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THE “INTENDED MISIDENTIFICATION” OF THE OTHER IN THE POETRY OF DAHLIA RAVIKOVITCH

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Abstract: *This article explores the attitude of Israeli poet Dahlia Ravikovitch (1936–2005) to the Other by considering, side-by-side, one of her poems, “The Viking,” and a little known episode in her life, which though brief was, as it turns out, quite important for Ravikovitch: her voluntary work, in 1964, at the Chicago-based residential school for autistic children run by the famous psychologist, Bruno Bettelheim.*

The poem reflects on the self’s relation to the Other from the complex perspective of simultaneous alienation and identification. This position reproduces Ravikovitch’s attitude toward Bettelheim whom she adopted as an authoritative father figure yet also rebelled against. Published in 1967, the poem “The Viking” is revealed to be in praise of difference and the aristocratic nature of trauma, anticipating Ravikovitch’s political poetry (which came to the fore after the first Lebanon War in 1982), by exposing the deep ethical commitment of her work.

The “intended misidentification” (טעות בזיהוי) of the Other—as a Viking, in this case—is explored here as a unique poetic device used by Ravikovitch to challenge conventional categories and to protest against oppressive systems.

From its very inception, Dahlia Ravikovitch’s work is marked by the poet’s fascination with the divergent and the Other. One of the first poems she translated, at the very same time she was composing her earliest, not quite mature poems in her high school years, was William Blake’s “The Little Black Boy”—the monologue of a black boy who wishes to “heal” the white boy in order to become like him: “I’ll shade him from the heat till he can bear / To lean in joy upon our Father’s knee.”¹ The black boy admits his “deficiency” and yearns to correct it—but rather than by changing himself, he will achieve this through the transformation he brings upon the non-different, the white boy who is part of the majority. The one who is different, therefore, has the power to heal and the “deficiency” is situated in the hegemonic group.

Ravikovitch’s interest in the different and the outcast was also reflected by the books she chose to read in this period, many of which were by black authors. In a radio interview recorded in 1968, she said:

1. W. Blake, “Songs of Innocence: VI. The Little Black Boy,” in *Blake: The Complete Poems* (ed. W. H. Stevenson; 2nd ed.; London: Longman, 1989), p. 58.

Right now I especially like black American writers. I don't think I know all of them. But two with whom I am familiar are James Baldwin and Richard Wright. It's not just through the lens of literature that I admire them but I feel a kind of personal admiration because I know all the suffering that comes with creation. It's something that also goes into the work. Distinction through suffering is almost the highest possible human summit.²

The outcast, in this context, is the non-canonical which Ravikovitch embraces, if only as a reader.

In this article I would like to focus on one relatively early poem by Dahlia Ravikovitch, "The Viking," so as to examine her complex attitude toward the Other—not merely as a theme for itself (The Other in Ravikovitch's Poetry) but as a reflection of the relations between self and other. I will try to show how the portrait the poem draws turns out to be a self-portrait, and that this poem is prototypical in the sense that it suggests the poetic and ethical course of Ravikovitch's poetry until then as well as the directions in which it was to develop subsequently. Behind this poem there is the "suffering that comes with creation," and exploring this casts a different light on the poem as well as on Ravikovitch's oeuvre.

Counting thirty-five lines, "The Viking" is one of Ravikovitch's longest poems. While it seems formally casual, apparently prosaic (in both senses) speech captured in verses, reading it aloud reveals its melodiousness:

הוויקינג

מוקדש לריצ'רד סוונסון משיקגו

The Viking

for Richard Swanson of Chicago

אֶצֶל רִיצ'רְדַּד	With Richard
הַכֹּל מְעוּת: הַפָּנִים, הַיָּדִים.	everything was twisted: the face, the arms.
יֶלֶד בֶּן אֶחָת-עָשָׂרָה מְשָׁעָה.	A crazy eleven-year-old kid.
בְּגֵן שְׂאֲחָרֵי הַמוֹזֵיאֹן	In the garden behind the museum,
אַחֲרֵי אֲרוּחַת צֹהֲרִים עֲלוּבָה	after a pitiful lunch,
הוּא דִבֵּר אֶל הַסֵּנָאִים	he talked to the squirrels

2. H. Kalev, "סיפורו של יוצר: ראיון עם דליה רביקוביץ" (An artist's story: An interview with Dahlia Ravikovitch), *Kol Israel* June 20, 1968, film archive script 9754; also see Ravikovitch's newspaper articles "הגדול שבכולם: ג'יימס בולדווין, האנטישמיות והיהודים" (The greatest of them all: James Baldwin, anti-Semitism, and the Jews), *Ha'aretz*, "Tarbut ve-sifrut," July 14, 1967, p. 15; "עולמם העז של" (The powerful world of the powerless [on new British literature]), *Davar*, "Dvar ha-shavu'a," October 27, 1967, pp. 6–7.

