

# STAGING SEXUALITY, READING WALLACH'S POETRY\*

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This article offers a reading of “Tefillin” as a staged performance of a theatrical piece. It reveals that staging sexuality is Wallach’s political, feminist strategy, one that produces and overcomes the reader’s resistance to the poem. On this stage, “Tefillin” unbinds a new poetic space, one that potentially transforms the Hebrew cultural and literary scene.

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I found myself in a classic situation of women who at one time or another, feel that it is not they who have produced culture.... Culture was there, but it was a barrier forbidding me to enter, whereas of course, from the depths of my body, I had a desire for the objects of culture. I therefore found myself obliged to steal them.

Helène Cixous, “Entretien avec Françoise van Rossum-Guyon”<sup>1</sup>

Go steal something small maybe you’ll calm down  
Years later it will be easy to see that you can steal sex too  
This too is quite a serious robbery if you take into consideration  
That it’s also possible to steal personality and spiritual things  
Yona Wallach, “הוא ממלא את החזייה שהוא לובש” (He stuffs the bra that he wears)<sup>2</sup>

In March 1982, Yaakov Besser, the publisher of *עֵתוֹן 77* (*Iton 77*), printed the poem “תפילין” (*Tefillin*) by Yona Wallach (1944–1985). “Tefillin” can be read, and has conventionally been read, as an offensive attack on both Judaism and manhood—a “porno-religious-national poem” of “emotional abuse of the entire nation.”<sup>3</sup> Considered on this level, the binding of the

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<sup>1</sup>Iff. S. Suleiman “(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Erotism,” in *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. S. Suleiman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>All translations are the work of the author unless noted otherwise.

<sup>3</sup>See E. Amikam, “אביונה של החינוך והתרבות” (*Eviona shel ha-chinukh vеха-tarbut*, The libido of education and culture) *זהות* (*Zehut*) (1983): 295–297; Halevi rejected “Tefillin” as “shitting and pissing.” See R. Halevi, “איגרת שלוחה לשולמית הראבן” (*Igeret shluḥah le-Shulamit Har’even*, A letter addressed to Shulamit Hareven) *אפיקים* (*Afikim*) (June 1984). Sarna describes: “Threatening letters were received along with a package containing tefillin that were brutally cut with a knife. ‘Use it to fuck yourself in your ass,’

leather straps of the tefillin—a ritual object in Judaism—in an act of sexual violence becomes a scandalous act of malice. Such readings of the poem too easily reduce it to crude pornography. (Pornography—distinguished from eroticism—is understood in a reductive sense that does not allow the poem to be read as a poetic text.)

In this article I offer an alternative reading of “Tefillin.” I suggest that we shift our focus to the performative aspect of the poem and examine the ritual and sexual acts in the context of theatrical performance. Wallach takes upon herself the highlighting of sexual difference in the problematic Israeli politics of gender, which explains her radical choice to use the loaded, highly visible object, tefillin. Her innovative postmodern production of gender looks for unconventional cultural sites and objects in the attempt to rework old notions of female sexuality, female agency, and ideology.

### Tefillin

- 1 Come to me
- 2 Let me do nothing
- 3 You do it for me
- 4 Do everything for me
- 5 Everything I start to do
- 6 You do instead
- 7 I will lay tefillin
- 8 I'll pray
- 9 You lay the tefillin for me
- 10 Bind them on my arms
- 11 Play with them inside me
- 12 Pass them delicately over my body
- 13 Rub them against me
- 14 Arouse me everywhere
- 15 Make me faint with sensations
- 16 Run them across my clitoris
- 17 Tie up my hips with them
- 18 So I can come quickly
- 19 Play with them inside me
- 20 Tie up my hands and legs
- 21 Do things to me

### תפילין

- 1 תבוא אלי
- 2 אל תתן לי לעשות כלום
- 3 אתה תעשה בשבילי
- 4 כל דבר תעשה בשבילי
- 5 כל דבר שרק אתחיל לעשות
- 6 תעשה אתה במקומי
- 7 אני אגיד תפילין
- 8 אתפלל
- 9 הנח אתה גם את התפילין עבורי
- 10 כרוך אותם על ידי
- 11 שחק אותם בי
- 12 העבר אותם מעדנות על גופי
- 13 חפך אותם בי היטב
- 14 בכל מקום גרה אותי
- 15 עלף אותי בתחושות
- 16 העבר אותם על הדגדגן שלי
- 17 קשר בהם את מותני
- 18 כדי שאגמר מהר
- 19 שחק אותם בי
- 20 קשר את ידי ורגלי
- 21 עשה בי מעשים

wrote the sender.” I. Sarna, *יונה וולך: ביוגרפיה* (Yona Wallach: *Biographia*, Yona Wallach: *Biography*) (Yerushalayim: Keter, 1993), p. 275.

22 Against my will	לְמִרְוֹת רְצוֹנִי 22
23 Turn me over on my stomach	הִפְךָ אוֹתִי עַל בִּטְנִי 23
24 Put the tefillin in my mouth a bridle bit <sup>4</sup>	וְשִׂים אֶת הַתְּפִלִּין בְּפִי רֶסֶן מוֹשְׁכוֹת 24
25 Ride me I am a mare	רִכַּב עָלַי אֲנִי סוּסָה 25
26 Pull my head back	מִשֶּׁךְ אֶת רֹאשִׁי לְאַחֹר 26
27 Until I shriek with pain	עַד שֶׁאֶצְוֶה מִכָּאֵב 27
28 And you are pleased	וְאַתָּה מְעֻנֵּג 28
29 Later I will pass them over your body	אַחֵר כִּךְ אֲנִי אֶעֱבִיר אוֹתָם עַל גּוּפְךָ 29
30 With unconcealed intention	בְּכוֹנֶנָה שְׂאִינָה מְסֻתֶּרֶת בְּפָנִים 30
31 Oh, how cruel my face will be	הוּ עַד מָה תִּהְיֶינָה אֶכְזָרִיּוֹת פָּנָי 31
32 I will pass them slowly over your body	אֶעֱבִיר אוֹתָם לָאֵט עַל גּוּפְךָ 32
33 Slowly slowly slowly	לָאֵט לָאֵט לָאֵט 33
34 Around your throat I'll pass them	סָבִיב צְוֹאֲרֶךְ אֶעֱבִיר אוֹתָם 34
35 I will wind one end a few times around your throat	אֶסּוּבֵב אוֹתָם כַּמָּה פְּעָמִים סָבִיב צְוֹאֲרֶךְ, מִצַּד אֶחָד 35
36 And tie the other to something stable	וּמִתְּצַד הַשֵּׁנִי אֶקְשֵׁר אוֹתָם לְמִשְׁהוֹ יָצִיב 36
37 Something very heavy perhaps rotating	בְּמִיָּתֵד כִּבֵּד מְאֹד אוֹלִי מְסֻתוֹבֵב 37
38 I'll pull and I'll pull	אֶמְשֶׁךְ וְאֶמְשֶׁךְ 38
39 Until your last breath escapes	עַד שֶׁתֵּצֵא נְשִׁמָּתְךָ 39
40 Until I strangle you	עַד שֶׁאֶחְנֹק אוֹתְךָ 40
41 Completely with the tefillin	לְגִמְרִי בַתְּפִלִּין 41
42 That stretch the length of the stage	הַמִּתְמַשְׁכִּים לְאֶרֶץ הַבִּמָּה 42
43 And into the astonished audience.	וּבֵין הַקָּהָל הַמִּפְּהָ תִּדְהָמָה. 43

The public debates surrounding the poem became among the most heated and controversial in the history of Hebrew/Israeli literature. Even the well-respected poet Zelda, an orthodox religious poet and an intimate friend of Wallach, protested the journal's publication of the poem. Igal Sarna describes Zelda's response in his biography on Wallach, published posthumously:

A thin envelope with a note written in pencil arrived in Besser's mail box. "When I saw Yona's poem" [wrote Zelda], "I thought, I wish I had died. I will not be able to touch a paper on which such a thing is printed." Zelda was a

<sup>4</sup> Hebrew the syntax maintains an ambiguity between placing the box inside the mare's mouth or using the leather strap as the bit.

regular contributor to the periodical and a friend of Besser and her response was the only one that pained him deeply. During the two following years, until her death, Zelda never sent him another poem.<sup>5</sup>

Reaction to the poem might have been even more violently hostile were it not for the timing of its publication: it appeared on the eve of the invasion of Lebanon. Nevertheless, the poem had enormous repercussions, and within a year and a half its impact had reached far beyond the literary scene, igniting a public scandal that engaged writers, journalists, and politicians. In an interview with Besser, Miriam Tasa-Glazer, then deputy minister of culture and education, reacted to the poem by saying: “Wallach is really disturbed...a horny beast (בהמה מיוחמת) who writes such a poem, and even publishes it...it is a foul wave...an anarchy.” The Association of Israeli Writers reacted to Tasa-Glazer’s inflammatory remarks by sending an acrid letter of protest to all the members of the Cabinet. Yosi Sarid, a left wing member of the Israeli Knesset, questioned Hammer, the minister of education: “The deputy minister’s world is steeped in sex, and affected by incest. What does the Minister intend to do so that the deputy minister can find her full satisfaction in the vocation of education?”<sup>6</sup> The debate, in line with popular polemics, focused not on Wallach’s poetry but rather on her personality (and her body). Tasa Glazer’s remarks represent a perspective that viewed “Tefillin” as nothing but a depraved provocation, emblematic of the total breakdown that modern promiscuity brings in its wake.<sup>7</sup> Possibly the response was so vituperative because “the puritanical quality of orthodox religious discourse preserves the possibility of shock in a way unavailable to hybrid heteroglossic vernacular discourses.”<sup>8</sup> Rather than viewing “Tefillin” as a response to the limits of Israeli critical discourse on women, these voices viewed the poem’s radical aesthetics as proof of Wallach’s pathology. Even for non-religious Israelis, employing tefillin to convey a sexual image meant to exceed the

<sup>5</sup> Sarna, *Yona Wallach*, p. 275. For a response on Sarna’s book see M. Wieseltier, דם וחי (Piha nimla’ dam ve-hi’ metah, Her mouth was filled with blood and she died) *הארץ* (Ha-<sup>2</sup>Aretz) (July 9, 1993): b8–b9; E. Dotan, “מצטיירת לי תמונה של אדם רב כח” (Mitsayeret li tmunah shel adam rav koah, I get the picture of a powerful person), *הארץ* (Ha-<sup>2</sup>Aretz) (July 9, 1993): b8.

