

Cohen Lidovsky, Zafrira. “Loosen the Fetters of Thy Tongue, Woman:” The Poetry and Poetics of Yona Wallach. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 2003.

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Zafrira Lidovsky Cohen’s book “Loosen the Fetters of Thy Tongue, Woman:” The Poetry and Poetics of Yona Wallach is a comprehensive study of the Israeli poet’s work. Well-known and revered by many in the 1960s to 1980s, “Yona Wallach is a household name in a country where poetry reading is not widespread.” (1) Cohen endeavors “to introduce, describe, and evaluate, Yona Wallach’s poetry within a variety of historical, literary, and political contexts.” (1) This is an ambitious book, covering a dizzying amount of material, and, for the most part, succeeds. Divided into eight chapters, Cohen covers, for example, Wallach’s life in brief; critical analysis of her meta-poetic poems; the poetry environment in Israel in the 1950s and early 1960s, and situating Wallach’s early poetry within that period; Wallach’s contemporaries and where she fits; and female images, and sex and violence in Wallach’s poetry. Cohen provides an overview of twentieth century Hebrew poets, and looks at modern poetry, in general, and poetry in the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, as well as critics and theorists who published in this time period.

Cohen writes in Chapter 1, “Wild, sexy, and outlandish, Wallach was able to charm many of those who crossed her path. The young poets with whom she regularly associated saw in her an exotic Amazon goddess courageously pursuing every imaginable experience regardless of the consequence. She was particularly fascinated by madness, which she regarded as an opportunity to break loose of societal rules, explore her inner self, and the unknown. In her quest for the unknown, she also plunged into Kabbalah and mysticism. It is not surprising that a blend of mysticism and madness would eventually characterize her unique poetic style” (8). Interestingly, Wallach checked herself into a mental institution in Jerusalem in 1964 to experience madness. I noted that Wallach was writing in the same period as American photographer Diane Arbus was rising in the world of photography, and Arbus took photographs of a mental hospital. Cohen’s description of Wallach’s later work in the early 1980s conjured up for me Kathy Acker’s work in themes and shock value. Cohen writes, “The lechery and callousness of the *female* voice of these poems are even more striking than their lurid descriptions, particularly the request for violent, painful, degrading acts.” (15) According to Cohen, Wallach does not adhere to a poststructuralist idea of language; “inner experience” is important to her. Wallach was also interested in issues of “self-subordination,” and “personal freedom of will” (15).

Wallach was writing against or in answer to modern male Hebrew poets. Her path to acceptance in the male dominated literary scene in Israel was gradual. Her first collection of poetry *Devarim* (Things) in 1966, and her second, *Shenei Ganim* (Two Gardens) in 1969 were met with neither success nor acclaim, but Wallach regularly read in public, and many poets gathered to hear her and admired the musicality of her readings. In 1976, her third collection *Shira* (Collected Poems) was published, and it was at this time when change occurred in the Israeli literary community and non-conventionality was celebrated that she broke into the scene. She won many prizes, some of her poetry was set to music, and her poems appeared in literary magazines. By the early 1980s, she was a cause célèbre, and was followed by the paparazzi and interviewed. In 1985, her book *Tsurot* (Forms) was published, and *Mofa* (Appearances) appeared soon after, but posthumously. Menachem Perry, an editor at Hakibbutz Hameuchad publishing house finally published these last two volumes, even though he had wanted Wallach to take his advice to reign in and edit her poems. Wallach’s later poems appear to be problematic for a number of critics. In her introduction, Cohen identifies previous critical studies of Wallach’s work. Wallach’s

contribution, according to literary scholar Ariel Hirschfeld, was “first in the area of the ‘meta-poetic concept,’ and second, in the feminist revolution in Israeli art” (21). Wallach’s over-the-top, forthright personality and edgy life that would have been fodder for *People* magazine today, superseded her work. The years since her death in 1985 have brought more interest in her poetry.

