a constant state of unrest, which originates from the gap between the desired tranquility that the home is supposed to provide and the inner world hidden in her heart. The feeling is one of relentless tension, devoid of purpose:

And here I wait, wait unwearied,  
with an obstinacy that has no basis,  
to hear this is all just a drill in conserving energy  
and preserving the state of readiness.38

It is evident that the author wants to live her life based on gender expectations and a normative set of cultural and social conventions. According to the personal poems, what the speaker senses as the ‘matrix that doesn’t hold’ is the result of the existence of the “right” abstract framework that she is aware of, that she has failed in maintaining and is apparently fearful of achieving. This sense of a ‘matrix that doesn’t hold’ appears in the personal poems of the book. Ravikovitch disperses throughout

37 Ravikovitch, Hovering at a Low Altitude, 207-208.
38 Ibid., 209.
her poems a series of risky behavior that she regrets; the mistaken, forbidden, dangerous – all are defined as such based on the power systems breathing down her neck. These are “things I keep hidden inside me/ to baffle the eye of others” (“State of Alert Drill,” 209).

The poem “Attempt to Express an Opinion” (204), which is formulated as a dramatic monologue, contributes to the clarification of this matter. The internal voices in the text are directed at an anonymous inner addressee, who is a representative of the symbolic order that the speaker requires and wants to accept. The speaker wants to understand the meaning of the word ‘banal.’ The explanation is based on her own thoughts: “And I am thinking/ What is the meaning of the word ‘banal?’” However, the text undermines the very foundation of her independent thought with a miniature semi-syllogism: “Have I fathomed your opinion/ or have I expressed an opinion at all?” In other words, ‘if I think in order to aim for what you think, then I do not have an opinion of my own after all.’ In any case, the thinking is not independent. The need for the approval of the addressee, the man, appears again in the end: “Have I expounded to your satisfaction/ my opinion about the banal/ have I fathomed your opinion/ or have I expressed an opinion at all?” The poem reveals a self-subjugation to a domineering male view. The need for male mediation or protection is an existential fact, a restriction that the speaker imposes on herself, knowingly or unknowingly, but in the final analysis, it is one with which she has difficulty living.

The speaker’s struggle in the space allocated to her and restricting her by social or gender arrangements lies at the center of the personal poems, as in the poem “He crashed before takeoff” (217): “What lops off my imaginings/ is the sharp line between the permitted and forbidden.” These are the places in which the speaker presents herself as different, as one who swims against the current, but also as one who seeks to resemble the majority. Ironic lines of poetry such as “She can’t see what’s good and beautiful in life./ She won’t see us the way we are / Anu banu artza: / We Came to Build the Land” (“Free Associations,” 221) are indicative of the tyranny
of the social order existing in the contrast between the “we” who present themselves as the salt of the earth, to the isolated “I,” who sabotages the homogenous picture of the dominant idyll.

In other poems too, the speaker expresses her sense of living on the edge, constantly just a step away from falling apart: “Here I stand, less than the least,/ there’s no point in wasting words about it,/ composing epithets” (“A Bottle on the Water,” 216). Even motherhood does not serve as a guarantee for self-fulfillment and a sense of belonging to a community – not only because she has been robbed of it in actual terms, but because “self-fulfillment” and “community belonging” are foreign concepts to the speaker. They cannot dispel the distress of someone whose present is a lost battle, as demonstrated in the poems, “Free Associations,” in the context of community belonging, and “History of the Individual,” in the context of self-fulfillment.

In many poems, there is a confrontation between the right, longed-for order and the inevitable storm of emotions; the difficulties of contending often appear with their contrasting complement, the dictates of the symbolic order. The poem “A Far-Reaching Athletic Exercise” (205-206) offers a metaphoric situation of arduous swimming, while the goal towards which the speaker is swimming is not explained in the poem. The poem begins with the statement “Of all people,/ that I should be out there swimming.” The meanings are produced through disparity and consequently from within an internal reference, it is understood that the ‘swimming’ is a possibility that will never be realized: “And what of it? I won’t turn into a fish, after all.” The speaker’s existential state requires her to exert herself to swim, in comparison to those who swim like fish. The speaker is swimming towards a goal, but the poem never tells what the nature of the goal is, other than swimming itself. She invests considerable effort so that the swimming is “in accord with the currents and coastlines,” “with measured exertions.” The effort to swim according to the rules completely drains the speaker, leaving her undermined. The meaning of the swimming metaphor is the effort to cross through life according to the dictates of the social order, which bind
and set the way, and the speaker describes the result of the effort at the end of the poem:

My body rising stooped from the sea
may scare the life out of any passerby
who gives it half an eye.
On second glance,
what ever possessed me to embark on this swim,
which in any case has no end
but self-delusion.³⁹

The effort to live according to the dictates of the social order exacts a high price from the speaker, to the point of actual physical deformation. Nevertheless, she continues to put in the effort, although she wonders to herself if it is not merely self-delusion and that she will never be able to concede to society’s conventions. The emphasis on the physical effort could also be attributed to the role the physical body plays in popular culture, as a gendered adherence or dissidence.⁴⁰

The pointlessness of the effort is underscored through the allusion to Natan Zach’s “Failure” (from the book Different Poems⁴¹) – a poem that deals with a situation of an irrational effort where the speaker knows that it would fail to produce results: “What forces me to try to separate/ water from water/ which cannot be separated.” Ravikovitch uses a similar rhetorical form. The poems in Mother With Child describe a situation of “I am wounded with a wounding world and with the terrible fury towards that world.”⁴² The wounded self and the wounding world still exist, but the fury towards the world has been dulled by the desire and the effort – perhaps in the name of motherhood – to accept its rules and regulations.

³⁹ Ravikovitch, Hovering at a Low Altitude, 206.
⁴⁰ See Halpern, Body and Its Discontents. Following Halpern’s argument, disorderly bodies, reckless behavior or obscure and unreasonable acts reflect a refusal to obey and a disruption of social performative impositions.
⁴¹ Zach, Different Poems, p. 34.
⁴² Sandbank, A world of Disappearance.
Lacking the Third Dimension

In the book *Mother With Child*, the obvious political dimension is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Gender politics, although subdued, is present as well, since it relates to the poet being a woman and mother. Alongside the obvious political-ideological criticism, which protests against the injustices of the occupation of the territories, the book protests implicitly against the political and social systems that oppress women in everyday life. The speaker has no difficulty expressing her protest against public authority, the moral disintegration of a sovereign entity and the collapse of a humane national image. However, on the personal level, when motherhood and being a woman are concerned, the *Différend* intrudes and prevents a formulation of a direct protest.

The *Différend* is a concept coined by Jean-François Lyotard to describe the silencing of an actor participating in a language-game. The *Différend* occurs when there are no agreed-upon procedures for the representation of the fundamental, conceptual and even historical difference, and it marks the silence resulting from the inability to put injustice into words. The *Différend* is a state of deficiency in a third dimension that would make it possible to connect two different dimensions, due to the lack of common discourse. It exists through the fact that it is not really there. The non-verbal, invisible injustice causes harm but is accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the harm. This could be true for the personal life of the speaker in the *Mother with Child*. In the personal poems, Ravikovitch projects a personal difficulty, the root of which lies in a conflicted inner self that reflects external conflicts.

Accordingly, the term “political poetry” is far broader than is understood at first. Her personal poetry could be read as being political in nature. Ravikovitch’s personal discourse is entirely suffused with value judgments about the oppressive gender structure, presented in the book as a main theme. Nevertheless, this is a political expression of a different kind, because although the description of the private sphere conveys skepticism and unease, there is no orderly formation of a political-gender
critique. It would be more correct to conclude that the weakness of the speaker exposes gender norms.

The book offers openly discussed public politics and more obscure gender politics in a series of poems that tell the “life story” of various characters. These poems are a form of vicarious testimony, since all the characters in the poems embody one or another aspect of the experiences that the speaker describes in the personal poems. The poems “Do or Die” (206-207), “Rina Slavin” (222-223), “Free Associating” (220-221) summarize the life of the speaker. Circumstances that refer to the protagonists of the poem in fact portray the speaker’s life. Thus, for example, in the poem “Do or Die,” the speaker’s pronoun changes from third to first person in mid-sentence: The first part of the sentence describes the character as “Flailing his arms around, searching for words,” and then as “(now I’ve forgotten what it was all about, whatever it was that got stuck in my mind)” (206). The character described in the poem “couldn’t pull himself out of despair” (207), is a familiar situation from the book’s personal poems. In the poem “Rina Slavin,” the speaker depicts a woman’s morbid depression, weakness, powerlessness, and passivity, unable to get out of bed. A play on words that serves as a key to understanding the poem is based on the phonetic similarity between the verbs *lehalel* – to desecrate or defile – and *lehalot* – to finish or live out. The protagonist of the poem is “caught between the forces of nature that despoil her,” and at the same time feels that she is “defiling” her existence, shaming herself and betraying her selfhood.  