בְּקוֹלֵי קוֹלוֹת,	at the top of his lungs,
וְאִין צֶרֶךְ לֹאמַר	and it goes without saying
שֶׁהַסֵּנְאִים נִמְלְטוּ עַל נַפְשָׁם.	the squirrels ran for their lives.
"לֹא רָצִיתִי לְהִזִּיק לָהֶם, בְּאַמֶּת",	"I wasn't trying to hurt them, really I wasn't,"
אָמַר אַחֲר־כֵּךְ רִיצֶרֶד,	said Richard later,
"רַק לְהַפְחִיד אוֹתָם".	"just to give them a scare."
רִיצֶרֶד	Richard
תָּמִיד מְלֻכְלָךְ וְרֹאשׁוֹ בְּעֵנִין אַחֲרֵי,	always dirty, his head somewhere else.
עַל שְׂפַת הָאֵגֶם	There on the shore of the lake
פָּחַדְתִּי שֶׁשׁוּב נִעְלָם	I was afraid he'd disappeared again.
אַחֲר־כֵּךְ רָאִיתִי אוֹתוֹ מְשִׁתּוֹבֵב	Then I saw him swimming and messing
בְּשַׁחֲיָה,	around,
בְּמֵי הַבֶּץ הַקְּפוּאִים	in the freezing muddy water
הִיְתָה לוֹ הַנָּאָה.	he was having the time of his life.
אֵין דָּבָר רַע אֶחָד	There isn't a single bad thing
שְׂאִי-אֶפְשָׁר לְהִגִּיד עַל רִיצֶרֶד	that can't be said about Richard,
אֶפְלוּ אָמְרוּ עָלָיו שֶׁהוּא מְתַפּוֹצֵץ	they even said he's bursting with envy.
מִקְנָאָה.	
עַם זֹאת חוֹבָה לְהוֹסִיף,	Nonetheless, it should be noted
שֶׁרִיצֶרֶד הָיָה וְיָקִינֵג	that Richard was a Viking,
גְּבוּהָ וְדָק וְצָחוּר מֵעֶבֶר לַמַּסְכָּה.	tall and slender, unsullied behind his
	mask.
בְּמֵי הַבֶּץ הַדְּלוּחִים,	In the murky muddy water,
בְּחֶרֶשֶׁת הַמוּזִיאוֹן	in the museum grove
כְּשֶׁעָשָׂה אֶת עֲצָמוֹ לְצֶחֳקִים	when he made himself the laughingstock
בְּאֲזֵי הַסֵּנְאִים וְהַקְהָל,	of the squirrels and the assembled crowd,
עֵינָיו הִנְהַדְרוֹת	his marvelous eyes
הָיוּ נִתְּוֹנוֹת בְּמֶרְחָק בְּמַבֵּט מְשַׁגֵּעַ,	were fixed on the distance in a crazy gaze.
רִיצֶרֶד חָלַם עַל תְּקוּן הָעוֹלָם	Richard dreamt of setting the world to
	rights
יֹתֵר מִכֵּל מִי שְׂאֵנִי מִכִּירָה.	more than anyone else I know.
תָּמִיד יִכְלָתִי לַחֲשֹׁב	I could always imagine
אֵיךְ אֲבוֹת אֲבוֹתָיו הַקְּדוּמִים	those ancient forefathers of his
מְפָלִיגִים כְּמִטְרָפִים	sailing like madmen
בֵּים הַצִּפּוֹנִי, בְּסִפְיָה מוֹזָרָה,	in an odd-looking ship across the North
	Sea.

איך הם מבקיעים בשלגים,	How they cut through the snows,
נלעגים בדמותם התמירה.	comic in their lanky bearing.
איך הם גוועים בתוך התמהון,	How they perished in astonishment,
מתוך הכרות רחבה יותר	having grown rather intimate
של הכפור והמצוקה,	with misery and frost,
ובכל זאת בתמימות,	and yet in innocence,
בידיעה בלתי מספיקה.	without sufficient knowledge.

ריצ'רד	Richard,
ילד משגע.	crazy kid.
גננים גדולים	Even great gardeners
שיש להם חממות מלאות שחלבים	who have hothouses filled with orchids
וטרפים,	and exotic plants,
שיש להם בברכות	who have in their ponds
ברבורים לבנים ושחורים,	white swans and black,
לעולם לא יוכלו לגדל	will never be able to grow
דבר יפה כמו ריצ'רד,	anything so beautiful as Richard,
אהובי.	my love. ³

Richard, it transpires, was a student (a ward, really) at the University of Chicago's Orthogenic School.⁴ The school became famous when, in 1944, the psychologist Bruno Bettelheim took up its management, a role he occupied for thirty years. During these years, the school (which still operates and is situated in the east part of the campus) became a magnet for psychologists with an interest in the most intractable cases of autism and retardation in children. Bettelheim believed that attaching a "central person" to each child, who would support them with everything but also make demands, would stimulate optimal development and allow her or him to open up. A team of twelve counselors (as they were called) worked almost incessantly, alongside Bettelheim, with the forty-five students. The counselors were "secular monks" who committed themselves not to marry for the duration of four years to wholly dedicate themselves to their work.

3. D. Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude: The Collected Poetry of Dahlia Ravikovitch* (translated from the Hebrew by C. Bloch and C. Kronfeld; New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), pp. 129–131.

4. In psychology, "orthogeny" refers to the treatment of children suffering from mental retardation, the wish to encourage linear development according to set notions (ortho = straight; genesis = origin, development). The use of this quasi scientific terminology clearly came to blur the stigma of autism.

