Tel Aviv University
The Lester & Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities
The Shirley & Leslie Porter School of Cultural Studies
Department of Hebrew Literature

"Most of the words have no substance": Action versus inaction as a central rhetorical
device in the poetics of Dahlia Ravikovitch

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE "DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY"

by

Navit Barel

SUBMITTED TO THE SENATE OF TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

Jnly 2019

This work was carried out under the supervision of

Prof. Michael Gluzman

Department of Hebrew Literature
The Lester & Sally Entin Faculty of Humanities

Abstract

    This research study examines a central rhetorical device in the poetics of Dahlia Ravikovitch (1936-2005), the most prominent female poet in Israeli literature during the first decades of the State of Israel. This rhetorical device is based on different kinds of friction between the language of the poem and the world represented in it, as expressed in representations of abundance, action and movement in Ravikovitch's poems. My main argument touches on the dominance that is revealed in the entire corpus of her poetry, despite changes in style and register and despite thematic and other developments related to the representative point of perception. Ravikovitch's poetry presents a calculated and carefully designed network of representations of movement that are ironically intended to represent the very opposite of action. The arena of the poem enables the reader to totally surrender to an impressive representation of action in all its various manifestations – repetitions, plural forms of nouns/pronouns, verbs and movements – a representation that is actually intended to represent the polar opposite of action that might be shrouded in stagnation; that might be the very inability to act, to communicate, to enter into dialogue, to get close to others, to be vigorous or to move. The multifaceted function of this rhetorical device in the figurative, thematic, intertextual and conscious network that is revealed in Ravikovitch's poetry, and the examination of its diverse manifestations enable us to shed light on the fundamental principles of Ravikovitch's poetic thought and of her ethical perceptions.

    In Ravikovitch's poetry one can note certain complex and interesting poetic tricks that are related to a specific kind of relationship between language and the world that language represents or determines. This kind of relationship revolves around the clash between action and inaction, between movement and stagnation. In the world outside the poem there are for the most part difficulties in engaging in vigorous activity, mental blocks that sabotage the realization of ambitions and desires, and – in many cases – situations where the chances for a passionate existence are slim. In contrast, the language of Ravikovitch's poetry offers an abundance of creative activity as far as language is concerned. This creative activity appears to be concrete action and is portrayed as an abundance of movements. Ravikovitch's fundamental manipulation gives the reader a sense of virtual forward movement in the course of reading the poem; however, that manipulation actually challenges the very existence of such movement and demonstrates how impossible such movement is in the world that the poem represents. The purpose of this research study is to discuss Ravikovitch's poetic key as a unique category of relations between representative language and the world that is represented in her poetry, that is, a relationship of disharmony between action and inaction. My basic argument is that this category of dichotomous relations between action in language and stagnation in the world became a central device with which Ravikovitch created both her voice as a poet and the uniqueness of her poetics and her lyrical world. That device swallows up positions, is directed at the reader and creates various thematic, ethical, aesthetic, emotional and other effects. The research was conducted with a focus on what will be termed the "movement map" that is formed in each of her poems. I am using the term "movement" to refer to all of the poem's components (formal, stylistic, syntactical, thematic, figurative, etc.) that create the illusion of movement. Such movement can be realized in diverse ways in each of her poems, and, for each poem, a unique "movement map" can be drawn.