<sup>6</sup> Sarna, *Yona Wallach*, p. 288.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Agassi, “מעמד האישה בישראל” (Ma’amad ha-<sup>2</sup>ishah be-Yisra’el, The status of the woman in Israel) in *נשים במלכוד* (Nashim be-milkud, Women in a catch 22) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uchad, 1982), pp. 210–216.

<sup>8</sup> K. Young, University of California, Berkeley, personal communication, May 1996. Similarly, according to Yael Feldman, Wallach’s generation was not yet ready for her “brazen destabilization of the sociosexual value system.” See Y. Feldman, *No Room of Their Own* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 9.

aesthetic, moral limits, threatening to contaminate the little that remained sacred in Israeli society.<sup>9</sup>

The uncompromising public demeanor with which Wallach presented herself, as well as the way in which others portrayed her contributed to the scandal and outrage that people associated with her and her work. On one hand, the intimate self Wallach presented—visibly different—fueled the public fire that surrounded the overdramatized femininity and unconventional sexuality of any expressive woman. (“As a woman, you are exceptional,” the journalist, Dani Dotan, stated while interviewing Wallach. She corrected him: “I believe that as a man, I am very exceptional.”)<sup>10</sup> Wallach’s struggle with breast cancer, and then her tragic death in 1985, no doubt, added another dimension to the drama often associated with her and her poetry.<sup>11</sup> Wallach’s readers, at least while she was still alive, were puzzled by the varying and seemingly contradictory characteristics of her work and personality.<sup>12</sup> For example, Wallach suggested to the organizers of a poetry reading that she be lying in a coffin on stage while the other poets read their work, and then rise

<sup>9</sup> Fifteen years after the publication of the poem, the passion surrounding it is still strong. In February 1997, the Museum of Art in Ramat Gan was organizing an exhibit devoted to Yona Wallach that would include, among other pieces, Mikhah Kirshner’s 1983 photographs of “Tefillin,” that were inspired by the poem (see n. 39). The religious members of the municipal coalition of Ramat Gan threatened to leave the coalition if the photographs were exhibited. Meir Aharonson, the exhibit’s curator, refused to exclude the photographs, and the exhibit was canceled. I thank Meira Weiss for this information.

<sup>10</sup> I. Sarna, *Yona Wallach*, p. 285.

<sup>11</sup> Many popular magazines, newspapers, and television programs documented Yona Wallach’s death with pictures, poetry, and interviews with those who knew her. Earlier, *חדרים* (*Chadarim*), a poetry magazine, devoted a whole volume to her work, including an interview with the poet by the editor, Helit Yeshurun “יונה וולך, אפריל 1984: ראיון” (*Yona Wallach, April 1984: Re’yon*, Yona Wallach, April 1984: an interview) 4 (1984). The radio program “קולו המתוק של אלהים” (*Kolo ha-matok shel ’Elohim*, God’s sweet voice), on Wallach’s poetry and personality, was produced and reported by Ilana Tsukerman, on *קול ישראל* (*Kol Yisrael*), October 1986, and was published in *פרוזה* (*Proza*) 100: 28–35. Other responses include A. Barukh and I. Nahmani, “יונה וולך—כל מילה אמת” (*Yona Wallach—kol milah ’emet*, Yona Wallach—Every word is truth) *ליידי גלובס* (*Lady Globes*) 23 (June/July 1993): 12–18; I. Schenfeld, “כאב” (*Ke’ev naki u-mevudad*, Clean, isolated pain) *על המשמר* (*’Al ha-mishmar*) (Oct. 2, 1985): 6; Y. Golan, “יונה וולך—התשוקה והבהלה” (*Yona Wallach: ha-tshukah vеха-behalah*, Yona Wallach—The passion and the horror) *הארץ* (*Ha-’Aretz*) Supplement (October 4, 1985): 11; H. Boshem, “מוות במשפחה” (*Mavet ba-mishpachah*, Death in the family) *הארץ* (*Ha-’Aretz*) (Oct. 8, 1985): 7; B. Tsipper, “פערמון” (*Pa’amon ha-zkhukhit: ’im motah shel ha-meshoreret Yona Wallach*, The bell jar: Regarding Yona Wallach’s death) *הארץ* (*Ha-’Aretz*) (Oct. 4, 1985): 16; M. Hendelzalt, “מוותם של אומנים” (*Motam shel ’omanim*, The artists’ death) *הארץ* (*Ha-’Aretz*) (Oct. 17, 1985): 8; H. R. Yona, “חוג הסרטן” (*Chug ha-sartan*, The Cancer constellation), *הארץ* (*Ha-’Aretz*) Supplement (Oct. 11, 1985): 14–15. See also I. Sarna, *Yona Wallach*, esp. chaps. 39–41.

<sup>12</sup> Ravikovitch’s poem, “סוף סוף אני מדברת” (*Sof sof ’ani medaberet*, Finally I am speaking), is one attempt to sum up society’s wide range of feelings toward Wallach. Ravikovitch, *כל השירים עד כה* (*Kol ha-shirim ’ad koh*, All the poem thus far) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me’uchad, 1995), pp. 217–218. Dorit Zilberman devoted a whole article to other poets’ works on Wallach. D. Zilberman, “שאלו שלום יונה” (*Sha’alu shlom Yona: Meshorerim ’al shirat Yona Wallach*, Poets on Yona Wallach’s poetry) *ידיעות אחרונות* (*Yedi’ot ’Achronot*) (Oct. 3, 1990): 30.

dramatically from the coffin to read her own reading; this proposal was rejected.<sup>13</sup> On another occasion she told Smadar Shir, from the women's weekly *לאשה* (*La-ishah*), "I prefer the company of hookers and pimps over that of literary critics." This statement became the title of that article.<sup>14</sup> Wallach's eccentric presence and transgressive creativity inspired writers, artists, and gossip columnists who were often as beguiled, attracted, and annoyed by her as they were by her poems. Obviously, these accounts of Wallach's personal and public life are themselves a social construct.<sup>15</sup> In order to understand these accounts, it is therefore crucial to examine their cultural context: namely, the limited and predominantly negative representation of women in Israeli literature, the exclusion and problematic inclusion of women writers in Hebrew literary history, and the woman's voice in response to this exclusion.<sup>16</sup> Wallach was represented primarily according to the prevailing cultural stereotype associated with this type of woman, further adding to her marginalization. These stereotypes, Homi Bhabha has suggested, are indistinguishable from the society's fetishistic desire to normalize and discipline its "deviant" subjects.<sup>17</sup>

In its attempt to highlight main annual events in the history of Israel toward the end of the millennium, Jerusalem's weekly *כל העיר* (*Kol ha-ir*) revisited the scandal of "Tefillin's" publication as one of the main cultural events of 1982.<sup>18</sup> The newspaper reporter re-approached Tasa-Glazer who insisted, "I have no objection that an artist will write whatever he wants, but it is wrong that such a poem will be published with the support of the Ministry of Education. A poem that takes a symbol—a sign (אִיִּת) model—and

<sup>13</sup> I. Sarna, *Yona Wallach*, pp. 236–237.

<sup>14</sup> *לאשה* (*La-ishah*) 1519 (May 24, 1976). Cf. I. Sarna, *Yona Wallach*, pp. 235–236.

<sup>15</sup> Lily Rattok's recent book *מלאך האש: על שירת יונה וולך* (*Mal'akh ha-esh: Al shirat Yona Wallach*, Angel of fire: on Yona Wallach's poetry) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uchad, 1997) is a good example of a reductionist reading of Wallach. Rattok resorts to uncritical and simplistic psychologizing about the poet as mystic, rather than exploring the meaning of the text itself.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, E. Fuchs, *Israeli Mythogynies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction* (New York: University of New York, 1987); M. Gluzman, "The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 259–278. L. Rattok, *הקול האחר: ספורות נשים עבריות* (*Ha-kol ha-acher: Siporet nashim Ivrit*, The other voice: Hebrew women's short stories) (Tel-Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uchad, 1994), pp. 261–346; C. Naveh, "לקט, פאה, רשכחה: החיים מחוץ לקנון" (*Leket, pe'ah ve-shichekhah: Ha-chayim mi-chuts la-kanon*, Gleaning, edge, and forgetfulness: Life outside the canon) in *מינ, מגדר, פוליטיקה* (*Min, migdar, politikah*, Sex, gender, politics) ed. D. Izraeli, et al. (Tel-Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uchad, 1999), pp. 49–106. And O. Lubin, "אשה קוראת אשה" (*Ishah koret ishah*, A woman is reading a woman) *בִּיקורת תיאורית* (*Te'oriah u-vikoret*) 3 (1993): 65–78.

<sup>17</sup> Fetishism, according to Homi Bhabha involves "a disavowal of difference"—an inability to grasp anything that violates the established order of "wholeness" or "similarity." H. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 66–84.

<sup>18</sup> *כל העיר* (*Kol ha-ir*) (April 16, 1999): 58–59. (My thanks to Anton Shammas.)

reduces it to a level of...I don't want to repeat this word. This poet wouldn't write this way about the Masbachah (worry beads) of the Arabs or the Cross. Today maybe things have changed.... Look at the way they talk on TV.... But in spite of it there is limit." Being asked "Don't you think it is a bit outrageous to call Yona Wallach 'a horny beast?'" Tasa-Glazer, after eighteen years, "In the poem she calls herself a horse. I only interpreted her images. If she can do it, so can I."<sup>19</sup>

## 1. THE FEMINIST SPACE OF INTERTEXTUALITY

Tasa-Glazer's cunning debate with Wallach is an ironic nemesis in the field of Israeli, feminist representation. It designates an extreme voice on the continuum of public responses provoked by the poem. But in "Tefillin" Wallach is also engaged in a dialogic relationship with her "anterior literary corpus."<sup>20</sup> In the poem's intertextuality—especially with reference to biblical and other Jewish sources—Wallach brings irony and depth to her subversive reading of the canon and at the same time expands the space of female presence in that canonic language. The expression, *מַעֲדָנוֹת* (*ma'adanot*), for example, which I translate as "delicately," alludes to the biblical confrontation between Samuel and Agag, the king of the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:32) and Agag's special way of approaching Samuel. Earlier, Samuel, who was angered by Saul's inability to kill the Amalekite king, asks that Agag be brought to him. "And Agag came unto him delicately," because he predicts a favorable verdict will be rendered on his behalf. Agag assumes that "surely the bitterness of death is past," whereas Samuel, whose anger is justified because Agag has killed women and children (*שִׁסְףָּה* [*shisef*]), hews Agag to pieces. Wallach plays with the ambiguity of this adverb, whose lexical meaning could refer to the tender feelings of the sexual act, but also invokes the tender delicacy before a brutal death.