43 Another phonetic link in the poem is notable, this time by way of contrast. Its function is also to reinforce the impression of the protagonist’s absolute helplessness; the reference is to the word pairs *lehalel* – to desecrate or defile – and *leholel* – to cause or dance (“She has a great wild hope / to arise, arise out of bed / and shake the world”). The word *leholel* as to dance highlights the contrast with the protagonist’s languishing in bed, whereas in its meaning as to act – in the phrase “to shake the world” the contrast between the protagonist’s desire for power and her passivity reverberates even more strongly.
and she defiles her days,
  piping away
  without so much as a flute to play.\textsuperscript{44}

This group of poems contains a number of direct links to public politics, and in them, her personal loss is linked to the distressing military situation. Like this, in the poem “What a Time She Had,” (213-214), a mother is dealing with the premature death of her child as “in the valley, the army was hunting down human beings.” This mother...

\[ \text{She} \] herself died three or four times
\[ \text{In the course of those years.} \]
\[ \text{Not an absolute and lasting death} \]
\[ \text{but a kind of ongoing death agony.} \]
\[ \text{A great yearning took hold of her in the lap of night,} \]
\[ \text{Powerful soulquakes.}\textsuperscript{45} \]

The connection between the emotional state of the speaker and the emotional state of the poet is quite clear, because the poet also lost a son, albeit in a different sense. The life story of the protagonist in “But She Had a Son” (212-213), who does not accept the loss of her son, provides an excellent parallel to the poet’s situation, as she too functions out of “an absolute refusal to adjust.” Among this group of poems, the poem “A Mother Walks Around,” tells a story of loss, even though the mother lives on the other side of the border. The power of these poems is in the connection that is created between the personal and the collective.

In an interview with Dahlia Karpel in 1986, Ravikovitch was asked: “Where are you on the political map?” She responded: “I am naturally on the side of the victim. It’s not that I am pro-Palestinian or that I have a political philosophy. I am with the tears of the oppressed.”\textsuperscript{46} Ravikovitch’s response sheds yet another meta-poetic ray of light, which illuminates the focal points of the book. First, she admits that she empathizes

\textsuperscript{44}Ravikovitch, \textit{Hovering at a Low Altitude}, 222.
\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., 214.
\textsuperscript{46}Karpel, “Another True Book Story.”
with the injured party, the oppressed, and the victim. Moreover, this empathy is not disconnected from her own personal history. Second, by denying that she has a coherent political philosophy, Ravikovitch’s indirectly confirms her subjugation to the patriarchal social order. Ravikovitch’s *Mother With Child* does not pretend to rewrite the social code or gender politics of the private sphere, nor does it openly challenge it, although she is definitely its victim. She does, however, directly and determinedly express her ideological position in regard to the public sphere. In both cases, the speaker is revealed as sensitive and vulnerable to social injustice.

**Conclusion**

Recently, Chana Kronfeld and Chana Bloch maintained that

> The last twenty-five years of her life mark the crowning achievement of Ravikovitch's poetic project - the period when the private and the public merge with extraordinary expressive force in her work. Now she is haunted by the inseparability of concerns with war, woman, and child. She explores the parallels between the plight of the Palestinians, the suffering of Jews in the Diaspora, and the constraints on women in patriarchal society, all the while resisting identity politics by deliberately blurring the boundaries between self and other.47

This article, consistent with the argument quoted above, focused on the entire book *Mother With Child* and read it as a single unified work both thematically and poetically. It illustrated how the personal and the political intertwine in the book and how the identity of the speaker is the point of departure that connects the two levels: her identity as a woman-mother in the lyrical poems and her public life in the political poems. The title represents a unifying framework, a definition of identity from which the self, others and the public are all assessed. Accordingly, the personal poems are only seemingly distinct from the political ones; in fact, both emerge from the same feminine, maternal viewpoint. Ultimately, there is no disparity between the perspective that observes the painful political reality and the one that observes the

47 Bloch and Kronfeld, *Introduction*, 30. See also the expansion of this argument in Kronfeld, *Political Poetry as a Language-art.*

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tormented personal story. This reading of the poems established the fact that motherhood and ethos merge, maternal characteristics move from the private domain to the public sphere, and are all connected to the speaker’s private, particular world.