Dahlia Ravikovitch, winner of the Israel Prize for Poetry (1988), the Bialik Prize (1987), the Shlonsky Prize (1965) and other prizes, published ten books of poetry, three collections of short prose pieces and eight books for children. She translated books and poems from English to Hebrew, wrote lyrics for songs and published journalistic articles on literary and cultural topics as well as on items in the news. Her activity as an artist extended over a period of five decades. A recently published collection of poems edited by Gideon Tikotzky contains over 150 poems that Ravikovitch chose not to publish as well as early versions of poems that were published. During her lifetime Ravikovitch published nearly 200 poems and the corpus of unpublished poems increases by 75 percent the total number of her known poems, on which the literary research work is still in its initial stages. In addition, a collection of dozens of theoretical essays by Ravikovitch published in 2018 (*Hazahav ve-tapuchei adama*) provides a glimpse into her poetic thought and permits a new reading of her poems in light of these essays. Ravikovitch's sweeping acceptance by the Israeli literary world that began with the publication of her first poems continued during her lifetime and is still felt even today. Critical articles written about her poetry during the decades of her literary activity dealt with a few aspects of her works: biographical, linguistic and stylistic. After her death, the research work on her poetry expanded and began to deal with other aspects – historiographical and ideological-political aspects as well as issues such as gender – and reflected the impact of psychoanalytical theories and intertextual studies that focused on connections between her poetry and that of Bialik, Ratosh, Alterman, Goldberg and Wallach, as well as on connections between her poetry on the one hand and the Bible and mythology on the other.

Comprehensive research studies on her poems appeared during the 1970s and 1980s (Miri Baruch, 1973; Juliette Hassine, 1989); however, the discussion in those studies was of a rather limited scope and did not adequately reflect the prominent position that Ravikovitch's poetry has in modern Hebrew poetry as a central part of Israel's beloved canon that is continually read and studied. A selection of reviews of, and essays on, her poetry by dozens of scholars and literary figures appeared in 2010 (*Kitmei or*, edited by Tamar S. Hess and Hamutal Tzamir). The selection contains diverse readings of Ravikovitch's poetry from the time of the publication of her first book of poems up to the end of the first decade of the present century and enables us to trace stages in the development of the approach to her poetry: the early readings, which focused on Ravikovitch as a prominent representative of a sub-genre termed "Women's Poetry" that was considered to be centered around the emotional life of the suffering or grieving woman and which offered little criticism of her situation; readings from the late 20th and early 21st centuries that included gender readings and which saw Ravikovitch as a poet who was fulfilling a mission of changing the relative standing given her as a female poet in a male-dominated domain or as a poet who was determining her own unique perspective that expressed opposition to the threatening male perspective (Tamar S. Hess, 2000; Shira Stav, 2007); sociopolitical readings that saw Ravikovitch as a poet who used her personal suffering in order to represent her identification with those who were suffering in the public sphere surrounding her (Olmert, 2010), readings that included re-readings of her initial collections of poems; and subversive readings that exposed radical dimensions in her writing and which proposed a rethinking of Ravikovitch's place among the poets of her era, taking into consideration the interaction between her own personal suffering and the trauma experienced by young people in Israel in the 1950s (Gluzman, 2018).

A recent comprehensive study (Tikotzky, 2016) examined Ravikovitch's writing processes and the sources for the publication of her poems and discussed poems and writings that had not yet been researched and which included poems and writings from her literary estate, from the corpus of unpublished works, from newspaper archives and from journals. This study presented Ravikovitch's works *inter alia* in extra-literary contexts not previously considered or examined, focusing on various phases in her life, on different places where she wrote and lived, on key figures in her life and on various poetic positions that she held during her lifetime, with regard to other poets and authors (not just in the field of Hebrew literature) and with regard to the surrounding cultural climate. To a great extent the present research study has been strongly impacted by Tikotzky's monograph, which not only produced insights and presented evidence regarding Ravikovitch's path as a young woman to the act of writing poetry but also illustrated how much intelligence and thought her writing displayed, in her creating for herself a distinct and, at the same time, misleading lyrical persona and in her maintaining a hidden shadowy corpus, thereby expressing herself not only by what she explicitly presented but also by what she concealed.

Although earlier and later critics noted the uniqueness of Ravikovitch's poetry, no comprehensive thought was formulated regarding this uniqueness as a vital and comprehensive characteristic. Baruch Kurzweil (1959) opened his monumental study, which appeared following the publication of Ravikovitch's first book of poems, *Ahavat tapuach hazahav*, with the words "Dahlia Ravikovitch has her own unique melody" (p. 19 of the original Hebrew text); however, besides pointing to her originality and to the manner in which the simplest things in life appear in her poems as altogether new entities, in other words to her carefully crafted repetitions that are a counter-effect to our familiar reality, the reading was not expanded to the point of defining what that melody was. In a study published in 1965, Kurzweil identified the effect of repetition in her poetry, which he linked to Ravikovitch's repeated returns to an identical emotional place; however, he did not explain the uniqueness of that effect.