Another term, *יָצִיב* (*yatsiv*, stable), alludes to the recited morning prayer, saying, "אֱמֶת וַיָּצִיב וַנַּחֲנוֹן וְקִיִּים הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה עָלֵינוּ" (*Emet ve-yatsiv ve-nachon ve-kayam ha-davar ha-zeh 'alenu*, True and certain and stable and enduring is this word unto us) and directly reflects Wallach's concern with tying the tefillin straps to stable, reliable posts. At the same time such stability is mocked because as it turns out, this pole is so stable that it endures the pulling of the straps, the strangling of the male. These examples indicate that for

<sup>19</sup> *כל דעיף*, p. 59.

<sup>20</sup> *□*. Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 39.

Wallach violence is not restricted to what one chooses to do with tefillin, nor to the production details. Violence is also established in the usage of language, existing on many levels coterminously.

The emergence of a large group of Hebrew women writers in the early eighties along with other internal socio-political developments helped to shift the focus of public attention from national hegemony and patriarchal ideology to individual introspection, female agency and subjectivity, and bodily representation. In this climate, literature, along with an increasing number of critical productions in theater, visual art, film, or popular music, helps to radicalize the public discourse, adding to the visibility of gender, ethnicity, and other ideological issues.<sup>21</sup> If Wallach's reception until the mid-seventies was problematic, the eighties saw a marked increase in the tolerance of her poetry, prevalent not only among young feminist poets and prose writers, but also among the general public. In this context Wallach becomes an icon of postmodernity, "a cult figure" who revolutionized Hebrew poetics.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the claim that Wallach's work is an artifact of postmodern sexuality, it is productive to focus on Wallach's specific relationship to the poetics of the older generation of poets, like Dalia Ravikovitch, and more specifically to her poem "מתנות מלכים" (*Matnot mlakhim*, Kings' gifts).<sup>23</sup> This poem provides us with an excellent opportunity to compare Ravikovitch's gender critique with Wallach's erotic, performative text, and to examine issues of intertextuality between the two women poets. In general, Ravikovitch's early poetry speaks directly to a female concern with powerlessness and violence as articulated through the body. Her writing

<sup>21</sup>Some examples are Chanoch Levin's plays, or the recent production of David Maayan's "*Arbeit Macht Frei Von Toitland Europe*" (Akko Theater, 1991–1996). For a thorough literary history of this process in women's literature see C. Naveh, "Life Outside the Canon," L. Rattok, *The other voice*, and Y. Feldman, *No Room*, introduction.

<sup>22</sup>Y. Feldman, *No Room*, p. 10. Zafira Lidovsky Cohen, who celebrates Wallach as an Israeli cultural hero, argues that Wallach's poetry belongs to the tradition of Romanticism. Making connections to Bialik's traditionalist perception of language, Cohen concludes that Wallach is neither a Postmodernist nor a Modernist, but rather a "Romantic realist," believing, accordingly, in "the inherently natural character of language and words' propensity to directly reveal the essence of things." In Z. L. Cohen, "Back from Oblivion: The Nature of 'Word' in Yona Wallach's Poetry," *Hebrew Studies* 41(2000): 101. See also Z. L. Cohen, "יונה וולך כגיבורת תרבות ישראלית" (*Yonah Wallach ke-giborat tarbut Yisraelit*, Yona Wallach as an Israeli cultural hero) *מאזניים* (*Moznayim*) 9 (June 2000): 41–45.

<sup>23</sup>For example, on the relationship between Wallach's first poem collection *דברים* (*Dvarim*, Words) and Dalya Herts's *מרגוט* (*Margot*, Margot) see R. Vierecht, "אין שליטה על הדם" (*Ein shlitah 'al ha-dam*, You can't control the blood) *מאזניים* (*Moznayim*) 10 (1992): 33; and L. Rattok, *Angel of Fire*, pp. 43–49. Rattok compares Wallach's poem "יונתן" (*Yonatan*, Yonathan) to D. Ravikovitch's, *אהבת תפוח הזר* (*Ahavat tapuah ha-zahav*, The love of the orange) (Merchaviah: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1967), demonstrating that although Wallach "went farther than Ravikovitch in her expression of sexuality and violence," Ravikovitch's passion and aggression are evident in her later collection *חורף קשה: שירים* (*Choref kashev: Shirim*, Hard winter) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1965). L. Rattok, *Angel of Fire*, pp. 66–74, esp. p. 73.



addresses the crisis of the feminine and attracts attention to the inferior position of women in an Israeli society controlled by adult males.<sup>24</sup> Ravikovitch's poem "Kings' Gifts,"<sup>25</sup> like Wallach's "Tefillin," introduces violent eroticism into negotiations of female power, but it is also an early dramatic text that uses destructive sexual dialogue centered on the object of desire, הראשה אבן (*even ha-ro'shah*, the head or foundation stone [of the Temple]).

### Kings' Gifts

### מתנות מלכים

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 The king descended with his beloved                                     | 1 המלך ירד עם אהובתו                    |
| 2 To the bottom of the ship   | 2 אל תחתית הספינה                       |
| 3 To the bottom of the ship   | 3 אל תחתית הספינה                       |
| 4 To choose for her from amongst his treasure a present.                  | 4 לבחור לה מבין גנזיו מתנה              |
| 5 I will give you riders and attendants                                   | 5 —אני אתן לך פָּרָשִׁים וּמַשְׁמָשִׁים |
| 6 I will build for you temples of prayer                                  | 6 אני אבנה לך היכלות תפלה               |
| 7 I will say your prayer to God   | 7 אני אמר תפלתך לאלהים                  |
| 8 Your prayer for you—in my love.   | 8 תפלתך בשבילך—באהבתי.                  |
| 9 I will bring you ivory and parrots.                                     | 9 אני אביא לך שנהבים ותוכאים.           |
| 10 Elders and wise men will wait upon you.                                | 10 זקנים וחכמים ישרתוונך.               |
| 11 And all that I scrutinized and concluded wisely                        | 11 וכל אשר חקרתי ואזנתי בחכמה           |
| 12 I will reveal to you—in my love.                                       | 12 אגלה לך—באהבתי.                      |
| 13 I will bring you midgets and Kushiyim                                  | 13 אני אביא לך ננסים וכושיים            |
| 14 And the chariot of Sheba and her overseer and her charioteer           | 14 ורכב שבא ונגידה ושלישה               |
| 15 Your head will spin on you like a wheel in the multitude of my desire. | 15 ראשך יסב עלך כגלגל ברב חשקי.         |
| 16 I will bring you the Head Stone.                                       | 16 אני אביא לך את האבן הראשה.           |

<sup>24</sup>See also D. Ravikovitch's short story "אהור קטן" (*Ichur katan*, One short wait), which addresses the subject of female physical abuse in the army base. D. Ravikovitch, *מוות במשפחה* (*Mavet ba-mishpachah*, Death in the family) (Tel-Aviv: 'Am 'Oved, 1977), pp. 26–33.

<sup>25</sup>First published in D. Ravikovitch, *The Love of the Orange*, pp. 26–29, and later in D. Ravikovitch, *All the Poems Thus Far*, pp. 31–33.

*Chorus*

17 The Head Stone, The Head Stone  
 18 Blessed is the one who takes and  
 inherits it.  
 19—I inherited the Head Stone  
 20 And the chariot of Sheba and her  
 overseer and charioteer.  
 21 My head goes spinning in my lust  
 22 To touch the Head Stone  
 23 To lick the Head Stone  
 24 To shatter the Head Stone.  
 25 I took all my passion  
 26 The more my passion grew  
 27 The more my passion was insatiable.  
 28 I took a portion of six and also of  
 seven.  
 29 I want the Head Stone  
 30 To touch the Head Stone  
 31 To lick the Head Stone  
 32 To gore with my head the Head Stone.  
 33 My passion will be my stumbling  
 block  
 34 And the day of my death is certain  
 and not far  
 35 I will pronounce all my passion  
 openly—  
 36 I want the Head Stone  
 37 To touch the Head Stone  
 38 To shatter the Head Stone  
 39 On me and on my head  
 40 On me and on my head  
 41 And on the back of my neck  
 42 I knew that my passion would be my  
 stumbling block.  
 43 The King is the Head Stone.  
 44 From the bottom of the ship to the  
 ends of the earth

## מקהלה

17 הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה, הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 18 אֲשֶׁר־יִנְחֹל אוֹתָהּ וִירְשָׁתָהּ.  
 19 — אֲנִי יִרְשָׁתִי אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 20 וְהָרֶכֶב שְׂבָא וְנִגְיֶדָה וְשָׁלִישָׁהּ.  
 21 רֹאשִׁי סוֹבֵב הוֹלֵךְ בְּאַוֹתִי  
 22 לְמוֹשׁ אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 23 לְלֶקֶת אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 24 לְרֹץ אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה.  
 25 אֲנִי נִטְלָתִי כָּל תַּאֲוֹתִי  
 26 כָּכָל אֲשֶׁר רָבְתָה תַּאֲוֹתִי  
 27 הִיָּתָה תַּאֲוֹתִי לְאֵין־שִׂבְעָה  
 28 נִטְלָתִי חֶלֶק לְשִׁשָּׁה וְגַם שִׁבְעָה.  
 29 אֲנִי רוֹצֶה אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 30 לְמוֹשׁ אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 31 לְלֶקֶת אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 32 נִגַּח רֹאשׁ אֶל הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה.  
 33 תַּאֲוֹתִי תִּהְיֶה לִּי בַּעֲוֹכְרִי  
 34 וַיּוֹם מוֹתִי אֲשׁוּר וְלֹא רָחוֹק  
 35 אֲשִׁיחָה נִגְדָה־נָּא אֶת כָּל  
 תַּאֲוֹתִי —  
 36 אֲנִי רוֹצֶה אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 37 לְמוֹשׁ אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 38 לְרֹץ אֶת הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה  
 39 עָלַי וְעַל רֹאשִׁי  
 40 עָלַי וְעַל רֹאשִׁי  
 41 וְעַל צִנְאָרִי  
 42 יָדַעְתִּי שֶׁתַּאֲוֹתִי תִּהְיֶה לִּי בַּעֲוֹכְרִי.  
 43 הַמֶּלֶךְ הוּא הָאֶבֶן הָרֹאשׁה.  
 44 מִתַּחְתִּית הַסְּפִינָה וְעַד קְצוֹת  
 עוֹלָם

- 45 Bad is the thing that his servants are blind every one  
 46 Won't they see the fire  
 47 The fire coming from the thornbush  
 48 Ablaze in their king?
- 49 The king is the Head Stone.
- Chorus*
- 50 The Head Stone, The Head Stone  
 51 Woe unto the one who takes and inherits it.