Bettelheim documented his impressions and his clinical experience at the institution in a number of books which all became bestsellers.⁵

In March 1964, Bettelheim visited Israel intending to study the so called children’s societies in the kibbutzim, a journey which would eventually issue in the publication of his *The Children of the Dream* (1969).⁶ He spent five weeks in kibbutz Ramat Yohanan in northern Israel, disguised as “Atid” in the book (“Atid” is Hebrew for *future*) in order to prevent identification, interviewing children, adolescents, and adults, as well as in other kibbutzim. Shortly after arriving in Israel, he lectured at Beit Berl Seminar before an audience of Labor movement affiliated psychologists, on how to “safeguard personal autonomy in modern mass society.”⁷ Michal Gur-Arieh (Ravikovitch), who was teaching at the Seminar at that time, asked her twenty-six years old daughter the poet to attend, and Dahlia was captivated by the Austro-American Jew in his sixties. She recounted the episode years later:

He spoke with a heavy German accent, observing not the slightest distance, with great simplicity. I was captivated by his huge love for the children and by the heavy burden he had taken on. It was the first time I met someone who took the side of the patient. Someone who took people’s distress seriously.

The participants came up with cases and he related to them, and then they asked me to leave because they were concerned I might reveal the secrets of the kibbutz movement. I refused. I knew they wouldn’t forcibly remove me in his presence. This drew his attention, and the next day he invited me to have lunch with him. He said people had been saying harsh things about me, wanting to prevent us from meeting. I told him about the kibbutz and he made a recording and some of what I said went into the book.⁸

5. Mainly: B. Bettelheim, *A Home for the Heart* (New York: Knopf, 1974); B. Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1967); B. Bettelheim, *Truants from Life: The Rehabilitation of Emotionally Disturbed Children* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1955), B. Bettelheim, *Love is Not Enough: The Treatment of Emotionally Disturbed Children* (Glencoe, Free Press, 1950).

6. R. Pollak, *The Creation of Dr B.: A Biography of Bruno Bettelheim* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 290.

7. From an announcement published by Beit Berl in *Davar* newspaper (March 20, 1964, p. 11; the lecture was delivered on Wednesday, March 25, 1964).

8. Y. London, “מותו של דוקטור ביי” (Doctor B.’s death; an interview on the occasion of Bruno Bettelheim’s death, with Dahlia Ravikovitch and others) *Yedioth Aharonot*, “7 Days,” March 23, 1990, pp. 16–17.

For Ravikovitch, it was a rare opportunity to vent her bad feelings about her childhood in Kibbutz Geva, also in northern Israel, to an impartial professional. This encounter with Bettelheim may also have inspired her to render her experience in the kibbutz's children's society in the story "The Summer Vacation Tribunal," published about half a year after their first meeting.⁹ And indeed, her account appeared in Bettelheim's book on the children of the kibbutzim. As she later recounted, she told him that she enjoyed more freedom in the army than when she lived on the kibbutz: in the army, from time to time, she was given leave, while in the kibbutz she never had as much as an hour to herself.¹⁰ And this is how her words eventually appeared in *The Children of the Dream*:

By contrast, their life as recruits in the army seems a relief. As one of them who just finished his tour of duty told me: "The army's extremely lenient. There's no comparison between the army and the kibbutz. In the army you have your off-duty hours. You never had an after-duty time in the youth society."¹¹

Bettelheim covered up his source of information both by changing her gender ("one of them who just finished *his* tour of duty") and by making her younger because she had not in fact left the army soon before their conversation: she had been released at least six years prior to their meeting. It may, however, also be that the difference was the result of Bettelheim's typical casualness in writing and his way of distorting data, as one of his major biographers has argued.¹² Immediately following the above citation, the renowned psychologist continued: "This last was from a person who had felt stifled by kibbutz education in his wish to become a person, so his views were no doubt somewhat jaundiced."¹³

It may be that the affinity Ravikovitch felt with Bettelheim was inspired by a resemblance to her high school teacher, literary scholar, Baruch (Benedict) Kurzweil, who was very instrumental in the reception of her first collection (*The Love of Golden Apple*, 1959). Both men were born to liberal Jewish families in the Austro-Hungarian empire (Bettelheim in Vienna in 1903, Kurzweil in Pirnitz in Moravia [presently

9. The story was printed in *Amot*, October–November 1964.

10. In Y. London, "Doctor B.'s Death," pp. 16–17.

11. B. Bettelheim, *The Children of the Dream* (London: Macmillan, 1969), p. 232.

12. R. Pollak, *The Creation of Dr B.*, pp. 269–297.

13. B. Bettelheim, *The Children of the Dream*, p. 232. A copy of this edition of the book was found in Ravikovitch's library, but it contains neither a dedication from the author nor annotations by the reader.

in the Czech Republic] in 1906) and got their education during its most glorious years under the reign of emperor Franz Josef. Both experienced the collapse of the empire in their childhood and were later forced into exile. Though each gained considerable professional-academic status in their respective new countries, their entire lives were in the shadow of this exile. In a way, their professional success itself was the result of transferring the personal rupture they had experienced to their fields of research. Kurzweil presented the new Hebrew literature as a fault line between two tectonic plates: Judaism and Modernity, while Bettelheim made his academic name by treating “broken” children (children suffering from schizophrenia, autism, etc.), calling to remove them—as if in exile—from their parents and place them in the Orthogenic School (which is why he was so fond of the communal kibbutz education, which separated children from their parents for most of the day and through the night).