During the years of her literary activity, various scholars formulated thematic principles they discovered in her poetry that were connected to disharmony. For example, Shimon Sandbank (1964) saw in her poetry a network of paradoxes, which he termed the "merging of apocalypse with pampering oneself" (p. 37 of the original Hebrew text). Nissim Calderon (1969) identified in Ravikovitch's poetry a "dimension of honor" that was the result of the confrontation between the "world of illusions" that she created in her poems and the reality of the "present of 'I who am singing'" (p. 52 of the original Hebrew text). Ariel Hirschfeld (1987) detected in her poetry the concealment of violence through the presentation of a figurative richness, while Mordecai Shalev (1969) stressed the fundamental element of disguise in Ravikovitch's poetry that hides negative feelings, the zenith of which is the feeling that life has no meaning. These paradoxes and confrontations were generally discussed in isolated studies but were not joined together to form a more general statement regarding Ravikovitch's poetry as a whole.

Other important perceptions of her effective use of the presentation of a lyrical reality intended to represent a completely opposite reality that exists outside the poem touched primarily on the manner in which she represented tensions between the personal sphere and the national sphere. Following Ravikovitch's death, in a profound review article on a collection of articles about Ravikovitch's literary estate that was edited by Uzi Shavit and Dana Olmert (*Mayim rabim*, 2006), Michal Ben-Naftali

pointed to a thematic characteristic at the heart of Ravikovitch's poetry, which Ben-Naftali described as a paradox that relies on the tension between a commitment to "here-and-now existence" and a refusal to exist. According to Ben-Naftali, the paradox is essentially the ability to express inability, that is, Ravikovitch's need "to explore 'what is impossible to write here'" (p. 99 of the original Hebrew text). Since the beginning of the present century, other scholars have indicated a new approach to reading her poetry and have pointed to a distinction between her lyrical expressiveness and the reality that exists outside the poem: Maayan Harel (2010) noted the tensions between movement and standing in one place, as expressed in the poem "Tiuta" ("Draft"), where, toward the end of the poem, movement is shown to be impossible from the standpoint of the speaker and only standing in one place is possible; Hannan Hever (2010) focused on the manner in which Ravikovitch's poems created a "safe haven" (p. 490 in the original Hebrew text) that demonstrates the paradox between interior and exterior, between what is covered and what is uncovered; Barbara Mann (2003) pointed to the attempt of one of Ravikovitch's poems to resist self-erasure and described the gap that was revealed between actual helplessness and a linguistic representation of victimization; Rachel Albeck-Gidron (2010) noted a special category of information that is conveyed in Ravikovitch's poetry and which refers the reader to a total lack of knowledge in the real world; Hamutal Tzamir illustrated in the poem "Diukan Yehudi ["Portrait of a Jew"] the effectiveness of the presentation of a tension between non-movement and movement in a constant circle whose infinity can never be broken.