45 רַע הַדָּבָר שֶׁמִּשְׁרָתָיו עִוְרִים כָּלֶם

46 הָאֵם לֹא יֵרְאוּ אֶת הָאֵשׁ

47 יוֹצֵאת מִן הָאֵטָר

48 בּוֹעֶרֶת בְּמִלְכָּם?

49 הַמֶּלֶךְ הוּא הָאֶבֶן הָרִאשָׁה.

מִקְהֵלָה

50 הָאֶבֶן הָרִאשָׁה, הָאֶבֶן הָרִאשָׁה

51 אָבִי לְנוֹטֵל אוֹתָהּ וִירֵשָׁהּ.

The limitless passion surrounding the objects, and the ritualized metonymic relationship to the objects, are intensified by the erotic tone and lead finally to death.<sup>26</sup> It is important, thus, to read “Kings’ Gifts” as an intertext to “Tefillin.” Unlike Wallach, but typical of Ravikovitch, “Kings’ Gifts” employs extensive layers of biblical allusions, archaic vocabulary, and conservative meter; in general it lacks the excessiveness and bluntness of “Tefillin.” Yet, despite the apparent differences between these poems, the similarities are striking. Consider, for example, how Wallach evokes Ravikovitch’s text in the offer of the male to do “things” for her: “I will build for you temples of prayers<sup>27</sup> will say your prayer to God<sup>28</sup> Your prayer for you—in my love” (initiated by the male in “Kings’ Gifts”) and “Let me do nothing<sup>29</sup> You do it for me<sup>30</sup> Do everything for me<sup>31</sup> Everything I start to do<sup>32</sup> You do instead<sup>33</sup> will lay tefillin<sup>34</sup> I pray<sup>35</sup> You lay the tefillin on me” (initiated by the female in “Tefillin”). Both place sexuality in a dramatic framework to varying degrees. Both poems also make reference to external authority: the קהל (*kahal*, audience, crowd) in “Tefillin,” and the מִקְהֵלָה (*makhelah*, chorus) in “Kings’ Gifts,” both from the same root, קהל (*k.h.l.*, to gather, convene), deploying the collective presence of an audience. In both poems, the קהל (*kahal*) and מִקְהֵלָה (*makhelah*) provide a contextual, complimentary voice that highlights the power structure of the cast in the drama. Furthermore, the cyclical movement of female desire, expressed by the use of the root סבב (*s.v.v.*, to wind, to spin) in both poems, results in the death of the male actor. In Ravikovitch’s poem, “Your head will spin on you

<sup>26</sup> I have not seen any reference to “מתנות מלכים” (Kings’ gifts) in the critical literature concerning Ravikovitch’s writing, nor did the translated English collection of Ravikovitch’s poetry include this poem.

like a wheel abundantly desired,” or “my head goes spinning in my lust.” In “Tefillin:” “I will wind one end a few times around your throat.”

The dialogue of giving and receiving in “Kings’ Gifts” motivates the narrative. Among the gifts that the narcissistic king will bestow upon the female once she descends with him to the bottom of the ship (a pre- or subconscious state) is *אבן הראשה* (*’even ha-ro’shah*), which will arouse her passion. The Head Stone, a reference to conception, is the seal of a royal male (material goods, knowledge, love, prayer) that seeks to be imprinted on the woman’s body. Yet, the material excess and the prospect of a gift as magnificent as the Head Stone inspire unlimited desire for control and destruction. This exaggerated enactment of a passion of mythological proportion, whose main historical prototype is King Solomon, prevents the genealogical movement that maps the economy of desire in terms of both gender and survival. If male power is manifested through female desire for the stone, then the female’s response to the male’s lavish gift is fatal.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly both poems deal with male cultural objects. The Kings’ gifts are questionable as they are motivated by self-serving drives, and as such they end up destroying those who are taken by them. Ravikovitch rejects gifts that are overwhelmingly (violently) bestowed upon her. Her poem explicitly laments the irony of receiving gifts of male culture, be they language, creativity, sexuality, or subjectivity. In a wider sense, this impossible position embodies Ravikovitch’s poetic stance vis-à-vis what male culture, at its best, has to offer her as a poet. It is an ironic statement about her own intertextuality within the male canon, and the impossible space of the woman within this tradition. But if the inherited objects of the patriarchs are unable to fulfill Ravikovitch’s desire, for Wallach they do. In fact, Wallach is so attracted to them that she is “obliged” (as Cixous feels) to steal them, even and because they are forbidden to her. She knows that in order to unbind the female body from its patriarchal bondage, she has to bind herself paradoxically and grotesquely to its sacred object. More than that, in spite of the object difference between Ravikovitch and Wallach, they both perform a

<sup>27</sup>□The metonymic/metaphoric movement from the body to the Temple (in the expression *אבן הראשה* [*even ha-roshah*, the head stone]) and from the temple to the body (in the poem) emphasizes that in this hierarchy the axis of transference is through the head. Yet the Head Stone becomes poisonous and reverses the biblical prototype which Zechariah’s prophecy (“Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit”) intended. Once informed by the stone of Abimelech, it is full of the irony of destruction and death. The intensified desire spiraling around the Stone is demonstrated by the extensive use of infinitives. *לרזץ* (*la-rotz*, to shatter or crush) is inseparable from the pathetic death of Abimelech who, once hit by the “piece of millstone” thrown by a woman, asked to be killed twice, “Draw thy sword, and slay me, that man say not of me, A woman slew him” (Judg 9:53–54). Note the meaning of other infinitives: *למוש* (*la-mush*, to touch, to feel); *ללוק* (*la-lok*, to lick); *נגח ראש* (*nageah ro’sh*, goring with (one’s) head).

“theater of poetry.” Ravikovitch laments the burning fire around the Head Stone, the king (“Woe unto the one who takes and inherits it”), Wallach pulls the tefillin straps around the male throat, turning them into his death trap.

## 2. THEATRICAL RITUAL

נשים ועבדים פטורים מתפילין.

(*Nashim va-ʿavadim pturim mi-tefillin*, Women and slaves are exempt from laying tefillin.)

שולחן ערוך (Shulchan ʿArukh)

All rituals are paradoxical and dangerous enterprises, the traditional and improvised, the sacred and secular. Paradoxical because rituals are conspicuously artificial and theatrical, yet designed to suggest the inevitability and absolute truth of their messages. Dangerous because when we are not convinced by a ritual we may become aware of ourselves as having made them up, thence on to the paralyzing realization that we have made up all our truths; our ceremonies, our most precious conceptions and convictions—all are mere inventions.<sup>28</sup>

Wallach’s choice to use tefillin is grounded in a radical strategy of exposing and exposition. After all, what other object could institutionalize theatrical ritual more than this daily, cyclical, yet sacred object? What other object (or site) could expose a better drama laying tefillin on the female body? Let us examine the ritualistic space that the straps of the tefillin afford.

Physically, the material used in making tefillin was originally cut from the skin of a calf sacrificed at the Temple, as described in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sanh.* 48b). And today they are made from the skins of “ritually pure” animals. Tefillin are the two small boxes, one is attached to the head של ראש (*shel rosh*) and the other is attached to the arm and hand של יד (*shel yad*). They contain scriptural texts, and connected to black leather straps (the box of the head to two straps, and the one of the hand to one long strap) that religious Jewish men bind to their foreheads and arms as part of the Morning Prayer service. The Torah commands, “You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (Deut 6:8). Tefillin encodes an entire male ritualistic tradition, referring to the main constituting narratives in the relationship between Israel and God; the box of the head (*shel rosh*) consists of four compartments, each containing strips of parchment on which are written biblical passages that mention the departure

<sup>28</sup> B. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1979), p. 89.

from Egypt, the dedication of all firstborn males to God, and the injunction to remember the origin of the covenant between God and man (Exod 13:1–10, 11–16; Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21). Each laying of tefillin is an additional performance, (en)acting the recited quatrains of the ritual, becoming, in itself, a poetic allusion to the text.

Instructions for putting on the tefillin are very precise. The Rabbis set the law of tefillin based upon a literal reading of the biblical verse, quoted above, which appears in four passages in the Bible (Exod 13:1–10, 11–16; Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21). In spite of its literal origin, several variations emerged around the practice, evidence of its significance. The male-directed imperative to touch לַמַּשְׁמֶשׁ (*lemashmesh*) the leather straps is an important part of the meditation—a bodily interaction with the object that Wallach sexualized in her poem. Numerous instructions codify the ritual regarding the purity of the object, the male body, and the male mind. Religiously, the tefillin secure, most intimately, the ongoing renewal of human relations with God and the covenant.<sup>29</sup> It is a reference within a reference, the “sign of a sign,” creating both the “interior space and time” of the humble, obedient Jewish subject and the abstract authority of God.<sup>30</sup> In fact, one can say that tefillin are themselves, an object of authority, and that by binding his body and his spirit, the male performs an act of utmost humility. Yet, this positive symbol is also a site of intimacy and connectedness that, as Rachel Adler explains, serves to “hallow time, hallow his (man’s) physical being, and inform both his myth and his philosophy.”<sup>31</sup>

If tefillin constitute the ultimate masculine space, a celebration of the relationship between the pure man and God, then women are necessarily excluded. Indeed, in contemporary Israeli culture, tefillin have become a prototype ritual—a catalyst in establishing and affirming the special bond between the man and God. In general, the more we understand the significance of tefillin as a monumental institution at the center of Jewish identity, and the more we realize the position of desire it constitutes for

<sup>29</sup>Modern patriarchy keeps finding new roles for the ritual. Ideologically, the act of laying tefillin became the ultimate act that can bring a nonpracticing male Jew back to his Judaism (God) in times of crisis. During Israeli wars, for example, Hasidic Jews offer the straps to soldiers at the front as a good omen, using the symbol as a marker between life and death.

<sup>30</sup>“The arbitrary nature of the sign may hold within the relation of word and thing, but it is transformed into a nonarbitrary relation by social praxis.” S. Stewart, *On Longing* (Durham, N.C., 1993), p. 17. In this fascinating book Stewart examines cultural objects (the souvenir, the collection) and their narratives with relations to language, body, and experience. Whereas the “miniature” constitutes a metaphor of interiority, the “gigantic” is a metaphor of the exterior world.