Works cited


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The Personal and the Political in Dahlia Ravikovitch’s *Mother with Child*


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**Supplements: Hebrew Poems and Their Translation into English**

[“Stones” was not translated into English]
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The text includes a Hebrew poem, followed by a section of text in English, noting the personal and political themes present in Ravikovitch’s work.
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Atypical Autumn

Little by little I get a clearer picture
of how I got trapped here.
Ten in the morning, after a sleepless night
—this bucolic tranquility.
Potted plants in bloom wherever the eye comes to rest.
Handwoven runners on every conceivable surface
and the teakettle
and the conspicuous paucity of houseware,
the tranquility within,
and from without, the voice of a sulky toddler.
They look less scary.

Someone is digging with a simple farm implement,
I forgot what it’s called.
(Forgot? Never mind.)
A rhythmic thumping, the whoosh of a hose dragged along.
Everyone here is toiling and cultivating
the fauna and the flora.
The women also knit quite a bit;
manual labor stands at the very top
of the ladder here.

This diligence and the urge to be of use
beget an illusion of the idyllic.
If not for their terror of Labor Movement values,
every man would swallow his friend alive.

Three days now my mother’s been sleeping the sleep of the just.
I told Ido: Santa is sleeping in peace and quiet.
And Ido said: Maybe that’s sleep everlasting?
God forbid, I told him,
not sleep everlasting,
just peace and quiet.

one half polished and well arrayed,
the other burnt black as a coal.
I’m cold and hot, hot and cold.
The child is gone for a hundred years,
a hundred years commence today.
He may come back for an hour or a day
but he won’t stay.

The Captors Require a Song

How shall we sing the songs of Zion
when we are yet here not?
—Leah Goldberg

Sing us one of the songs of Zion
for an ear that hears not.
Sing us some insider songs
that the soul will recoil from singing
beyond the innermost circle
of the Home.
Quick, sing us a new song,
a song we will yank from your throat with pliers.
What are the Veil of the Ark and the Holy Temple
to you?
We’ve got a brute urge to inflict pain,
to torment.
For what are we without the cup of your sorrows?
A broken potsherd.
A broken potsherd too the loathing in your throat.

Look at us:
We hang your harps
fast, far away
upon the willows.
And you, keep on sawing
with your cracked voices
like a dunce climbing
the Ladder of Tzve
or a knowing on
buzz buzz.
The Personal and the Political in Dahlia Ravikovitch's *Mother with Child*

**Poem in the Arab Style, Perhaps**

Lesions of mildew creep up the shower curtain.  
Come, my dear, what are you doing here?  
Even the smallest thread on the floor can rob me of rest.  
No way to maintain a sense of order.  
Just patches of shadow under the table.  
Ask not,  
hold shadow on pale shadow, set in a square frame.  
Oh, my dear, don’t let these things be troubling in your eyes,  
though they’re hardly grand, to be sure.  
Even the eye seeks rest,  
words recompense for its toil.  
The subterfuges of the window bars  
In repeating patterns, circle and line  
—the blacksmith sought to invest them with beauty and form.  
Beyond the square of shadow, the floor  
reveals its defects,  
the defects are right there before you,  
and that’s what disturbs the eye,  
dispels any rest.  
At the mouth of the large urn inside the shadow of night,  
spectral images arise.  
Come, my dear, what are you doing here?  
What are you doing here beside me  
when everyone’s asleep?