Ravikovitch's many years of literary activity produced different responses to different periods of her literary creation. Quite a number of scholars and critics pointed to the differences in terms of style, language and sources of influence between her first collections of poems and the later collections that were published (mainly after *Ahava amitit*. The "later Ravikovitch" manifested herself in a dramatic change not only in style, which now became direct and conversational, but also in themes, which now drew more upon the social reality and less upon the inner reality of imagination and desires. Ruth Carton-Bloom (1987) noted the disappearance of "substance beyond what is revealed" (p. 63 of the original Hebrew text), an element that she discovered in Ravikovitch's first book and which she revealed through the examination of the extensive use of sophisticated, flowery language, the "language of loftiness and glory"; this element was replaced, argued Carton-Bloom, by poetry that represented a "world that has been taken over by the profane" (p. 65 of the original Hebrew text). Hirschfeld (1987) identified Ravikovitch's first three books of poetry as belonging to one pattern of poetic writing and the collection of poems *Ahava amitit* as demonstrating a "real change" (p. 66 of the original Hebrew text) in the shaping of Ravikovitch's poetic molds, a change that is connected to her turning her back on orderly structures of stanzas and rhymes and to the adoption of a structure of inner development. Hirschfeld argued that this latter collection was profoundly different from her previous writing because of its inclusion of "political poems," that is, poems that were written under the impact of events of a political or social nature. This accepted trend was replaced in the early years of this century by readings that identified the political element in Ravikovitch's poetry that first appeared in her very first book of poems (Wieseltier, 1995; Hess, 2000; Tzamir, 2006). Chana Kronfeld (2010) showed how the political dimension was encoded in the language of Ravikovitch's early poetry, which linked itself to ancient genres such as parables and legends, to textual contexts derived from the Bible and to distant expanses. Other readings merged Ravikovitch's later poetry with her early poetry, indicating links

from the standpoint of representations of suffering. Ilana Szobel (2010) noted, on the one hand, the presentation of suffering in Ravikovitch's poetry from a position of bearing witness and, on the other, the revelation of private suffering and its extension to a broad political discussion; Dana Olmert (2010) showed how Ravikovitch was unable to distance herself from representational sources of suffering and how she was therefore condemned to represent atrocities – both hers and those of others.

Despite the abundance of Ravikovitch's writings, there is a lack of in-depth research on the rhetorical key of these poetics. In my research study, I sought to fill this absence with a discussion of internal configuration, which must be pointed out and must be understood. This internal configuration is a fundamental trick that can be seen in each of Ravikovitch's poems – whether in the books of poetry that were published in her lifetime or whether in the poems that were published after her death. The exposure of this fundamental characteristic will shed light on the common denominator in Ravikovitch's poetry, despite the stylistic and thematic changes from one book to another, and from one poem to another, and will hopefully contribute, *inter alia*, to renewed understanding of familiar poems and to rethinking on the sources of Ravikovitch's writing, on the relationship between poems she authored and on her relationship with other poets and writers, whether of her generation or of earlier ones. The theoretical framework I used in my readings blended the theory of the literary text proposed by Benjamin Harshav, the practice of optimal reading proposed by Menachem Perry and Harshav's theory of the metaphor. Harshav's theory of the text emphasizes the examination of guiding principles that exist in a text and which signal to readers in what specific sense they must understand the linguistic meaning of a poem. The practice of close interpretive study proposed by Perry focused on the raising of the threshold of extracting the meaning of the poetic text to thereby turn as many textual components as possible into rhetorical functions and to thereby stress paradoxes and various tensions. The approach to the figurative setup that Harshav proposed refers to the figure as layers of reality spread out throughout the poem and in confrontation with one another. I chose four ways for relating to Ravikovitch's poetry, each of which contains readings of isolated poems and distinctions related to her poetics as a whole.

In the introduction to my dissertation, I referred to Ravikovitch's literary thought as reflected in her readings of modern literary creations such as those by Virginia Woolf, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and others, as part of my proposal to formulate, in light of those readings, the way she believed movement should be used in literary works. Ravikovitch's reading of the short prose works of Amalia Kahana-Carmon shows to what extent Ravikovitch's readings manifest her faithfulness to her poetic credo. Ravikovitch's poetic allusions to Kahana-Carmon's short stories illustrate Ravikovitch's unique intertextual activity, an activity of reading and rewriting out of an identification with the emotional state described in a previous text, whether a moral stance is expanded and applied to a broader public space or whether there is an immersion into an emotional stance that was presented in an earlier text in the contexts of her worldview and experience of the world.