<sup>31</sup>R. Adler, “The Jew Who Wasn’t There: Halakhah and the Jewish Woman,” in *On Being A Jewish Feminist* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983), pp. 12–18.

Jewish males, we also come to see that the ritual of tefillin holds out no room, no hope for women. Being halakhically “פטורה” (*ptura*) exempted from the ritual, does not immune the woman from longing for it. On the contrary, Wallach’s “Tefillin” should be seen as an act by which she interjects herself into this male institution.<sup>32</sup> The gender-blind approach to literature, about which Israeli feminists agonized, can be addressed only through this poetic act.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Wallach’s poem attends precisely to this gender blindness; it produces its reversal by an exaggerated, overdramatization of sex and religion. By presenting the role of tefillin visually, Wallach utters a radical prayer against the exclusion of women in Jewish/Israeli ritual and culture.<sup>34</sup> It says that if women are exempt from the ties that bind us to the text, to its memory and history, then the response to *gender blind* is *gender bind*. The question is, how can Wallach transform the ritual around the very sacred, cultic object into a ritual poem? Wallach, we will see, not only expends the poetic space by evoking the domain of ritual, she also utilizes the performative stage of the theater.

But Wallach’s choice of turning tefillin into the object of her theatrical spectacle entails a tremendous public scandal. “What is perceived as the most scandalous thing,” Shoshana Felman explains about *The Turn of the Screw*, is “that *we are forced to participate in the scandal....* [t]here is no such thing as an innocent reader of this text.”<sup>35</sup> Wallach’s poem similarly seduces the reader to her scandalous site of tefillin by virtue of its religious (sacred), sexual, and performative attraction. Felman’s assertion that the reader inescapably becomes an active participant through the act of reading applies particularly to the poem’s highly seductive monologue; the woman residing behind the text, however, cannot be separated from either the poem’s composition or its enactment. Also, the critical responses to the poem

<sup>32</sup> Jewish social practices in which men, and a male’s perspective, encroach upon the domain of a woman’s body are common in Jewish law. One need only recall the subject of *niddah* (the laws of female ritual purity concerning menstruation) and its attendant classification of blood color and size of blood spots.

<sup>33</sup> E. Fuchs, *Israeli Mythogynies*, pp. 1–11. Fuchs argues that “A myopic vision which focuses exclusively on male-produced works and on male subjects as national symbols is just as inimical to the development of a radical inquiry of literary epistemologies and the political assumptions underlying them as the restrictive use of a term ‘politics’.” F. Fuchs, *Israeli Mythogynies*, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> The demonstrative significance of laying tefillin is explicitly articulated in the Bible. “Tefillin,” from the Hebrew root פלל (*pll*) means to pray but also to discriminate. Tefillin marks gender, nation (Yisrael/Goyim), and bodily distinctions. The preference of the head (law, canon, culture) over the hand and the rest of the body (sexuality, grotesque, nature) reinforces the opposition of classic, and pure versus unofficial and impure. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), pp. 28–30.

<sup>35</sup> S. Felman, “Turning the Screw of Interpretation,” in *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. S. Felman (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1982), pp. 94–207, esp. p. 97, emphasis in original.

become, themselves, additional performances imposed by the author.<sup>36</sup> Reading “Tefillin” inevitably redefines the reader as an actor or producer. It turns the innocent reader into a sexual partner, which partially explains the anxiety the poem produces in a reader who cannot escape from the grasp of the tefillin on his/her now sexually engaged body.

According to David Gurevitch, “Wallach knows that words have a long history of “mutual voyeurism,” and she uses them in her mixing of “sexual poetics with the poetics of power.”<sup>37</sup> Ideological relationships can be, therefore, perceived and articulated through words and language as sexualized objects, because “words...are fetishistic objects of voyeurism.... Sometimes they are used as mobile initiators through which the world is perceived in its exposed, naked, almost pornographic condition.”<sup>38</sup> But more precisely here, “Tefillin” demands close attention to the implied setting of a theatrical stage in order for the reader to understand the political and poetic strategy involved in both writing and reading the poem.<sup>39</sup> The sexual engagement of bondage must be understood in the context of performance. Therefore, the text must be read as a set of informal stage directions given by a female director/producer to a male actor in a one-act show—the implied director also functions as both playwright and female lead.<sup>40</sup> Approaching the text as performance redefines the relationship between the text and its reader and introduces the fancy of drama. This paradigm disengages the reader and allows some relief from the anxiety the poem evokes. Seeing the poem as performance opens up the space of the poem to include the outside world:

<sup>36</sup> S. Felman, “Turning of the Screw,” p. 101.

<sup>37</sup> The common objectives of feminism and postmodernism, according to Gurevitch, are articulated in terms of the notions of difference, allegory, and deconstruction. Although Gurevitch does not discuss or even mention the poem “Tefillin” or, in fact, the *אור פרא: שירים* (*Or Pere: Shirim*, *Or Pere* collection) by Y. Wallach (Yerushalayim: Eikhut, 1983), I find his discussion of Wallach’s poetry relevant and important. D. Gurevitch, “פמיניזם ופוסטמודרניזם” (*Feminism ve-Postmodernism*, *Feminism and postmodernity*) *אלפאיים* (*Alpayim*) 7 (1993): 27–58, p. 51.

<sup>38</sup> D. Gurevitch, “Feminism and Postmodernity,” p. 51.

<sup>39</sup> Note that bondage (man to God or sex partner to partner) is also an act generated for theatrical affect. There is some interesting scholarship on sadomasochism that depicts the same relationship. The bondage is a “scene.” Even privately or intimately, the “scene” calls for the invisible reader to articulate oneself to its power relations.

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, in 1983, Mikhah Kirshner for the magazine *מוניטין* (*Moniti*) shot a series of photographs based on the poem, with the poet appearing in the pictures in the role of the female subject. Sarna describes the occasion: “They continued to the studio of the photographer, Mikhah Kirshner. Dani Dotan’s younger brother, a handsome young soldier, took off all his clothes. Yona didn’t want to undress. ‘I am crazy for clothes,’ she said, ‘Nudity takes experience.’ They wound the tefillin around the soldier’s arm and he placed it (the arm) on Yona’s body. Kirshner began to shoot. The camera clicked; the naked man twisted around Yona. The photos were filled with sensual scenes. But when the printout arrived at *Monitin*, the assistant graphic editor, a religious man, threatened to resign if the erotic photos of “Tefillin” were chosen for the Magazine. They cut the body of the soldier and the tefillin, only the hand of the man on Yona’s stomach remained as a kind of hairy sexual body part,” I. Sarna, *Yona Wallach*, pp. 285–286.



political, historical, and cultural all play a role in the realization of the text, and “are encouraged to assert themselves” on the stage.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that Wallach kept the stage hidden until the last moment, explicitly introducing it only in the last two lines of the poem in order to culminate the shocking drama by the man’s death, a climax heightened by the presence of a voyeuristic audience: “Until I strangle you  completely with the tefillin  that stretch the length of the stage  and into the astonished audience.”

My reading of “Tefillin” actualizes the poem’s casual mood as implied by the stage directions found in the poem. Practically, the poem is a text in which a female producer approaches a male actor. She speaks swiftly, excitedly, in broken sentences, giving directions to the actor and then to herself. At the same time, she pays attention to the setting, the lights, facial expressions, and the audience. She is enthusiastic, as if envisioning the scene as she talks and becoming excited as she imagines the act. She repeats herself. Her verbs and adverbs mobilize this text as they provide optional space for action. More than any adjectives and nouns, the verbs are the key points in the “oral” script, highlighting the narrative structure of the instructions. The performance becomes more concrete with every imperative the director employs. As a good director, she verbalizes the many alternatives that will eventually constitute the actual performance. Taken as instructions for staging, the verbs and the poem in its entirety should be considered in its most informal sense as a performative pose, spoken intensely but colloquially.

Do *everything* for me (the word “everything” is stretched suggesting everything that comes to his mind)

Everything *I* start to do (a pose to emphasize the “I” and “You” contrast)

*You* do instead

*I* will lay tefillin

*I*’ll pray (as if she counts the possible actions)

*You* lay the tefillin on me

Turn me over on my stomach (she lays out the different actions she provides)

Put the tefillin in my mouth like reins (she invokes the image of the mare)

Ride me I am a mare

Pull my head back

Oh, how cruel my face will be (she anticipates her facial expression)

I will pass them slowly over your body

*Slowly slowly slowly* (could be said quickly)

Around your throat I’ll pass them

I will wind one end a few times around your throat

<sup>41</sup>   I. Sayre, “Performance,” in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago and London, 1995), p. 94.

And tie the other to *something stable*  
 (she might look around the room to find an example to this “something”)  
*Something very heavy perhaps rotating* (she speaks slowly, figuring it out)  
 I’ll pull and I’ll pull

*Completely* with the tefillin (stressed, emphatic)  
 That stretch the length of the stage  
 And into the astonished audience. (assertive, prompt)

Wallach clearly plays on familiar boundaries between theater and life, the mundane and the ceremonial, the public and the private. Through the stage and the public theater which she constructs, we witness the two acts that are socially perceived as most intimate:<sup>42</sup> the act of laying tefillin and the act of having sex. This act of sexuality gets confused with the daily, Jewish male, bodily ritual that is supposedly devoid of explicit sexuality. This conflation is a new language of subjectivity, for here the female speaker reverses traditional roles and invents new positions and dispositions. Her position as speaker and stage director redefines the possibility of female roles: she is on the stage, her body is dressed, her voice undressing. But appearing dressed further masks the language of instruction. The poem is less invested emotionally, and even the allusions to the official language of *halakhic* reality (laying tefillin), are teased by the temporal and spatial casual framework. One of the defining characteristics of ritual is its highlighted, transcendent, and marked notions of time and space. Wallach reframes the ritual of laying tefillin on the stage.

In her adaptation of Monique Wittig’s *Les Guérillères* (1977), feminist playwright and director Batya Podos, conceptualized ritual theater as a “transformative spiritual experience” for “an audience that has been denied knowledge of its own history and power.” Aiming to reach the audience’s subconscious, ritual theater tends to be nonlinear, transcending constraints of conventional order by introducing timelessness, mythic setting, and repetitive language and movements, much as Wallach produces ritual theatrics through her poem.<sup>43</sup> She lays on tefillin only to dismantle it. Wallach’s innovative ritual theater appropriates not only the object, tefillin, but also the whole ritualistic framework of halakhic instructions, always addressed in masculine imperatives, and always presupposes the presence of an authoritative first person (God). Such a framework not only keeps the referential process of the

<sup>42</sup>Even though the ritualistic aspect of laying tefillin is often part of the daily morning prayer or שחרית (*shacharit*) and maybe done as part of a מינין (*minyan*), the spiritual relationship between the person laying the tefillin is solitary and private.

