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In a letter to the philosopher Franz Rosenzweig in 1926, Gershom Scholem ominously intoned against the secularization of the Hebrew language; “fraught with danger,” this land “harbors a volcano.” The modern Zionist agenda, in actualizing the “holy tongue,” has generated a “vulgar gibberish” as it strives against the impossible: “to empty out words which are filled to the breaking point with specific meanings.”

Scholem augured “that the religious power of this language” would “perforce break open again one day.” The question he posed still resonates today: “which generation will bring this about?” In Lea Goldberg’s Hebrew poetry, we glimpse rays of that divine light in her language, despite her self-identified secularism. (Her collected essays on modern Hebrew literature are entitled: *The Audacity of the Profane* [Ha-’Ometz la-Chulin 1976]). Born in Prussia in 1911, Goldberg emigrated to pre-state Israel after completing her doctorate in Semitic studies at the universities of Berlin and Bonn. Upon her arrival in 1935, she was presented with the first book publication of her poems, *Smoke Rings*, by the prominent poet, Avraham Shlonsky, and welcomed into literary circles. During her Tel Aviv years (1935-1952), she wrote prolifically – poetry, drama, translations, children’s novels and stories – and went on to become a beloved professor of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, dying of those very smoke rings in 1970. Well ensconced within the literary canon of Hebrew literature, her poetry, however, defies categorization.

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1 William Cutter renders the original German, volapuk, “ghastly” or “ghostly” – in order to invoke the paradoxical move to revive the national culture and tradition through the Hebrew language. I refer to his translation of Scholem’s letter in “Ghostly Hebrew, Ghastly Speech: Scholem to Rosenzweig, 1926,” *Prooftexts* 10.3 (1990): 417.
Straddling boundaries of geography and language, as well as temporal divides (before and after the foundations of the state of Israel in 1948), Goldberg articulates a liminal voice, as she herself writes: “And I am here, wholly here—in a foreign city/in the heart of a great foreign homeland.” She can neither be classed with the poet-prophets of the early twentieth century, such as Hayim Nahman Bialik (poet-laureate of pre-state Israel), nor neatly ensconced among the poets of the Statehood generation, such as Yehuda Amichai, Natan Zach, and Dahlia Ravikovitch. Rather, as a woman caught between the diaspora and the “great foreign homeland,” Goldberg embodies a transitional figure; her poems move between lyrical, classical sonnet forms, to pared-down imagistic vignettes. This volume of her selected poetry, translated by Rachel Tzvia Back, including also her one play, “Lady of the Castle” (trans. by T. Carmi), captures the deceptive simplicity of her lucid language, though many allusions (especially to the Hebrew Bible) are lost in translation.

Like Amichai’s poetry, her poems seem to “celebrate the ordinary” and “deflate the sacred,” when (in fact) she relocates that sense of the holy in the flight of a bird or the entrapment of a bee, in the absence of a lover, or in the hue of landscape and sky (shamayim, not as heavens). In her ars poetica, “About Myself” (pp. 25-26), which opens this volume, she writes: “I have no difficult words—valves of illusion./My images are/transparent like windows in a church;/through them/one can see/how the light of the sky shifts/and how my loves/fall/like dying birds.” Only a church, not a synagogue, could serve as the sacred space safely invoked by the secular persona of the poet, with its stained-glass windows, coloring the sky from which birds and lovers might fall. She self-consciously (and ironically) undermines her own claim to have “no difficult words,” and elliptically, “(no) valves of illusion.”

In her beautiful poem, “For One Who Does Not Believe” (pp. 149-150), Goldberg pens a secular prayer – an invocation: “For one who does not believe/it’s hard to live this year—/the fields ask for a blessing/the sea asks for faith/and you—you ask for nothing.” Alluding to the verse from Song of Songs, “I sleep but my heart is awake,” (Cant. 5.2), she continues: “My heart
sleeps its sleep/ and I sleep…How will I wake from my sleep/ when my heart has no faith/ and you ask for nothing?” The “you” in the poem may be another, or the shadow of a mute self, a muse slumbering and still, whom the poet tries to wake, yet again, with the question “How?” and the persistent accusation: “You ask for nothing…” Only in the last stanza does the “you” modulate into the “me, prodigal son.” She concludes: “Only the hills are already awake/And I sleep./Dawn presses up in my window-pane/and calls out my name/and I do not answer” (p. 150). The call of the lover (dod) from the great biblical love song, allegorically representative of God in the Jewish tradition, is relocated in the hills. Despite the displacement, the persona of the poet does not answer. Ultimately, she turns to the “you” of the reader to wake her, reading her poem with an ironic slant, as the plea of an intercessor. Again, she invokes the window frame in “A look at a Bee” (pp. 144-145), and asks: “How can we crown” this trapped queen “with songs of praise? How can we sing and what?” fearing that some “small child will come and say:/The Queen has no clothes,” betraying her nakedness, her vulnerability. She vacillates between the potential of honey and sting, which the poet’s own words bode, and urges her: “Protect yourself.” Does the poem address the bee or the poet?

Many of these poems, in this lucid translation, may be read as radically secular prayers, addressing the “you” of the reader and the poet-self rather than God, as in “Poems of the Journey’s End” (pp. 96-97), commonly found in alternative siddurim (prayer books) in Israel:

Teach me, my God, to bless and pray
over the mystery of a withered leaf, the beauty of ripe fruit.
over this freedom: to see, to feel, to breath,
to know, to hope, to fail.

Teach my lips blessing and song of praise
when your days are renewed morning and night,
lest my day be today like all the yesterdays,
lest my day be for me an unthinking haze.

As the orison of an ever-receding horizon, Lea Goldberg’s poems blur the line between the secular and religious divide. They reach for a “contiguity” (Dan Miron’s term) between tradition and a breach with that tradition, awakening anew the religious power of the Hebrew language. And so, this volume of poetry speaks uniquely to this generation of Jewish readers. It should be kept by one’s bedside, read as meditations, “blessings” or “hymns of praise” each morning and night, just as God renews Creation each day (Psalms 104), in the glory of dappled-things, a “withered leaf” or “ripe fruit”, reviving “all things counter, original, spare, and strange” (Gerard Manley Hopkins, “Pied Beauty”), so that your words do not blur in vulgar gibberish, so that your days not turn mundane.