The two educators, moreover, were famous for their intransigence and their strictness, and the frequent, sharp antagonism they provoked. Later in life, they both were among the most outspoken critics of the youth of the day—in his articles Bettelheim mocked the notion of “youth culture” and attacked hippies for their radical views and for using drugs, while Kurzweil frowned upon the majority of young Israeli artists for disavowing Jewish tradition and thereby creating an apriori sterile writing. Perhaps it was the formative experience of being uprooted from their homeland (starting with the painful defeat of the Austro-Hungarian empire in the first World War, and the subsequent necessity to go into exile) that sowed the early seeds for both men’s suicide—Kurzweil in 1972 and Bettelheim in 1990—in both cases a carefully planned and firm act, matching the way in which they had lived.

Though Ravikovitch, at the time, had no way of knowing how they would end their lives, she may well have considered the similarities between the two men. They seem to have functioned as male authority figures for the girl who had lost her father early; their power fascinated her while she did not recoil from acting independently or even against their wishes.

About a year after the visit of “Doctor B.”—as Bettelheim was often called in the United States—Ravikovitch followed him and was accepted to work at Chicago’s Orthogenic School as a guest-counselor.¹⁴ This is

14. This was in the summer of 1965. Arriving in New York City in mid-May, Ravikovitch stayed there for two weeks and then continued to Chicago (see a letter by Ravikovitch to Hayim Leaf

when she met Richard, “a boy who refused to recognize the earth’s gravity,” she said, “he’d climb to frightful heights.”¹⁵

Though Ravikovitch managed to work no more than two weeks at the school, these two weeks were enough for her to notice some of the malfunctions which were exposed only after Bettelheim’s death in 1990, casting a heavy shadow over his life-time project.¹⁶ On his death, Israeli journalist Yaron London did a comprehensive interview with some of the famous psychologist’s acquaintances in Israel, including with Ravikovitch, who told about her acquaintance with him and of her brief experience at the school:

I had problems of my own that didn’t start in Chicago, but that oppressive system didn’t help me. All those ‘counselors’—themselves psychologically damaged people—were like Doctor B.’s children and were in tough competition for his affection. They would often attack one another pretending it was professional criticism. That would seem legitimate since they were all constantly trying to improve themselves, after all.

Doctor B. had a kind of authority that bordered on the tyrannical. He turned the caregivers into less than dust and gave his total protection to the patients. When I left he gave me two hundred dollars by way of a present. He said: You’re a poor girl. Go and buy yourself a record player. I so much wanted a record player and I took it, until then I didn’t know that there are rich people who feel guilty about being rich.

What did you learn from him?

I learned that there’s hope, that if you give people [משקיע באנשים] what they need, they develop exceptional powers.

Did you return to him?

We corresponded. I very much wanted to show him my child but that didn’t work out. I felt guilty when I left. For some months afterwards I had nightmares about returning to Chicago and wanting to see the children, and he doesn’t let me, to punish me for having left them.¹⁷

dated June 15, 1965 in “Gnazim,” Bio-biographical Institute for the Research and History of Hebrew Literature in Tel Aviv; collection 541, 9983/15).

15. In Y. London, “Doctor B.’s Death,” pp. 16–17.

16. Bettelheim was accused of having forged the rate of success of his treatment, of having invented many of the case studies on which he based his method, and of having repeatedly committed plagiarism (including, for instance, in his 1976 book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*). And as if this was not enough, cases of abuse involving wards at the Orthogenic School were revealed, including ones in which Bettelheim himself was actively involved. Pollak’s biography, it seems, published seven years after Bettelheim’s death, put a stop to the, until then, copious praise, allowing the institute’s wards to tell their personal narrative. See, for instance, R. C. Redford, *Crazy: My Seven Years at Bruno Bettelheim’s Orthogenic School* (Bloomington: Trafford, 2010); S. Eliot, *Not the Thing I Was: Thirteen Years at Bruno Bettelheim’s Orthogenic School* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

17. In Y. London, “Doctor B.’s Death,” pp. 16–17.

Apparently solid categories get mixed up in this description: adult-caregivers resemble children (“themselves psychologically damaged people.... They would often attack one another”); Ravikovitch identifies Bettelheim’s position as father but shrewdly observes his limitations and weaknesses, herself figuring somewhat like a mother who was exiled from her children.

Having appealed to Ravikovitch on the basis of the trauma she experienced in kibbutz Geva, Bettelheim then attracted her to what may be considered as another kibbutz, the “kibbutz” of the dysfunctional at the Orthogenic School in Chicago. Here finally, Ravikovitch was supposed to feel that she belonged, to feel “proper” or “well-adjusted.” But only the briefest of stays at the institution as a guest-counselor showed her that she did not fit in either at the “kibbutz” of the dysfunctional, that there too she was a stranger. (Given the eventually revealed deficiencies of Bettelheim’s method and his mode of work, she may well have been more “well-adjusted” than her colleagues at the school when she was not willing to submit to its rules.) In spite of what she said in the interview, no letters from Bettelheim have so far been found in Ravikovitch’s estate, nor have any letters from Ravikovitch been traced in Bettelheim’s archives, which are now deposited at the Department of Special Collections at the University of Chicago but have not yet been fully catalogued. Her personal file at the Orthogenic School—if ever there existed one given the very short term of her employment—must have long since been destroyed (the school only keeps records for ten years at the most); the same is true for Richard Swanson’s personal file.¹⁸ What remains, then, is primarily the poem.

