National and Historical Concerns in the Childhood Poetry
of Dalia Ravikovitch

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As I was reading Dalia Ravikovitch: Unpublished Poems, expertly edited by Giddon Ticotsky, and published by Hakibbutz Hameuchad (2016), I found to my surprise a series of national rhymed poems, which appear in the first section of the appendix called: “Childhood Poems” (195-224). The poems were written in 1949. Undoubtedly, the thirteen-year-old Ravikovitch was affected by both the aftermath of the Holocaust, and the ongoing Israeli War of Independence. The poem, “What Does a Jew Want,” (195) which opens Ravikovitch’s childhood verses is acutely indicative of her historical and national orientation at such a young age. Her question points to her, already, heightened sensitivity towards the individual and the collective, as she totally identifies with her people. While the title raises the pertinent issue of “What Does a Jew Want,” the poem’s content attempts to answer this basic question with an unwavering sincerity. Moreover as an introduction to the ensuing answers, the young Ravikovitch opens her discourse with a condensed prologue that exclaims: “This is the will of that nation/ So persecuted in the world,” and continues to detail the “will of that nation” from the point of view of a wise and sensitive girl, who glances with anxiety at the somber history of her nation. The answers brought forth in this poem relate to basic human desires, namely: a homeland, a warm living space, security, and an unthreatening existence. It is remarkable that the young Ravikovitch is aware of her people’s deadly fears, tribulations, wanderings, and displacements. It’s possible that these sentiments arose due to the misfortunes of her own childhood triggered by the sudden death of her father in a car accident, and the hardships and alienation she endured as a consequence of this untimely tragedy. I tend to argue, however, that beyond this horrific early setbacks, Ravikovitch’s own sensibility enabled her to identify with the dark history of her people desiring, “Joy, happiness, no sadness/ Thus is the wish of the Jewish people.” The poem’s last stanza promises redemption,
resurrection, and realized longings: “Bliss that will follow, true peace” receiving even Satan’s seal of approval. It's impossible not to see these wishes as highly relevant not only to the poet’s times, but to the present turbulent reality in the Middle East.

In the second poem in this appendix, entitled: “When the Hebrew Nation will Triumph” (196), one finds a subtle allusion to this necessary and undeniable national triumph. This is not a naïve belief of a young poet who wishes her people to win the battle, but stems from a sincere, deep, and almost absolute faith and necessity in such an outcome. Furthermore, the young speaker brings forth the moral character of her people who will not be cruel to the enemies (upon being triumphant), and not seek bloody revenge; on the contrary, they will concentrate: “to create, work, and toil…” and usher an era of positive energies and creativity. She wishes for a peaceful, amicable, and “a totally united world.”

While sensitive to the history of her people, she also strives for regional unity (“with seven Middle Eastern countries”) and for cosmic harmony. She reaches the conclusion that these calls for global unity are not only divinely ordained, or the commandments of moral human beings, but the imperative demands of the blood spilled throughout the generations, the “blood of the sacred,” which doesn’t seek revenge, but rather wishes to bring forth “life, bliss and light.”

Ravikovitch has a clear vision of the “End of Days” which will be realized, she believes, not only in her poet’s young imagination, but also in the reality in which she lives. The poem’s speaker continues her vision by hovering above her present reality wishing to reach heights and to ascend the ladder of greatness both individually, and collectively. The escape from the here and the now characteristic of Dalia Ravikovitch’s later poetry, is acutely expressed in the next childhood poem entitled: “To Heights” (197). The takeoff to faraway summits away from a dark and painful reality occurs here in an unusual intensity. The poem’s speaker gazes constantly “towards heights, heights” away from the blackness of the earth, and close to God who appears as an absolute and positive power demanding elevation, spiritual uplifts, sublime love, light and heavenly bliss. Furthermore, the greatness of the human being, made in the image of God, will usher redemption. The young Ravikovitch believes that the theory of reward and punishment starts with the individual. She stresses that the burden lies on every human to strive and
reach spiritual heights bringing forth their own, and their people’s redemption, and even reaching to encompass the entire universe. Ravikovitch brings forth a unique cosmic view of human responsibility affecting us all. Her didactic tone presents a symbiosis between humans and their creator capable of bringing “sublime happiness” to both the divine and human spheres.