<sup>43</sup>B. Podos, “Feeding the Feminist Psyche through Ritual Theater,” in *The Politics of Women’s Spirituality*, ed. C. Spetnak (New York: Anchor Books, 1982), pp. 305–311.

poetic language to its textual allusions active, it suggests that language of religious law, when practiced consistently as ritual, constitutes Jewish Israeli identity, creating Jewish man and woman.

But it is the usage of the stage that opens the referential system to other possibilities and subverts its meaning. The interplay between the poem and the stage confuses the relationships between the ritual (poetic) and the poem (ritualistic). These relationships drive the metaphorization of the characters and the object further forward, as it confuses the tight relationship to one referential system. To start with, every dramatic text “offers points that have no reference in the world and the reference that is offered can be realized only on the stage, performed by real flesh and blood actors, with the support of real objects.” The paradox of the dramatic text is that even before being produced on stage, but especially when it is produced on stage, the “real” acquires its fictitious status. The real existence of the actors gains its metaphoric status: “fictitious characters” acted by “real characters.”<sup>44</sup>

Such a text reworks the relationship between signifiers and signified. Wallach is using the performativity of both the Hebrew language and the contextual stage she provides. As theater, “Tefillin” becomes metaphor, breaking out of the object’s conventional meaning to accrue ambiguous meanings. This ambiguity rescues the text and the symbol from its literal meaning, or as Felman argues, from being “vulgar.”

The vulgar is literal insofar as it is unambiguous: The literal is ‘vulgar’ because it stops the movement constitutive of meaning, because it blocks and interrupts the endless process of metaphorical substitution.<sup>45</sup>

Although I have reservations about the general equation of vulgar with literal, in its semiotic economy between signifier and signified, the vulgar in poetry does indeed translate into an imposition.<sup>46</sup> The stage alluded to, therefore, helps to convey the open space that such metaphoric articulation brings to “Tefillin.” Wallach, in emptying conventional categories of time and space of their immediate sacred meaning, realizes their powerful potential during the performance. As if the text, as text, is secondary; as if it serves primarily to precipitate the performance, and so results in a serious, yet theatrical act: one repetitive performance.

<sup>44</sup>Maor, “יצירת ספרות כתאטרון” (*Yetsirat sifrut ke-teatron*, The work of literature as theater), in *אנו כותבים אותך מולדת* (*Anu kotvim ʔotakh moledet*, We are writing you, our homeland) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meʕuchad, 1995), pp. 249–250.

<sup>45</sup>℥. Felman, “Turning of the Screw,” p. 107.

<sup>46</sup>℥Such an imposition explains the leap that is usually done between “literal” and “pornographic.”

## 2.1□ New Sign: The Female Body

In Hebrew, transitive verbs require the use of the particle or preposition *et* (אֶת) when the object is definite. When joined with a pronoun suffix, the conjugation of אֶת becomes *oto* (אוֹתוֹ), *otkha* (אוֹתְךָ), and *oti* (אוֹתִי)... “me,” “you,” “him,” and so forth. The extensive use of transitive verbs in the poem, especially in reference to the tefillin straps, results in the repetition of *otam* (אוֹתָם), them (for example, כִּרְוַךְ אוֹתָם [*kroch otam*, bind them]... שַׁחַק אוֹתָם [*sachek otam*, play them]... הַעֲבֵר אוֹתָם [*ha'aver otam*, pass them]... חֲכַךְ אוֹתָם [*chakhekh otam*, rub them]... אֶלֶף אוֹתִי [*alef oti*, arouse me]... הַעֲבֵר אוֹתָם [*ha'aver otam*, run them]...)

The Hebrew noun *ot* (אוֹת) means either a letter (of the alphabet), or “a sign,” “mark,” “signal,” “miracle,” or “indication.” The repetition of *otam* can thus be taken as a direct allusion to *ot*, “the sign,” which is central in the tefillin instruction, which is also recited in the Morning Prayer service: “וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ” (*ve-hayu le-ot al yadekha*, And you shall bind them as a *sign* upon your hand, [Deut 6:8]). *ot* meaning letter also appears in the ritual of tefillin. Rabbi Arik Sherman describes: “During the practice of tefillin, a man forms with the straps of the leather, in different ways, the shapes of the letters שְׁדֵי (*shaday*).... You are supposed to write the name of God on your body, on your body with your body, *ot ot* (אוֹת אוֹת), letter by letter, you utter the name of God.”<sup>47</sup>

Wallach’s reference to the *ot*, the sign and the letter, through the repetitive use of the preposition and the direct object pronoun cannot be read simply as a way to challenge the original *ot*. Rather, by designating the tefillin as the primary prop/object on stage, front and center, Wallach transforms the female body into a subject, an act that liberates it from its historical objectification. Female marginality can be reconsidered once the explicitly reduced body becomes the author. From another vantage point, if a woman is perceived as only a body, and if this body is reduced to its sexual zones, then indeed, the only level on which a relationship to the female can be reimagined is through her body. The poem, in its problematic use of symbolic femininity, exposes the limitations of feminine discourse just as it raises the possibility of a woman’s breaking free through the very body that has traditionally been the locus of patriarchal eroticism. For Wallach, the constraints of the anatomic body become its autonomy.

<sup>47</sup>□ At an early stage of this study I conducted a small-scale ethnographic study, asking several men in Berkeley to describe the ritual of tefillin in general and also the personal experience. The description of Rabbi A. Sherman, in his forties, is relevant here.

## 2.2 The Clitoris, דגדגן (*Dagdegan*): “I Have a Stage in My Head”

A close textual reading shows that Wallach's poetics are explicitly embedded in a strategy that clearly recognizes, as she often stated, the multiple possibilities afforded by the richness of the Hebrew language. She crafts her language by evoking several layers of meaning, often attaching them to the stage and theater, and shifting and subverting conventions of aesthetics, intimacy, class, gender, fiction, and reality. Wallach herself was explicitly concerned with gendered language, a subject she directly addressed in her poem “עברית שפה סקסמניאקית, עברית מפלה לרעה ולטובה” (*Ivrit safa sex maniakit*, *Ivrit maflah le-ra'ah ule-tovah*, Hebrew is a sex maniac, Hebrew discriminates for and against).<sup>48</sup> While it is not the only way in which identity is revealed, language does often assume certain aspects of the speaker's identity.

In Wallach's poems, the gender of the actors is not always explicit; rather, they are often defined ambiguously. The first person in Hebrew, for example, conceals the gender of the speaker. While this identity can be codified through the grammatical morphology of verbs, adjectives, prepositions, and the occasional piece of clothing or body part, Wallach is very selective in her choices. In fact, the assumed sexual identity of “אתה” (*atah*), masculine “you” in Hebrew, and “את” (*at*), feminine “you,” are often disguised. The poem תותים (*Tutim*, Berries) is a good example of such a strategy that goes beyond the gender paradigm to reveal its power dynamic.<sup>49</sup>

### Berries

- 1 When you come to make love with me
- 2 Wear a black dress
- 3 Illustrated with berries
- 4 And a black wide brimmed hat
- 5 Decorated with berries
- 6 And hold a basket of berries
- 7 And sell me berries
- 8 Tell me in a high sweet voice

### תותים

- 1 כְּשֶׁתָּבוֹאִי לְשֵׁכַב אִתִּי
- 2 תִּלְבְּשִׁי שִׁמְלָה שְׁחֹרָה
- 3 מְאֻיָּרָה בְּתוֹתִים
- 4 וּמְגִבֶּעֶת שְׁחֹרָה
- 5 מְקֻשָּׁטָה בְּתוֹתִים
- 6 וְתַחֲזִיקִי סֶלֶסֶלַת תוֹתִים
- 7 וְתִמְכְּרִי לִי תוֹתִים
- 8 תִּגִּידִי בְּקוֹל דֶּק וּמְתוֹק

<sup>48</sup> The poem “עברית” (*Ivrit*, Hebrew), appeared first in Wallach's collection צורות (*Tsurot*, Shapes) (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ah-Me'uchad [Siman Kri'ah], 1985) and later in the collected poems, יונה וולך: תת הכרה, נפתחת כמו מניפה: מבחר שירים 1963–1985 (*Yonah Wallach: Tat Hakarah Niftachat Kmo Menifah: Mivchar Shirim*, 1963–1985, Yona Wallach: Subconscious expands like a hand-held fan: Poetry Selection, 1963–1985) (Tel-Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uchad [Siman Kri'ah], 1992), pp. 180–182.

<sup>49</sup> Y. Wallach, *Or Pere*, p. 52.

9 Berries berries	תותים תותים 9
10 Who wants berries	מי רוצה תותים 10
11 Do not wear anything underneath the dress	אל תלבשי כלום מתחת לשמלה 11
12 Later	אחר כך 12
13 Strings will lift you up	חוטים יעלו אותך למעלה 13
14 Invisible or visible	בלתי נראים או נראים 14
15 And bring you down	ויורידו אותך 15
16 Straight onto my prick.	ישר על הזין שלי. 16

The strong male presence contrasts with an absent female, who is referred to only through grammatical references, a description of the feminine addressee's outfit (a black dress and black hat), and her voice. Yet, the male, the inviting voice of the first person, is represented by the penis. The poem ends with the woman landing on the penis, but the impression created by lack of references to the woman's body is that under her outfit, the woman's nakedness is actually her absence.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, in "Tefillin," the gender of the female speaker is never marked by a grammatical reference (given the length of the poem, an amazing excursion), nor even by the ambiguous signifier שדי (*shadai*, a reference to God but also, in modern Hebrew, "my breast"), whose letters are inscribed on tefillin, but rather by the דגדגן (*dagdegan*), the clitoris. The speaking "I" reveals its feminine identity solely through reference to this sexual body part. "Arouse me everywhere ~~IV~~ Make me faint ~~IR~~ Run them across my clitoris." The mention of this specific body anatomy amplifies the contours of the female body. *Dagdegan* replies to the historical construction of the female body centered on her reproductive organs, relocating her locus of pleasure. In a fascinating poetic construction of the female presence, Wallach gives rebirth to the female body through the clitoris. A woman's pleasure, she asserts, is attainable only through the once-erased body part. סוסה (*susah*), the mare, also marks the actor as a female who is being ridden. These two references, *dagdegan* and *susah*, both have phonetically duplicated syllables, thus multiplying the female's ability to symbolically reproduce herself. In any case, *dagdegan* as the only gender marker in the poem brings to mind that the

<sup>50</sup>On fact, a female can turn into a man in a linguistic expression and play with the notion of having a penis. The male body is likewise not fully present in "Berries"; the ambiguity of the expression על הזין שלי (*al ha-zayin sheli*) which literally means "on my penis," in colloquial Hebrew indicates highly impassioned disregard, as in the expression "I don't give a damn." Wallach constructs here a male poetic body and extends the meaning of the sexual interaction, underplaying the role of the phallus in favor of its "mindful" mood.