**State of Alert Drill**

Let me tell you the truth:  
It’s possible to make do  
with so and so many answers to a room,  
color coordinated, pink, red, dark green,  
with a delicate lace curtain  
on the small melancholy window,  
and a sense of consensus intimacy  
between these objects  
although they retain their estrangement.  
And that’s what there is in the room.  
On the face of it, I am little all that amounts to,  
it’s not even the little that contains the all.  
but whatever’s in plain sight is what there is.  
There are things I keep hidden inside me  
to baffle the eye of others.  
And here I wait, wait unwarried,  
with an obstinancy that has no basis.  
to hate this is all just a drill in conserving energy  
and preserving the state of readiness.

Attempt to Express an Opinion

Rain on the piazza  
of Santa Maria Novella.  
A few people with umbrellas,  
a drizzle of rain, very light.  
And I am thinking:  
What is the meaning of the word “banal”?  
Have I faltered your opinion,  
have I had an opinion at all?  
Rain on Piazza Santa Maria  
and rain in our Santa Croce  
and rain dotting its drops on the city floor  
and all over Tuscany, etc.  
And what little of this will stick to me  
and what little of this will actually stay with me,  
because most things  
actually most things,  
are just seeming, not actual being.  
A drizzle of rain, very light,  
moists the cobblestones just a bit,  
won’t keep anyone off the street,  
won’t leave a sticky wetness.  
Have I expounded to your satisfaction  
my opinion about the banals  
here I faltered your opinion  
or have I expressed an opinion at all?

May 3, 1987

Signs and Portents

When a glass drops,  
a chip dare,  
a scrap of paper slips  
and something stirs or starts  
out of bounds,  
can had better beware.  
Now I write, now I stop,  
big deal, one might think  
a wad of paper got stuck in my throat.  
I’m no longer, I, so to speak.  
Half an I, and diminishing fast.  
A stirring in the air. The matrix doesn’t hold.  
Perhaps I’m the one who is falling fast.
Lullaby

Mama and Grandma
will sing you a song.
your shining white mothers
will sing you a song.
Mama's shawl brushes
your bed with its wing.
Mama and Grandma
a mournful old tune
will sing in Jabalya's barden of gloom.
There they sat, clinging together as one:
Papa wrenched, coughing up
blood from his lung,
his son of fifteen embracing his frame
like a steel hoop girding
his father's crushed form
—what little remained.
True love,
sweet love,
thus did their captors make mock of them.

Mama and Grandma
will sing you a song
so you, sweet child.
may sleep without harm.

Rachel is weeping aloud for her sons.
A lamentation. A keening of pain.
When thou art grown and become a man,
the grief of Jabalya thou shalt not forget
the torment of Shati thou shalt not forget,
Hawa and Beka,
Jezozron, Balata,
their cry still rises night after night.

A Mother Walks Around

A mother walks around with a child dead in her belly.
This child hasn't been born yet.
When his time is up the dead child will be born
head first, then trunk and buttocks
and he won't wave his arms about or cry his first cry
and they won't slap his bottom.
won't put drops in his eyes
won't swaddle him
after washing the body.
He will not resemble a living child.
His mother will not be calm and proud after giving birth
and she won't be troubled about his future,
won't worry how in the world to support him
and does she have enough milk,
and does she have enough clothing
and how will she ever fit care more cradle into the room.
The child is a perfect model already;
nothing one he was ever made.
And he'll have his own little grave at the edge of the cemetery
and a little memorial stone
and there won't be much to remember him by.
These are the chronicles of the child
who was killed in his mother's belly
in the month of January, in the year 1968,
"under circumstances relating to state security."
The Personal and the Political in Dahlia Ravikovitch’s *Mother with Child*

What a Time She Had!

How did that story go?
As a rule she wouldn’t have remembered so quickly.
In that soil no vineyard would grow.
A citrus grove stood there,
sickly, stunted.
The single walnut tree blooming there bore no fruit
as if some essential life-giving element
were lacking in that soil.
Hard green lemons.
A balding patch of lawn.
A great tranquillity.
On the western side, the hedge went wild
and there was a honeysucker, of course
(today we’d call it a sunbird)
—if he were still alive
he’d be twenty years old.

In the valley, the army was hunting down human beings.
Fire in the thicket.
Summer’s hellfire blazing as usual.
Evening mowing down shadows, merciless.

Line 31, *Rachel your mother*. Cf. Jer. 31:15, “Rachel, weeping for her children, refused to be comforted for her children, because they were not.” Poem reverses the traditional interpretation, based on Jeremiah, according to which the matriarch Rachel becomes a metaphor for the nation. See “Lullaby”; cf. “Like Rachel” and “Rough Draft.”