At the very outset of “The Viking” the speaker makes a point of the difference between herself and Richard: She mentions that his face is twisted, that he has had a “pitiful” lunch, that he talks “at the top of his lungs,” that he is “always dirty,” that “he made himself the laughing-stock,” and so on. In this way she demonstrates her familiarity with proper manners and conduct, something to which Richard is necessarily and absolutely oblivious, and thus she implies her superiority to him. This gap between them also translates into an ironic distance, for instance where the speaker says: “he talked to the squirrels/at the top of his lungs/and it goes without saying/the squirrels ran for their lives.” In this manner too

18. This I found out when I contacted the Orthogenic School and the library of the University of Chicago in the spring of 2013.

she adopts her readers' perspective on the divergent phenomenon she describes, trying to team up with them behind Richard's back. She knows very well, moreover, what information her readers are lacking and what they do not need to know: "it goes without saying," "There isn't a single bad thing /that can't be said about Richard," "Nonetheless, it should be noted." All this comes to mark herself as Richard's opposite: as "proper" (sane, that is) and knowing.

This device, which in a sense turns its back on Richard, encapsulates identification mixed with alienation, or alienation mixed with identification. The speaker enlists readers' trust so she can proceed to the next move: the argument about Richard being a Viking. To support her baseless argument, she states with total confidence: "*Nonetheless, it should be noted* / that Richard was a Viking." From here on, the speaker's ironic distance is replaced by identification, a development which culminates at the end of the poem: her heart goes out to Richard, and from an exceptional child who must be supervised and whom one must approach with a "patronizing" attitude, he becomes "my love" (beloved child or male partner). Everything turns upside down and the readers may well wonder whether the speaker can be trusted, whether her judgment may, like in the case of Richard, be deficient.

In the course of the transition from remoteness or alienation to identification, the poem also includes other gestures like the demythologization of the other, the inferior, the mad person, which in fact issues in his mythologization and apotheosis—a fundamentally romantic development; departure from the realistic rendering of the time spent together in the garden to the ancient, otherworldly realm of the Vikings; and movement from prose to poetry. As the poem progresses, it grows more "poetic," both in the speaker's tone, becoming more subtle and full of love, and in its form. Toward the end of the poem there is more and more rhyme—though rather simple and essentially grammatical it does contrive to "break" the poem's earlier prosaic tone.

These parallel gestures transform this ostensibly impossible poem (on the one hand its seemingly casual form, on the other its subject matter: comparing the boy to a Viking, and with such adamance) into an inevitability. The line "white swans and black" toward the end of "The Viking" may suggest another mythical world—the one of Andersen's fairy tale "The Ugly Duckling" (assuming that the average Hebrew reader, who tends to confuse between rabbit and hare, does not really distinguish between swan and duckling). The swans in the poem, moreover, also recall

Richard’s surname, Swanson. Rather than portraying Richard as a black swan, as the ugly duckling who will make it in the end, the speaker presents him as a third kind, whose beauty outdoes that of both the “proper” swans and the “different” ones; an organism of a third kind, neither animal nor vegetable: “Even great gardeners / who have hothouses filled with orchids and exotic plants, / who have in their ponds / white swans and black, / will never be able to grow / anything so beautiful as Richard, / my love.” By the end of the poem, it is not only Richard who undergoes transformation but the speaker too, who has dared to confess her love for one who has been rejected. And thus the transfiguration is complete: the mad and the outcast has become ultimate beauty, failure (rendered in the images of his messing around in murky, muddy water) has turned into brilliant triumph by having been shifted to a different level of association. And in parallel, prosaicness has burst into poem.

1. THE ARISTOCRACY OF THE DIVERGENT AND THE DYNAMIC APPROACH TO INJUSTICE

“The Viking” was first published in *Ha’aretz* in April 1967. However personal its source of inspiration, or maybe exactly because of this, it managed to accord with the dominant mood in certain circles at that time, which was marked by an interest in children with mental or physical abnormalities and, generally, in “freaks.”¹⁹ About two months before the poem was published, a group exhibition, *New Documents*, opened at MoMa, New York featuring the work of three young photographers: Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand. It was the first major exposure of photographs of people suffering from various forms of distortions by Arbus who had become known as a fashion photographer. Five years later, these were the photographs that represented the United States at the Venice Biennale, making Arbus into the first photographer ever to represent the United States at this event. This is what Israeli art critic Adam Baruch wrote about her: “In discussing her work, the relevant concepts are: sincerity, humanity, compassion, desire, truth, dialogue, respect.... Her photography constitutes a literary and social document.”²⁰ And she herself said—in words evocative of Ravikovitch’s attitude to Richard:

19. Thanks to Haim Be’er, that drew my attention to the work of Diane Arbus in this context.

20. A. Baruch, “לא הייתי רוצה לנשק אותך: על דיאן ארבוז” (I would not want to kiss you: On Diane Arbus), *Yedioth Aharonot*, “7 Days,” June 29, 1984, p. 22.

Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot. It was one of the first things I photographed and it had a terrific kind of excitement for me. I just needed to adore them. I still do adore some of them. I don't quite mean they're my best friends but they made me feel a mixture of shame and awe. There's a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading that they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life. They're aristocrats.²¹

The same goes for Richard in the poem. He is an aristocrat exactly on account of his trauma. And while he is a biographical figure, he also appears as an almost legendary creature, a Viking. In his book *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, first published in 1976, about a decade after "The Viking" first appeared in print, Bettelheim argued that in contrast with many current children's books, in fairy tales evil is present just as much as good things.²² From this perspective, too, the poem has a quality of legend. The speaker—and poet—bring about this miraculous metamorphosis, this transfiguration, through poetry, changing the leper into a prince. She succeeds where the school and its acclaimed principal failed to achieve metamorphosis in the damaged boy and to "fix" him.

Fundamentally, "The Viking" is a poem about suffering and injustice. Turning the anomalous and rejected child into "my love" is an attempt to correct this, so that it is easy to associate a characteristic which the speaker uses in reference to her hero to herself: "Richard dreamt of setting the world to rights / more than anyone else I know." About two years after the poem was first published, Ravikovitch said this in an interview:

In the end, perhaps, what I am doing [in her poetry] is to expose injustice, or ugliness. I think it is the task of all art to provide human fortitude. My approach to literature may be one-sided, and quite nonacademic, but what attracts or repels me in literature is the author's ability to see, his ability to expose injustice where it exists.²³

21. D. Arbus, *An Aperture Monograph* (Fortieth Anniversary Edition; New York: Millerton, 1972), p. 3.

22. B. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), pp. 8–9.

23. I. Zartal, "השירה: נשמה ללא גוף" (Poetry: Soul without body), an interview with Ravikovitch, *Davar*, July 8, 1966, p. 10.

Years later, in another interview, she said: “I’m with the tear of the oppressed.”²⁴ It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to think of the speaker in Ravikovitch’s poetry as someone who simply identifies with the oppressed no matter who they are (which most studies dedicated to Ravikovitch’s political poetry take as their basic point of departure). Ravikovitch presented a much more complex perception of suffering and injustice, and argued, among other things, that the individual’s liberty and identity are threatened when he or she becomes immersed in a sense of injustice and deprivation. Here is Ravikovitch writing only some months after “The Viking”’s publication in an essay on Mary McCarthy’s novel *A Charmed Life*:²⁵

Mary McCarthy’s own broadmindedness and her perception of the world as not being ruled by any form of providence save her from the need to blame or to indulge in a sense of injustice which sometimes is the essence of social novels. “Nobody can have a permanent claim on being the injured party,” says Martha in the novel.

She cannot afford the luxury of a sense of injustice, because the demand for personal liberty implies giving up on the right to be considered oppressed. The author, in fact, takes care not to exaggerate the feelings of suffering, and the most profound suffering—that of her heroes and her own—in her autobiographic stories always comes with self-irony and a pinch of humor.²⁶

Ethics, thus, constitutes poetics: so as not to overflow the measure of suffering, one must employ self-irony “and a pinch of humor” (does not this also capture the end of “The Viking”?).

In this manner, the representation of suffering and injustice loses its static and superficial character and becomes dynamic. The same happens with exploitation—another word in Ravikovitch’s dictionary for injustice—which she represents as both cruel and harmonious. This is how she explained her poem “Exploitation”:²⁷

Our notion of harmony is actually the bringing together of good attributes. Harmony is the good thing that is also beautiful. And to me, that’s

24. D. Karpel, “עוד ספר: אהבה אמיתית” (Another book: *True Love*), an interview with Ravikovitch, *Ha’Ir*, Tel Aviv, Nov. 28, 1986, p. 30.

25. M. McCarthy, *A Charmed Life* (New York: Plume, 1974 [1955]), p. 194.

26. D. Ravikovitch, “חיים מופלאים ואבודים” (A lost, charmed life), *Yochani*, July 5, 1967, pp. 69–80. This was incorporated in Ravikovitch’s book, *מוות במשפחה* (A death in the family; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1976), p. 163.

27. “Outrage” is how Kronfeld and Bloch translate Ravikovitch’s “עושק”—literally: exploitation; see D. Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, p. 101.

a place that requires no effort, and my poem is actually a poem about when cruel damage is inflicted on harmony. The destruction of flowers [in the poem] has two aspects. It involves brutality, on the one hand. On the other, because flowers possess beauty, the flowers' beauty somehow attaches to the act of their destruction. As one might talk about a splendid battle. As one might talk about the beauty of loss, like there is a notion of a final burst of life [התלקחות] before death, a flowering before extinction.

I try to connect the sense of injustice with the sense of beauty. What I'm trying to do here, actually, is to clarify the contradiction. The technical tool I use is that instead of a description of brutality, I conclude with a reference to beauty. And where the image is one of beauty, I remind of the brutal side of it.²⁸

Suddenly, the distinct categories of "injustice" and "beauty" come together, even as self and Other intersect at their limits. Richard Swanson's portrait emerges as Ravikovitch's own portrait due to his strangeness and difference, belonging to a tribe which no one in that place but she can understand, or rejected just like she was the odd one out at kibbutz Geva and later in the Orthogenic School. The portrait becomes a self-portrait, and the other way around: the self-portrait has turned into the portrait of an Other.