Of all Wallach’s collections, *Devarim* appears to be the most compelling: “Rooted in biblical allusions, ancient mythologies, legends, fairy tales, and esoteric symbols from the realm of fantasies and dreams, the enchanted worlds that Wallach creates lure the reader into their unique oddities, yet the underlying message becomes increasingly clear. Contemporary language, in Wallach’s world, is but a veil over a wealth of invaluable distinctions encoded in language through the ages” (12). Wallach’s early poems read like fables. These seemed to me the most interesting of her poems that were further explicated by Cohen in Chapter 3. Cohen discusses Wallach’s poems “Lota,” “Yonatan,” “Cornelia,” “When I look in the mirror,” and “Presleep Poem.” Wallach’s poetry as analyzed by Cohen is symbolically multivalent, with words and names often connoting or denoting mythology and the Bible. For example, in the poem “Lota,” multiple meanings of “Lota” and “spiral springs” are evident. Cohen’s analysis of “Yonatan” is particularly interesting: “‘Yonatan’ enjoys the literary acclaim that it does because it displays that artistic principle Alicia Ostriker calls ‘duplicity,’ which allows contrary meanings to coexist with equal force within one poem” (55), as is her look at “Cornelia”: “A deep sense of irony...Cornelia’s story evidently opens just like a common fairy tale. Lines such as ‘in the middle of the night’ and ‘this is the time’ allude further to a very particular fairy tale, namely, Cinderella. However, the familiar plot is immediately disrupted” (57). Cornelia does not encounter a fairy godmother, and ends up back in submission. “When I look in the mirror” displays Wallach’s self-reflective and matter-of-fact voice. Cohen writes, “What her poems evidently show over and over again is that, for her, even the simplest, most direct language cannot be pinned down to an underlying essential meaning and that one’s conscious sensibility is not the ultimate source of poetic endurance” (66).

Wallach’s confessional poetry in Chapter 4 is discussed in light of when 1960s Hebrew poetry shifted away from the 1950s stricter forms and structures. Cohen explicated “Avshalom” looking at the themes of maternity, pregnancy, and abortion through the lens of Biblical text, and Wallach’s personal experience, as she had two abortions. This is a beautiful, heart-wrenching poem (“where will the wind/carry you/my son”). In Chapter 5, Cohen centers on female images in Wallach’s early poetry, and this chapter is especially strong. Cohen situates Wallach’s female images in her poetry with other feminist poets Dalia Rayikovitch, Dalia Herz, and Lea Goldberg, although she stresses that Wallach is more lyrical. Cohen is strongest and most enlightening with explanations of Biblical, mythological, or historical figures (primarily female) such as the explication of Wallach’s poem “Teresa” as connected to St. Teresa, a mystic. Cohen references Adrienne Rich when discussing Wallach’s poem “The Siren,” and in connection with explications of “Nizeta” and “Cecilia,” Cohen references such women writers and scholars as Simone de Beauvoir, Virginia Woolf, Alicia Ostriker, Mary Daly, and Barbara Herrnstein Smith.

Cohen’s book was published in 2003. Deconstruction and some of its attendant “buzzwords” are somewhat passé, so some sections of analysis feel dated or not particularly startling. The post-structuralism, feminist, and psychoanalytic theory (e.g. logocentrism and binaries) is, however, fitting for the time period in which Cohen wrote her book. Cohen’s references and interpretations of Wallach’s work through the lens of postmodern theory are mostly appropriate and stimulating, but can also be a stretch, as the theory sometimes appears tacked on. The theory does not always enhance the author’s otherwise strong textual and structural interpretation and

analysis of Wallach's work. Much of the theory in Cohen's book was popular in the 1990s, such as Gilbert & Gubar, Cixous, Annette Kolodny, Toril Moi, Derrida, Lacan, and even, to some extent, Freud, Jung, and Deutsch, so her book took me back to graduate school days, which was a welcome refresher.

Cohen is an Associate Professor of Hebrew. Although written in the style of a literary scholar, Cohen's book is oftentimes more of a language, linguistics, and translation focus than a literary focus. Notably and admirably, Cohen translated all of Wallach's poems in the book.

Under Cohen's guidance, we revisit scenes and passages from the Bible through Wallach's poetry, which will be of interest to scholars in myriad fields, not just Biblical studies or theology. The Bible is frequently the foundation for symbolism and stories in literature through the ages. Also rewarding was Cohen's discussions of Wallach's word usage in her poems, and a poem's essence and meaning derived from words, lines, and stanzas in Hebrew and also in English.

Your reading experience, and appreciation of Cohen's book, might be enhanced if you can read Hebrew, and if you have a background in Hebrew poetry. Discussions of Hebrew grammar, Hebrew words and phrases, and, for example, whether masculine or feminine in light of Wallach's poetry, makes for interesting, but also, at times, admittedly, ponderous reading, and is limited to a circumscribed discourse community.

In conclusion, ordinarily, I would not have been easily drawn to a book outside of my literature purview amongst an array of scholarly offerings, so it was gratifying to open the door wider and have the opportunity to be introduced to Wallach and her work. I learned a great deal from Cohen's thorough presentation and analysis of Hebrew poetry, Israeli poets, and Wallach and her poetry, and I think other readers will as well.

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