Rina Slavin

Rina Slavin lies abed all day,
pen and paper beside her
three cups with the dregs of coffee and tea,
a bottle of pills
and for added drama, two deodorants.
Opens her eyes with relish
all afire toward the new day,
but does not raise her body
from her lair.
Could it be she is paralyzed,
could it be she is lazy or—to use a higher style—
an idler?

A small alarm clock is at her bedside,
so should she wish to be alarmed into waking
there's nothing to prevent it.
Rina glances at the clock and discovers
half the morning is already gone.
And what will become of the other half?
What will come at noon
and yet again after noon
and just before eventide
with the splendiferous sunset so close to her window
that she, in any case, will miss.

Rina Slavin waves an enervated arm
to banish an ant or a hair
that sullies the sheet or the floor.
Her house is spotless, spick-and-span,
and the clock without ticking propels its hands
by her pillow or her bed.
No way will she ever manage
to cut and carve the times into hours
because she has no time
in the usual sense of the word.
She has a great wild hope
to arise, arise out of bed
and shake the world
or just
arise and shake her booty
like Deborah the Prophetess
and Miriam the sister of Moses
but like Michal the wife of David
all she does is look out the window
despising in her heart.
All that despising, from within

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and without, rends her asunder
and she defiles her days
piping away
without so much as a flute to play.
Caught between the forces of nature that despoils her
she dozes off,
which is the best way of all
to swallow time,
swallow time.

But She Had a Son

for Rachel Melamed-Eitan

An acquaintance that began midwinter
ripened by the end of spring.
A kindly woman, conciliatory.
She had a son,
a fallen soldier.
She bakes and cooks
part-time for City Hall.
A hot lunch is always ready on the table.
All this in an absolute refusal
to adjust.

In her own way, as if unperturbed,
she can stop the world short.
It's hard to know what she might do.
Without putting it into words,
she stakes her claim.
Didn't they take away her son?
No way will she see any justice at all
in that taking.
And who would dare tell her:
Come, wash your face, it's time,
be strong,
whatever happened, happened.

She sets out on an arduous journey,
a circular journey, to and fro.
With her own hands she heaps coals of fire beneath her,
deliberately strews the embers over her body.
She is Rachel. Which Rachel?
The one who had a son.
And she tells him night and day,
summer and winter, feast day and holiday:
I am Rachel your mother
of clear mind and free will,
I will not be comforted.
A Far-Reaching Athletic Exercise

Of all people, that I should be out there swimming. The waves have covered my shoulders three days now; I rise and fall, rise and fall with the upper half of my body. I’ve almost turned into some kind of boat. And what of it? I won’t turn into a fish, after all. I propel myself forward like a guided object down the Mediterranean, bearing slightly north, in accord with the currents and coastlines. Back in the Aegean, I met with heavy storms. I had to go around in circles; to all appearances I was borne upon the waters like a log. But in fact, I have absolute control over myself, free from physical limitations, filled with unswerving determination. Legs, arms, arms-and-legs: That’s me. On the first day I covered only an eighth of the distance, my day went dark while I was still in the water, but given my unusual condition I had no problem to keep on propelling. On the second day I was close to the breaking point; my arms continued to propel me as before but my willpower began to grow shaky. I thought, after all this, perhaps I won’t even find land at the other end,
not real land, as when the ship's lookout proclaims:
Land ahoy!
All the same, I continued to rise and fall
with measured exertions
so as not to exhaust my resources.
By the third day I'd reached the middle of the sea,
I could no longer sense the heat of the waters or their chill.
My skin was wrinkled, its protective layer gone;
my hair was sticky and stiff.
I had three days' worth of propelling left
if the sea continued calm and clear,
but if it began to rage
there was no telling how long.
By then, I already knew I would make it,
that is, I would make it all the way to shore.
In an indeterminate physical condition
but without danger of substantial injury.
It's likely my skin will be shriveled and blistered;
for a few days I won't be able to look in the mirror.
My body rising stooped from the sea
may scare the life out of any passerby
who gives it half an eye.
On second glance,
what ever possessed me to embark on this swim,
which in any case has no end
but self-delusion.