2. THE POWER OF "INTENDED MISIDENTIFICATION"

I have already mentioned that "The Viking" includes earlier tendencies in Ravikovitch's poetry and marks directions it will take subsequently to it. This poem about a "crazy kid" encapsulates the poet's interest in anomalous people, which is also reflected, among other things, in her translations of W. B. Yeats's "Crazy Jane" poems which she made exactly at the same time as she was publishing her first poems,²⁹ and perhaps also in the poem "The Seasons of the Year" (תקופות השנה)³⁰ from the same period. About the opening sentence of that poem, "Through the outliers the winds do blow" (הרוח נושבת בחריגים), Ravikovitch later said:

That is a poem I wrote about the changing seasons, and it was simply the wrong use of a word. I was confused. What I wanted to say was בחרכים

28. I. Zartal, "Poetry," p. 30, emphasis added.

29. D. Ravikovitch, "ג'יין המשוגעת והבישוף" (Crazy Jane and the bishop); "ג'יין המשוגעת עומדת" (Crazy Jane reproved); "ג'יין המשוגעת ביום הדין" (Crazy Jane on the day of judgment), and others; from Yeats's series of poems, "Words for Music Perhaps." Ravikovitch's translations were first published in *Lamerchav* in January 9, 1959, p. 2, and they were subsequently included in her book D. Ravikovitch, תהום קורא (The deep calleth; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1976).

30. D. Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, p. 72.

[through the cracks] and it came out *בחרייגים* [through the divergent, the different, the outliers], and that is how it remained. Later I understood that I must have also wanted to say something about the wind [in Hebrew also spirit] that blows through people who are different. Sometimes one has to allow words to escape and flow even if they do not quite fit in with the rules of the language.³¹

Misidentification (*טעות בזיהוי*), intended or unintended, I would like to argue in conclusion, is a key principle of the representation of the Other in Ravikovitch’s poetry—whether it is the crazy other, the rejected or socially-ethnically other, or outcast. Furthermore, the “Intended Misidentification” is a strategy used by Ravikovitch to challenge conventional categories and to protest against oppressive systems. In the above example, Ravikovitch claims to have made a wrong identification: an apparently incorrect word, *בחרייגים*, somehow put itself in the place of the right word: *בחרכים*. Yet eventually it transpired (or it so happened) that the ill-fitting word was the most fitting of all. The same can be said about Richard in “The Viking.” In the extra-poetic reality, it is obvious that he is not really a Viking. In the poem, however, he is a Viking. And the “error” in the poem (or the “poetic truth”) gradually establishes itself until it vies with the extra-poetic truth. The representation of the Other in Ravikovitch’s poetry is always associated with the breach of hierarchies, with the overturning of rigid categories, with the misidentification as the notion is used in military context: failing in telling apart “our forces” from “the enemy,” that liminal moment when one distinct identity becomes absorbed beyond recognition in another. While misidentification, in the military context, is something that “happens,” the “Intended Misidentification” is a willful act functioning as an anti-oppressive mechanism. And this is why every poem by Ravikovitch about the Other is a protest poem.

Indeed, despite its poetic nature, “The Viking” is essentially a protest poem, challenging conventional categories and the existing order. It is one ongoing misidentification, intended to blur the boundaries between the normal and the abnormal, between the average person’s reality testing and that of the autistic person—and in parallel: between a regular reader and the artist, between the beautiful and the ugly. If to this we add the concrete biographical background, it is hard not to read the poem as the young Ravikovitch’s criticism, on her brief visit at one of the jewels in the crown

31. V. L. Barzilai, “העונה החמה: מנן נכנס לנו לראש שיש בארץ סתיו?” (The hot season: How did we get it into our heads that there’s fall in Israel?), *Ha’aretz*, weekly supplement, October 29, 2004, p. 48.

of the psychological (and perhaps also psychiatric) establishments of its time, of the admired and senior authority figure, Doctor Bettelheim, and the establishment itself. Ravikovitch, who later on found herself on the other side, as a patient, offers here an alternative approach which does not try to assume superiority in order to contain the afflicted child but takes a position of full equality, or even an inferior role, in relation to him (the inferiority of the “healthy” person as opposed to the “mad” one necessarily harks back to the glamor of the crazy figure in Romanticism).

As opposed to the masculine, analytical treatment Ravikovitch suggests maternal or parental empathy. On such a reading, it may be argued that “The Viking” begins in Bettelheim mode (with its binary distinction between functional and dysfunctional, its stereotyping, subtle superiority) and ends in Ravikovitch mode (blurred boundaries, embracing the Other, compassion devoid of superiority). At the same time, too, the poem’s backdrop grows more varied. While it starts off in the garden behind the museum (two consummate representations of order and culture), it moves to “the murky, muddy water, / in the museum grove,” “the shore of the lake,” from there to sailing “in an odd looking ship across the North Sea,” a Viking ship—predating modern Western civilization—and it concludes with ponds and “hothouses filled with orchids and exotic plants”—a different representation of governance and culture whose emphatically vegetative nature threatens to take over.