In the four chapters of my dissertation, I discussed four components in Ravikovitch's poetry in the light of her poetic key: the isolated poem, a sequence of poems as they appear in her poetry collections, a central figure and intertextual dialogue. In chapter 1, "The presence of absence in Ravikovitch's poetry and her rhetorical action to counter that presence," I closely study her poem, "Kaf yad risha" ("The Palm of Evil") in light of the perspective reversal that is revealed there and after Ravikovitch repeatedly defended her version of the poem's interpretation five

times in the course of the years of her writing activity and in five separate interviews. The poem, which presents vigorous activity in order to represent powerlessness and fear, was read in the context of a discussion of the figure of smoke presented there, as that figure is represented in Goldberg's first poems and in the context of a discussion of the figure of the smitten hand, as that figure is represented in the poem "Bito" ("His Daughter") by Rachel (Blobstein). "The Palm of Evil" served not only as a case study illustrating the rhetorical key of Ravikovitch's poetry but was also a contextual junction from which the model of thinking that I term the "principle of Ravikovitch's orange" can be studied. Formulated in the poem that opens the first collection of Ravikovitch's poems, this principle circulated during the years of her writing activity as a fundamental element that was almost never challenged. The principle applies not only to Ravikovitch's perception of love but also to her moral perception regarding suffering and the manner in which suffering should be represented.

In chapter 2, "The rhetoric of apparent movement and the intertextual road map between *Ahavat tapuach hazahav* and *Horef kasheh*," the first two collections of Ravikovitch's poems were read as a poetic sequence whose order of transmission reveals the unique action of the world elements presented in her poetry between actual reality and poetic reality. In this chapter I discussed part of Ravikovitch's inner-poetic lexicon as a sequence of figurative transmission. The poetic components of the lexicon, such as movement around something, fingernails, heat and cold, etc. were read in different contexts in these collections of Ravikovitch's poems. The reading of those poems, each time in a different context, and their examination in relation to the isolated poem and in relation to the front page and the collection in which they were planted developed into a discussion of Ravikovitch's imagined space, which pretends to be an existing space. Ravikovitch's poetic key – between action and the absence of action – was examined in light of her recoiling from the collective values of work and labor that shaped the worldview of the members of her generation.

In chapter 3, "On the special meaning of the sea in Ravikovitch's poetry and on the connection between the sea and love," the figure of the sea in Ravikovitch's poetry was explored as was her attitude toward the perception of love that was expressed in all her poems – from the early ones to her later ones. This exploration was conducted within the context of a reading of the unique meaning of bodies of water, idioms that included the word "water" and the action of diving in her thoughts regarding love. I presented an interpretive reading of a short story on a visit to the Mamilla Pool in Jerusalem, contained in a letter Ravikovitch wrote in 1956, and I discussed the network of allusive links between her and Bialik, at the basis of which links there is a complexity connected to the sources of her literary creations. In chapter 4, "Intertextuality as an action taken against absence," I discussed Ravikovitch as a unique intertextual agent whose attitude toward previous texts consists of a moral inter-contextual confrontation and I also examined the ethical element that appeared in the previous text. In this context I exposed and considered, on the one hand, the covert and overt links between Ravikovitch and biblical language and figures and, on the other, the chain of intergenerational allusions that began with Goldberg, continued with Ravikovitch and simultaneously – as well as later – with Tirza Atar. Parts of the chain were concealed while these three women were still living and were published only after their respective deaths in a manner that allows one to apply what appears in the shadows to the corpus that was revealed, and vice versa. Three female poets, who dealt with the tensions between passion and pain, turned to each other in circuitous ways that included paradoxes and agreement, provocations and assimilation. Finally, I traced the various transformations of the

principle of the orange that Ravikovitch formulated early in her literary career, as this principle was articulated in Goldberg, a poet who was Ravikovitch's mentor. Each of these three poets gave a voice to victimization, which they represented from their own unique moral standpoint, which in turn created links between the act of writing and identification with focal points of suffering. Each of the three poets read the dirge of the captives from the Book of Psalms – Psalm 137 – in relation to the reality surrounding her and as a part of the expression of her rebuke, which received a central standing in their later years of writing.