Hebrew root דגדג (*d.g.d.g.*) means, after all, to tickle or to titillate, emphasizing the association of the clitoris with pleasure and joy (*jouissance*).

In her poem, with the clitoris as the single reference to the female body, Wallach reestablishes the primacy of the female body over that of the male as an authentic referential system.<sup>51</sup> By highlighting sexual differences within the parameters of the binary opposition of male and female bodies and roles, Wallach poses a new anatomical model. Irigaray, along with other French feminists, has been dealing with the question of how to invent and speak a language other than the ‘old’ male language, urging that

if we don’t invent a language, if we don’t find our body’s language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We shall tire of the same ones, and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealized.<sup>52</sup>

Wallach’s invented language of female sexuality and female pleasure speaks directly to the recognition of the specificity of writing women’s eroticism. As Irigaray articulated it:

The problem of ‘speaking [as] woman’ is precisely that of finding a possible continuity between the gestural expression or that speech of desire—which at present can only be identified in the form of symptoms and pathology—and a language, including a verbal language.<sup>53</sup>

In other words, woman’s sexuality and eroticism is the site of culture that, once written, can lead to the visualization of the female body as discursively and ontologically different from that of the male. Wallach’s new anatomical model of the female body challenges the Freudian-Lacanian models, which excluded the female body from the discourse of sexuality and pleasure. She subversively titillates her audience and its consciousness.

The poetic discourse encodes the performed intercourse. Yet the contextual stage emphasizes the language of the text and brings it to life. A two-layer discourse intertwines the seriousness attached to the donning of tefillin and the anxiety aroused by the erotic act, shifting from the text to the public stage and from the stage to its precursory verbal representation. Yet

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<sup>51</sup>Man Schenfeld correctly observes that tefillin and the דגדגן (*dagdegan*) are the “two articles of reality” that are confronted in this poem, linguistically and narratively. However, he does not make clear how this confrontation indicates that Wallach “did not intend to destroy the sacredness but to intensify it.” I. Schenfeld, “Clean, Isolated Pain,” p. 6. In this short article, “Tefillin” is used to demonstrate Wallach’s poetic stance.

<sup>52</sup>Ir. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. C. Porter with C. Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1985), p. 214.

<sup>53</sup>Ir. Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, p. 137.

the loaded signifiers keep overwhelming the theatrical scene as the ritual performance re-creates and reinvents the new materials; repeatedly canonizing, producing, and reproducing on stage. במה, (*bamah*)—the sinful, erotic stage—also alludes to both the biblical sacrificial altar and the prayer platform in the synagogue.

Although in “Tefillin” the stage does not appear until the end of the poem, in a later collection Wallach devoted an entire poem to the subject of the stage.<sup>54</sup>

### I Have a Stage in My Head

1 I have a stage in my head	יש לי במה בראש
2 And it is more real than any other stage	1 ויש לי במה בראש
3 And when I descend from the stage	2 והיא מציאותית יותר מכל במה
4 I reach down to the bottom step	3 וכשאני יורדת ממנה
5 I have a whole theater in my head	4 אני יורדת לשפל המדרגה
6 In it I am the hero	5 יש לי תאטרון שלם בראש
7 And when I turn off the light	6 ואני בו תגבור
8 I am finished	7 וכשאני מכבה את האור
9 And when I stop playing	8 אני גמור
10 My life stops	9 וכשאני מפסיק לשחק
11 When I let the curtains down	10 מפסיקים חיי
12 Behind my eyelashes	11 וכשאני מוריד את המסך
13 All my friends, my lovers	12 מאחורי ריסי
14 Are lost.	13 אוברים כל ידידי
15 My memories	14 אהובי.
16 My colors	15 זכרונותי
17 My magic	16 צבעי
18 My fears are coming	17 קסמי
19 My anxieties	18 באות בהלותי
20 My corpses	19 תדרותי
21 My abuses.	20 גיותי
	21 עלבונותי.

Wallach's theatrical position intensifies here: the concealed stage gives life to the real world. A stage in the head is a metaphor within a metaphor, or rather, the literalization of metaphor. Being internalized—a resource for vitality and creativity—it becomes an *emotional* framework. At the same

<sup>54</sup>ח Y. Wallach, *Poetry selection*, p. 239. Also Y. Wallach, מופע (*Mofa*) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Me'uchad, 1985).



time, relationships between writing and reality are problematized and complicated as the aspect of a play is invoked. Wallach's internalized stage is also a metaphor of "coming out" to encounter life. Stage and acting, she confesses, become her strategies for woman's survival. In this poem the self perceives itself through the close relationship between the real and the acted. But through the complicated way in which the body becomes Wallach's precursive interactor, one could say that Wallach perceives the body as a stage, an intimate platform which not only protects one's interior, but helps to suspend her torment and misery through its performance.

Many of the poems in Wallach's *אור פרא* (*ʿor pereʿ*) collection (published in 1983) allude to erotic role playing, theatrical acting, and inversion and subversion of identities through sex and the exhibition of the body. Consider the series of poems which begin: "When you come to make love to me." As the following lines indicate, fragments of clothing, voices, words, and positions all play important roles in these arrangements. "Tefillin" is the first poem to address the sexual act, followed by "תותים" (Berries), an invitation to a female addressee by a male speaker. Four poems then open with this repetitive pattern, found in their titles "כשתבוא לשכב אתי" (*kshe-tavoʿ li-shkav ʿiti*, when you [masculine, singular] come to make love to [literally to lie down with] me).<sup>55</sup>

When you come to make love to me  
Wear a policeman's uniform  
I will be your little criminal. ("When You Come," in *Or Pereʿ*, p. 54)

When you come to make love to me  
Wear a judge's robe  
I will be the little delinquent. ("When You Come to Make Love to Me Like a Judge," in *Or Pereʿ*, p. 56)

Come to make love to me like God  
Only in spirit. ("When You Come to Make Love to Me Like God," in *Or Pereʿ*, p. 58)

When you come to make love to me  
Come like my father  
Come in the dark time  
Speak in his voice . . . ("When You Come to Make Love to Me Come Like My Father," in *Or Pereʿ*, p. 60)

<sup>55</sup>□. Wallach, "תבוא אלי כמו קפיטליסט" (*Tavoʿ ʿelay kmo kapitalist*, Come to me as a capitalist) which was published in *Mofa*<sup>c</sup> and in Y. Wallach, *Poetry selection*, p. 226, could also be included in this group of poems.

Many literary critics insist on depoliticizing Wallach's position by attributing it to her mystical, otherworldly concerns.<sup>56</sup> Lacking critical distance, Helit Yeshurun, an editor and publisher of one of today's leading poetry journals, takes these poems as obvious references to Wallach's attitude toward God, and places God at the center of Wallach's sexuality. Relying on an interview with the poet and on other personal communications, she concludes that, "sex in Yona's poems is, essentially, an act of reception of mystical power." Yeshurun develops her argument, saying that

he (God) forces her to have sex (בעל אותה, *ba<sup>c</sup>el ʿotah*),<sup>57</sup> takes her over, and she surrenders and allows all the things to be done (with) in her. Because she is a vessel that denies her own desire, she has no other desire. Her self disappears and this loss of personality and the devotion to supreme power appears as the ultimate way of life.<sup>58</sup>

Yeshurun's position is perhaps not so surprising given the affection for "secular mysticism" in popular Israeli culture.<sup>59</sup> To insist that God forces himself on her (בועל אותה, *bo<sup>c</sup>el ʿotah*) is to diminish Wallach's political stance. Mythologizing the poems and the poet removes them further from their contemporary context. Such a position not only precludes the possibility of "reading as women," but also reinforces old cultural and ideological paradigms concerning gender. I argue that these poems set new terms of "intercourse" which unravel the ideological obligations and assumptions of the players (as much as of the language) in favor of new ones. Wallach, like other earlier American feminists such as Audre Lorde and Judy Chicago, is

<sup>56</sup> Along these lines, Miri Kubovy concludes her study on violence in Wallach's poetry by saying, "The religious violence in Yona Wallach's poetry is the violence of God." In M. Kubovy, "אלִימוּת בְּשִׁירַת יוֹנָה" ("Alimut be-shirat Yona Wallach, Violence in Yona Wallach's poetry") *Proceeding of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1993), pp. 237–244. See also A. Shabtai, "God's Sweet Voice," p. 33; and "Regarding Yona Wallach," *Chadaram* 5 (June 1985).

<sup>57</sup> בַּעַל (*ba<sup>c</sup>al*, husband) as husband was one of the first words that feminists aimed to remove from the vocabulary of Modern Hebrew. Originally the noun was a proper name in the Bible that referred to a specific deity, Hadad, the West Semitic storm god, the most important deity in the Canaanite pantheon. God was the "master" and "husband" to Israel, and already in Hosea (2:16) it gains the meaning of husband. As a verb, however, בָּעַל-ל, (*b<sup>c</sup>-l*) gained a sexual connotation meaning to make love forcefully or from a position of power.

<sup>58</sup> Helit Yeshurun, "God's Sweet Voice," p. 35. Although I am aware of the argument that, following Lacan, God is *jouissance* and sexual relations with God can be seen as a celebration of poetry, it seems to me that such a construction of Woman remains grounded in phallic subordination. See J. Lacan, *Feminine Sexuality*, ed. J. Mitchell and J. Rose, trans. J. Rose (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), pp. 137–148.

<sup>59</sup> At the cost of over-generalizing, I am referring to the overwhelming response of contemporary Israelis to cultic, religious, metaphysical movements which are thought to provide satisfying answers to everyday difficulties.

well aware of the power of the erotic to constitute a new site of radical women's aesthetic and political praxis.<sup>60</sup> As Lorde asserted,

we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling.