“The Viking,” I believe, inaugurates Ravikovitch’s political poetry with its characteristic combination of identification and remoteness, of including the strange and the different, and generally, with its complex attitude to suffering and injustice. Whilst she crucially relates to suffering and injustice throughout her poetry, right from the start, it seems that identification of the other’s suffering starts here, even if the other’s suffering is a projection of suffering the poet herself experienced. In this regard, too, “The Viking” is a key poem: it exposes Ravikovitch’s poetry’s profound ethical commitment, which will find more pertinent expression in the poem “All Thy Breakers and Waves” (“and I beheld the tear of the oppressed”), which subsequently would form the basis for the poems she wrote during the First Lebanon War (1982) and for her political poetry as a whole.³² Israeli poet Nathan Zach claimed that it is a mistake to call her poetry political, and that these are “actually poems of compassion for

32. D. Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, p. 147.

mankind, reserved poems of defiance against the terrors of existence.”³³ It is interesting, in this context, to note that the poem “Beheaded Heifer,” which has been perceived as one of Ravikovitch’s most obviously political poems, was entitled “Misidentification” in manuscript.³⁴ That original title points at the proximity of ostensibly separate categories (Jew, Arab) and the discovery that the Other is oneself and the other way around (because he is identified by “our forces” as an Other even though he is the self).³⁵

The ruse of “Intended Misidentification” is a double-edged sword. Much as it turns the black into white (“crazy” Richard is actually a Viking), it also turns what was white into black (the Vikings sail “like *madmen* / in an *odd*-looking ship across the North Sea / ... *comic* in their lanky bearing”, emphasis added) in order to gain readers’ trust in the speakers’ “objectivity.”³⁶ The ruse, then, is also a double-edged sword for one who holds it. Often, Ravikovitch’s political poetry caused her to be seen as “not one of us” (לא אחת משלנו) by certain readers. Chana Kronfeld describes Ravikovitch’s late poetry as follows—mentioning features which all obtain for “The Viking” as I read it here and for the representations of the Other: Ravikovitch’s poetry is “deliberately blurring the boundaries between self and other by means of extending the analogy between different types of distress to the point of fundamentally refusing any fixed identities whatsoever.”³⁷

Another, last tendency in Ravikovitch’s late poetry is also announced by “The Viking.” While in her political poetry, the “blackening” and “whitening”—that is, ironic distancing and pathetic expression, tie into one another, leaving the speaker’s position usually ambivalent—ironic distance in “The Viking” narrows toward the end and eventually disappears with the conclusion: “my love.” The poem’s end is a pure expression

33. N. Zach, “קידה לדליה רביקוביץ” (A respectful bow to Dahlia Ravikovitch), *Yedioth Aharonot*, “Culture, Literature, Art”, June 16, 1995, p. 29.

34. D. Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, pp. 195–196.

35. The background to this poem was the death of orthodox Jewish seminary student Aharon Gross on Hebron’s market square in July 1983. He collapsed bleeding after having been knifed in his stomach and back by three Palestinians.

36. The same device is also typical of Ravikovitch’s poetry during the First Lebanon War—for instance in the poem “Get Out of Beirut” (D. Ravikovitch, *Hovering at a Low Altitude*, p. 194), which starts on a strongly sarcastic note: “Take the knapsacks, / the clay jugs, the washtubs, / the Korans, / ... and kids running around like chickens in the heat. / How many children do you have? / How many children did you have? / It’s hard to keep the children safe in times like these.”

37. C. Kronfeld, “שירה פוליטית כאמנות-לשון ביצירתה של דליה רביקוביץ” (Political poetry as verbal artistry in Dahlia Ravikovitch’s writing), in *כתמי אור* (Sparks of Light: Essays about Dahlia Ravikovitch’s Oeuvre; ed. H. Tsamir and T. S. Hess; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2010), p. 520.

of true love, shorn of sarcasm, “No Stitchery More Precise,” as in the title of a section of the book *True Love* (1987) in which Ravikovitch, years later, brought together the first of her poems about her son, alongside the political poems about the first Lebanon War; and so “The Viking” anticipates her various poems about her son Ido.³⁸

3. EPILOGUE

Ravikovitch did not forget Richard. She mentioned him in several interviews, the last of which was a radio interview in 2004, about a year before her death:

One of your early poems is about a retarded [מפגר] boy...

Not a retarded boy...an autistic boy.

Do you remember that poem?

I remember it very well. Yes. To a certain extent he was my child before Ido. I think I was always looking for children to adopt. Later I saw adoption doesn't work out.

Do you know how he is today?

No, I don't know how he is today. That's a great mystery. And really I want to succeed abroad only in order to be able to find out what happened to Richard. He was in Chicago, in an institution for children with very severe mental disturbances, and I know he moved away, I don't know where he moved, and there are two possibilities: either he got rid of the illness and is doing well in his life, or he is still in some...some institution. And in any case I very much want to know what happened to him. But...for this I would have to get to Chicago, and to get to people who can help me, and wherever it comes to taking initiatives I am really rather a moron [מפגרת].³⁹

Retardation [פיגור] is rehabilitated here: the interviewer makes the mistake to call Richard “retarded” and Ravikovitch immediately corrects her by mentioning that he was an autistic child. At the end of her reply Ravikovitch says that she herself is retarded, to some extent, “a moron,” this time a certain charm which removes the clinical meaning from the attribution מפגר. This move may be considered as another version of “Intended Misidentification,” which in this case, connects so beautifully the Other to the Self.

38. D. Ravikovitch, *אהבה אמיתית* (True love; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1987).

39. T. G. Gross, radio interview with Dahlia Ravikovitch, “ספרים, רבותי, ספרים” (Books, gentlemen, books), *Galey Tsahal*, June 11, 2004.