Historical events in Dalia Ravikovitch’s childhood poems are found in the following poems: “Gloom Has Spread” (89-9), “When the Hasmonaean Kings Quarreled” (200-2), “Nazis” (203), and “Masada” (208-9.)

In the first poem, of those listed above, one clearly distinguishes the spreading gloom at the start of the poem, and the total darkness ruling its conclusion. In between those two visual poles, a great personal and national drama takes place evoking much pity: Moses, the Shepherd of Israel, will not enter the Promised Land. Ravikovitch appears in the poem as a subtle young “psychologist” succeeding to present a tragic and tormented figure. She champions the wronged individual (Moses) who strives for years, “crowned with sweat and hard labor” to settle with his people in their land. Moses is seen here gazing with yearnings at the Land of Israel, the “dear and missed landscape” as he is sentenced to die, helplessly, on mount Nebo. Ravikovitch stresses Moses’ loyalty to both God and his people coupled with his great disappointment: “He served God/ With unending faith/ A savior to His people/ And this is his repay.” Moses’ dismay turns “to bitterness and anger” as he begs God with a pitiful lament: “Let me reach my goal/ Let me, Hear my voice/ God of Hosts/ May my foot step on this land.” But, in vain, Moses must accept the somber decree. God’s answer rises in a climactic, chilling, and heartbreaking crescendo: “You shall not enter this land.” And Moses saddened and confused feels shame and remains powerless and alone in total darkness, which crudely marks him and his fate.

In the next poem entitled “When the Hasmonaean Kings Quarreled” (200-202), the young Ravikovitch uses a chapter in Jewish history, namely, the rise of the Hasmonaean kingdom until its annihilation by Herod (2nd century to the 1st B.C.E.), presenting internal rifts which provoke the young poet’s anger. This kind of revolt on the part of Ravikovitch is passionately expressed in this compassionate anti-war poem.
Interestingly, Ravikovitch does not name the Hasmoneans except for a single verse, which mentions “Simon attacking Yohanan,” referring to Simon, President and High Priest, who declared the establishment of the Hasmonaean Kingdom, and who was consequently murdered at a young age in Jericho, and to Yohanan Hyrcanus the First who expanded the kingdom to Samaria, to the Edomite region in the south, and eastward. Ravikovitch does not mention the murderous Alexander Yanai, nor Herod who even murdered his beautiful, young, and loving wife, Miriam the Hasmonaean, to put an end to her dynasty. Instead of these tragic figures, Ravikovitch, effectively, brings forth the spirit of Matityahu, the leader of the Hasmonaean revolt, whose great wish was to fight the Hellenists defiling the Jewish temple, and grossly tainting Judaism. Matityahu never envisioned the ensuing quarrels among his descendants. It is against these evildoers that his spirit revolts. He appears in Ravikovitch’s poem: “Tall and thin…his voice sorrowful/ His glance full of pain…and on his face a cloud (of sadness),” sending his rebuke, and warnings against the dangers awaiting these unworthy Hasmoneans, and their Hellenistic followers, but in vain, “They did not hear, did not listen/ And their end is well known…” In the poem’s second part, Ravikovitch emphasizes the rebirth of Israel in the 20th century, saying: “And Israel returned to its land/ And the return is saturated with blood/ Becoming a new people with all its might and will/ Conquering, and achieving good and great things/ And leaders moral and dedicated/Establishing a nation too/ Through fire and blood/ Rooting itself in the land…” but, again, quarrels renew themselves, skirmishes and hate among “brothers,” and in the home front, enemies threaten, and great danger is in sight. At the end of these historic and timely verses, the spirit of Matityahu reappears calling his people to cease their inner rift. His desperate voice pleads endlessly: “Fellow Jews, listen/ Desist, time has come/ Don’t quarrel anymore/ Your country is calling.” Ravikovitch seals her poem on the 15th of February 1949. On June 29, 2018, as I am writing my comments on her insightful and visionary poem, one can clearly detect the parallel between the period the poem was written, and our present times. The contemporaneity of Ravikovitch’s poem is most relevant today as far as Israel and the Middle East are concerned. Ravikovitch’s engaging poetry, even in her youth, touches a painful cord still reverberating today.
Amazingly, the thirteen-year old Ravikovitch succeeds in the poem entitled: “Nazis” (203), written on the 16th of February 1949, to deeply feel the human magnitude and colossal evil done, not only to her people, but to humanity at large. Ravikovitch expresses with anger the disproportionate and shocking wrong doings during the Holocaust. The poet’s approach is both universal and philosophical. She attacks human nature, in general, and brings forth the animalistic tendencies of humans: the instinct of destruction, murderous inclinations, and the desire to annihilate and take revenge. Because of the poem’s importance and relevant content, I will cite it here in its entirety:

_Nazis_

“To destroy, murder
The whole world
Relentlessly, restlessly
Spilling blood! Blood!
What is life worth
For those others
Against the passion
To murder, to eradicate?
Yes, murder and annihilation
Effacing all living
Unceasingly and measurelessly
Repeatedly
Killing, disposing
Without a trembling hand
Only murderer, only defiler
Crushing
No surviving soul
World’s destruction
Only vengeance”
This is the beastly man.

Interestingly, the entire poem is presented in quotation marks ending with a sharp and fateful conclusion uttered by the desperate speaker, as said: “This is the beastly man.” The tragedy brought forth in the poem is encompassing, revolting, and chilling.

The next poem entitled: “Masada” (208-9), originates with the history of this lone fortress in the eastern region of the Judean desert marking one of the last revolts against the Roman army in the first century C.E. This failed revolt signifies the end of the Judean
kingdom, and precipitates the Roman conquest of the land of Israel. The site has become a mark of Jewish courage, and the uprising of the few against the many. The verse: “Masada will not fall again,” from the poem “Masada” by Izhak Lamdan (first edition, 1926), is seen as a manifest of steadfastness and revival of the Jewish people in heir ancestral land.

In Ravikovitch’s poem, this staunch resolve is emphasized by a crescendo proudly proclaiming the goal of the Masada revolt, and the bravery of the Jewish fighters throughout the generations, and during the War of Israel’s Independence, namely: “To return and redeem the land/ To break the yoke of oppression…and strive for redemption…in the name of dripping blood – the blood of the sons of Masada.” Ravikovitch uses in almost every stanza the gray and black color marking repeatedly the deep gloom engulfing the tragedy at Masada: “Gray and somber are Masada’s rocks at night…gloomy and far is Masada, the last and unique fortress…the boulders turned black…in the presence of Masada’s ruins.” Yet, parallel to the accumulated blackness in these verses, and immediately following them, Ravikovitch contrasts this gloomy atmosphere with the ignited bright flame in the hearts of the brave Masada rebels. This visual dichotomy of light cut from darkness is expertly described and accelerates in the poem from stanza to stanza until the fighters’ flame climbs above the giant rock of Masada and rises against the ruins.

As an epilogue to these “poems of wrath,” the young poet creates an optimism enabling her to escape from a grim reality. The initiative of escape is brought forth in this selection in an earlier poem entitled “To Heights,” (197) in which Ravikovitch’s speaker takes flight, and thus distancing herself from painful situations. This momentary optimism also appears in “Even in This Murderous World,” (214) in which she prompts herself to believe in a baby’s innocence, in the delicate blooming roses, in the sun illuminated sky, and in a sparkling spring day. Innocence is also attributed to the stars casting their light in the night with glorious modesty, to the sun’s splendor, to the crowned trees, and to the blossoming of the garden flowers. In this utopia, Evil has no place and will no longer harm humans, nor bird, or the beauty of the soft flowers.
Ravikovitch’s escape to a fantastic world also marks her later poems in which she imagines herself living in far-away and sun-bathed islands, surrounded by the rose’s beauty, and the land’s greenery. Interestingly, her early poems become already at this young stage, renewed songs of spring with warming sunrays and a blue sky. This wonderland turns totally personal as the poet creates her redeeming world wishing to create a single work which will “illuminate” the entire world and encompass her being: “…To sink in my creation/ To immerse my soul in it/A work, a single creation/ Illuminating the world of worlds/ To remain there eternally/ Always in the heavens.” Ravikovitch wishes thus (from the start) to not only free herself from an oppressive reality, but to, additionally, and above all, reach a poetic flow through which she will be able to rise on high and freely attend to her creative powers.

Ravikovitch, through her articulate speaker in her poetry, assures the reader that this sublime and awaited possibility will finally come and redeem her.

Note: All English citations are translated from the Hebrew by this author.