More than that, within the sexual interplay with patriarchy, these contextual postures critique those in authority who turn social, religious, and paternal power to their sexual advantage. When challenged in an interview that a policemen, a judge, God, and a father are all stereotypes of authority, Wallach approves:

Right. They have the power to hurt me. Probably it goes well with oedipal complex, a tendency to surrender to authoritativeness and too strong attachment...one gets liberated by writing poems.<sup>61</sup>

Wallach's purpose, in general, was not to establish a "new order" that reverses the pattern of relations with men, but to reconstruct, in an almost utopian way, a new emotional, philosophical and political position that corresponds to the oppositional paradigm of relations in which the power play between genders will be actualized. From this position the female is able to exercise alternative power positions.<sup>62</sup>

Wallach's theater pieces, among which the poem "Tefillin" is obviously prominent, ironically critique male power to redefine the female subject. A striking staging of an alternative to this negative identification thus results from the powerful speech acts which she, the female, constructs. In her newly negotiated gender politics, Wallach asserts that what is at stake is not the sexual act itself as much as its imagined antecedent. Power relations of gender, class, religion, or social position as well as politics, biases, and awareness all indicate that what we bring with us to the sexual act determines the act itself. One could argue that as long as it is possible to narrate these heterosexual terms, a mental collaboration—orgasmic and productive—is

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<sup>60</sup> Rather than accepting it as a sign of female inferiority, Lorde calls to bring the erotic back to female consciousness as part of a political and spiritual position. See A. Lorde "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 53–59, and J. Chicago, *Through the Flower* (New York: Penguin, 1975).

<sup>61</sup> Sarna, *Yona Wallach*, p. 285.

<sup>62</sup> D. Gurevitch, "Feminism and Postmodernism," p. 51. See also L. Rattok, *Angel of Fire*, pp. 85–94.

possible. Obviously, her mentally active role neutralizes her role as body qua body, the objectified position of the female body.

Although the subjects of sex, sexuality, and the female body appear in Wallach's earlier collections, their presence is much more strongly felt in *'Or Pere'*. Wallach's stance in this collection is that a woman's relationship with the world is possible only through her body, through physical discourse as the medium of existence. This space of sexuality alone enables her to clearly make "discriminatory markers." In this body politics, Wallach explores relationships of power, especially those of gender, but also those of different authorities. This examination results in a new political dictionary of sexual behavior. שכב עם (*sh-k-v 'im*, to make love to or with), is an act always attached to its language practice, an authoritative power position (policeman, God, father, judge) that can redefine its epistemological and topographical ends. The female body emerges in these poems as multidiscursive and accessible, capable of playing a wide variety of roles. The fact that the female voice choreographs these episodes indicates that it is the female author who exerts freedom in imagining the performativity of the body. An inventive mind gives birth to an inventive body. As such, it emerges as an intelligent, conscious being, capable of reversing its historical prototype. As Simone de Beauvoir articulated this prototype: "She (a woman) is Other, she is body. Consciousness resides outside of her."<sup>63</sup>

It is possible that what Wallach attempts in this political dictionary is to create a nondiscriminatory code of sexual interaction in which the other is no longer marked, and in fact would reach what Derrida calls "the multiplicity of sexually marked voices."<sup>64</sup> Not only does the female body assert its authority on stage; but, being her "discursive agent" (to use Kaja Silverman's term),<sup>65</sup> it enables the woman to become the author as it provides her with a voice. Remaining in the physical realm, Wallach reverses the relationship between the mouth and sex, with sex that speaks and reproduction that occurs

<sup>63</sup> S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974). In the Israeli gender dichotomy, men are associated with public/spirit/culture, whereas women are analogous to private/nature. The female body, accordingly, is a metonym of domesticity. Whereas nationalism and heroism are identified with masculinity, women are trivialized to physical matters. E. Fuchs, *Israeli Mythogynies*.

<sup>64</sup> Derrida says: "I would like to believe in the masses, this indeterminable number of blended voices, the mobile of nonsexual marks whose choreography can carry, divide, multiply the body of each 'individual,' whether he be classified as 'man' or 'woman' according to the criteria of usage." J. Derrida and C. MacDonald, "Choreographies," *Diacritics* 12 (Summer 1982): 76.

<sup>65</sup> K. Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 42–71.

through the mouth.<sup>66</sup> Relations between sex and mouth are interchangeable: the female voice resides in female sexuality, in which writing sexuality is a production that rethinks female subjectivity in terms of body language. As a result, the female body is transformed into a site where physical differences negotiate symbolic differences. Women produce through verbal conception: Wallach's conception rearranges the female's spatial and physical relations and in so doing decodes the physical and religious being of the male.<sup>67</sup> Although this point has already been extensively discussed among feminists, my specific question concerns the discourse of sexuality within poetic writing. Wallach's seductive and feminine poetics reaches beyond its materiality; it is a feminine subversive cover for a discussion of gender politics. Writing and having a voice are fully verbal, sexual, and political acts. Violence is only one alternative strategy of this prefigured relationship to female expression; with the leather straps of tefillin, the woman lays down the text, the woman whips male tradition.

### 3. CONCLUSION

The implication of having a stage set is essential for an adequate rendering of Wallach's poem. The conventional private male gaze, in the poem and of the reader, is replaced by the public arena. The sensational performance draws on the ritualistic daily activity of laying tefillin; it also encourages repetition, legitimizes and canonizes the sexual act as a planned, designed piece of acting rather than an impulsive one-night stand. The violence is also framed and reduced to a controlled, carefully directed performance. The result is that the continual production of "Tefillin" on stage promises the endless renewal of the female body, while it prohibits the reproduction of the male body. On that stage, Wallach's female body emerges not as biographic, literal, or metonymic but rather as a liberated agent capable of contention and victorious subversion.

<sup>66</sup>On the relationship between language and violence see M. Bal, "The Rape of Narrative and the Narrative of Rape: Speech Acts and Body Language in Judges," in *Literature and the Body*, ed. E. Scarry (Baltimore, Md.: John Hopkins University, 1988), pp. 1–32.

<sup>67</sup>Woman's ability to speak stands in stark contrast to the traditional Jewish construct of the female voice, which claims that קול באשה ערוזה (*kol be-ʾishah ʿervah*, a woman's voice is a sexual incitement), (*Ber.* 24.A), for one must not read the Shema<sup>c</sup>, one of the core prayers in the morning and evening Jewish worship services, while a woman can be heard singing. Consider Wallach's treatment to the mouth/sex articulation in her short poem "תנין אשה" (*Tanin ʾishah*, A crocodile woman):

His incisors are the parting of her legs  
 Her stomach—his eye  
 He can be anything this crocodile (in Y. Wallach, *Poetry Selection*, p. 238).

The shift I am describing must therefore be seen as a shift from utterance to practice. Now the female speaker's body is set to be the mirror and the guiding voice of a radically different scene. Indeed, now he will do for her that which he had so far done while excluding her. The verbs, loaded signifiers, are speech acts that kill in every performance. With the killing of the male body, the historically narrow site of femininity is now expanded. Diverting our attention from the semantic depth of the poem to its performative element, Wallach extends the reader/spectator's gaze to its full potential.

More than that, the proximity of the text of sexuality to the text of physicality is also indicated by the inseparability of the text from the body. In her discussion on the book of Judges, Mieke Bal demonstrates the enactment and capacity of the voice to shape the physical matter of the female body.<sup>68</sup> Such a voice permits the conversion of words into speech acts, or of language into violence. As a result, narratives are not told or read, they are done. The language of performance and sexuality makes a strong claim for its correspondence with the material world. Wallach's language is obviously loaded with "referential obligations,"<sup>69</sup> as it touches upon the physical, tabooed body, the instructing texts and the coded rituals.

Surely, this one-act play (there is no punctuation except for the final period at the end of the poem) performs a new body praxis in which the sacredness of the tefillin is displaced onto the female body, while at the same time the objectification of the body shifts back to the tefillin. The tefillin, the stolen object, is deployed to act as an object of desire. A toy, a whip, its dramatic omnipresence underscores the absence of the penis. In this contextual void the *dagdegan* (clitoris) emerges as the only gender marker of the female body, a new signifying reference to female subjectivity. Indeed, it is only against the background of another clearly defined object, the sacred tefillin, that the female body can rid itself of its marginality and become the center from which the female speaks. This stage becomes a radical site on which the female body is redefined and de-objectified. The sacredness of the tefillin now resides in the female body.

Ironically, Wallach's choice to use such a grandiose object as tefillin on her stage already implies the centrality of the object in the Zionist Jewish narrative. In the Israeli reality in which religion plays a major role in constituting the nation, tefillin maps an emotional and secular reality that

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<sup>68</sup>M. Bal, "The Rape of Narrative and the Narrative of Rape," pp. 1–32.

<sup>69</sup>E. Scarry, in *Literature and the Body*, p. viii.

heightens national discourse. The practice is an explicit, outward expression of the deep, ideological position in this internalized discourse. In fact, it is possible that no other object in Israeli culture so subtly and profoundly articulates the centrality of religion (its language, symbolism, practices, and imagined subjectivity) in the secular state.<sup>70</sup> Paradoxically, it is precisely the inability to separate between the religious and the national that evokes horror on the poetic stage, as it captures so profoundly the desire of the Israeli reader to protect and control such a cultural phantom. Wallach's "Tefillin," in this regard, manages to dismantle these deep, "natural" ties. It brutally violates the integrity of the collective narrative by confusing the linear and binary hierarchies, and subverting the "differences" it aims to establish.

At the price of creating a cultural scandal, or maybe more intentionally, a sensational theater, Wallach critiques the process of signification of the female position through stolen cultural objects. Rather than offensive or pornographic provocation, then, "Tefillin" is an attempt to create new poetics and aesthetics of difference and marginality. "Tefillin" embodies Wallach's attempts to write a text of female sexuality that replaces female sex as tied to reproduction and erotic display. The poem thus emerges as a sociopolitical antidote to the traditional treatment of the woman's body and its subjection. And to those who charge that Wallach is a "horny beast" and presume that the heat of her body is her author, I would respond—if such a poetic body is in heat, then its poetry is endlessly re-productive.

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<sup>70</sup>□The מַאֲכֵלֶת (*ma'akhelet*, the slaughtering knife) is another ideologically loaded object, closely associated with its textual reference to the עֶקֶדָה (*'akedah*, the sacrifice), and subject to frequent critical discussions in poetry and prose.