

# *Subverting Hebrew's Gender Binary: Grammar, Poetry, and Performance in the Work of Esther Raab*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines antigrammaticality in the work of the so-called first “native” modern Hebrew poet, Esther Raab, focusing in particular on how Raab deploys the constraints of Hebrew’s highly gendered grammar in her poems. I begin by considering the broad implications of grammatical gender for how we think and act in the world, while also taking into account specific, concrete examples of gender policing that Raab recalled from her own early childhood. I then offer a close reading of a single, untitled poem to demonstrate how, from her position at the intersection of multiple margins, as a native-born female poet in a literary milieu dominated by immigrants, most of them male, Raab effectively subverts both gender and grammar norms in the construction of a nonconforming gender identity.

“ I LIKE LINES THAT ARE STRAIGHT AND STRONG,” the Hebrew poet Esther Raab (1894–1981) once said, while declaring her affinity for biblical Hebrew and the language of Bialik over that of her contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> As she went on to explain: “I do not like things that are too complicated and that do not grow from a natural foundation: Earth, Water, Air, etc.”<sup>2</sup>

Scholarly readings of Raab’s work have tended to focus on the poet’s connection with the physical landscape of Eretz Yisrael, and images of the native (or, as it happens, imported) fauna and flora, the latter in particular, abound in Raab’s early work. Though she attributed the inspiration for the title of her first book, *Thistles* (קמחונים), published in 1932, to Baudelaire’s *Les fleurs*

<sup>1</sup> Esther Raab and Reuven Shoham, “K’var pigashtikh pa’am: Halifat mikhtavim 1971–1981” [I have met you before: 1971–1981 correspondence], ed. Ehud Ben-Ezer (unpublished manuscript), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 35.

*du mal* (The flowers of evil), thistles were ubiquitous in the *yishuv* that Raab knew intimately, and Raab herself is often referred to as the first *sabra* (meaning both “native Hebrew” and “prickly pear”) poet[ess].<sup>3</sup> While Hamutal Tsamir offers a compelling counterargument to the prevalence of terms like “authenticity,” “rootedness,” and “truth” in critical reception of Raab’s early work, the poet seemed to welcome this assessment of her work, and of her person, in relation to both the land and the Hebrew language.<sup>4</sup>

Despite her claims to a “pure,” unmediated Hebrew, unencumbered by attachments to other languages and cultures, rhetoric that recalls the infamous experiment Eliezer Ben Yehuda conducted with his son (whom he set out to raise in a pure, untainted Hebrew environment), Raab was never monolingual, and Hebrew was not her first language.<sup>5</sup> Born to Hungarian-Jewish immigrants who were among the founders of Petah Tikvah, Raab spoke Yiddish, which remained the lingua franca both at home and among her peers for the better part of her childhood. She was likely exposed to her parents’ native Hungarian and most certainly to both Arabic and Russian, which were heard often on the streets of Petah Tikvah. At school, the languages of instruction were French and Hebrew, and Raab taught herself German in order to be able to read works by Heine, Schiller, and Goethe in the original.<sup>6</sup> As Adriana Jacobs argues, Raab’s multilingualism would profoundly influence her own poetry. All of this is worth noting, not because it set Raab apart from other poets of her time, but because, as Jacobs makes clear, modern Hebrew poetry was itself born out of a confluence of languages and was shaped by translational practices that were ubiquitous among the poets of Raab’s generation.<sup>7</sup> Raab herself would go on to translate poems by Charles Baudelaire and the German writer Walter Cale into Hebrew.

The ubiquity of multilingualism among early modern Hebrew poets may explain why Raab, who remained a marginal poet throughout her life, chose to emphasize her status as a native-born poet, something that distinguished her from her fellow poets, many of them (including the three women who, along with Raab, would form the first generation of female poets in modern Hebrew) immigrants from Eastern Europe. As she told the poet Mosheh Dor, “My entire essence, as a *sabra*, was different.”<sup>8</sup> Comparing herself with some of her most notable contemporaries, including Natan Alterman and Avraham Shlonsky, Raab claimed that while those poets were

<sup>3</sup> The noun *sabra* צבר refers to the prickly pear that is native to the Middle Eastern terrain. Its adoption as a metaphor for the “native Israeli” has to do with the fruit’s ubiquitous thorny exterior and luscious sweet interior, which is seen as representative of the kind of “tough on the outside, kind on the inside” new Jew of the Zionist imagination.

<sup>4</sup> Hamutal Tsamir, “Ahavat moledet ve-si’ah ḥershim: Shir eḥad shel Ester Rab ve-hitqabluto ha-gavrit” [Love of homeland and a deaf conversation: A poem by Esther Raab and its masculine reception], *Teoria u-viqoret* 7 (1995): 125–45. See also Hamutal Tsamir, “Migdar ve-teritoriah nifgashim: Ha-miqreh shel Ester Rab” [Gender and territory meet: The case of Esther Raab], in *Be-shem ha-nof: Le’umiut, migdar, u’sovyektibiyut ba-shira ha-isrealit bi-shenot ha-ḥamishim ve-ha-shishi* [In the name of the land: Nationalism, subjectivity, and gender in the Israeli poetry of the Statehood Generation] (Jerusalem: Keter Books; Be’er Sheva: Heksherim, 2006), 91–124. For more on Raab as native poet, see Hanan Hever, *Nativism, Zionism, and Beyond* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 17–20.

<sup>5</sup> See Adriana Jacobs, “Paris or Jerusalem? Esther Raab, Baudelaire, and the Writing of *Kimshonim*,” in *Strange Cocktail: Translation and the Making of Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018), 49–96, esp. 53, which cites an interview with Raab on this subject: Ziva Shamir, “Ne’urei ha-shira be-arets lo zerua” [The youth of poetry in an unsowed land], *Ḥadarim* 1 (1981): 101–18. See also Ehud Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la’ana u-devash* [Days of gall and honey] (Tel Aviv: ‘Am ‘oved, 1998), 461.

<sup>6</sup> Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la’ana*, 130.

<sup>7</sup> Jacobs, “Paris or Jerusalem?”

<sup>8</sup> Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la’ana*, 484.

“stuck in Russianness” and brought to their poetry an element of foreignness, she came to poetry with “essentially no baggage.”<sup>9</sup> Fanciful thinking, no doubt, and yet Raab’s insistence on her authentic, supposedly unmediated access to Hebrew is a useful factor in considering the identity that emerges from her early poems, in which subversive grammar is a performative feat that manages to enact gender ambiguity while simultaneously asserting mastery of the still nascent modern Hebrew language.

Recalling the transformation of Hebrew into a modern vernacular and her own enchantment with the newly formed language, Raab once said, “Every Hebrew word was new and shining with a wealth of colors like a bird’s wings. . . . And I caught it as one catches a bird.”<sup>10</sup> If poetry has the capacity to make language new and is often tasked with, to borrow from Viktor Shklovsky, defamiliarizing what is already known, things are necessarily more complicated when one writes in a language that is itself undergoing a process of renewal and rebirth. While the very newness of modern Hebrew would seem to present myriad opportunities for experimentation, the fact that the reinvention of Hebrew was inextricably bound up with the project of nation building meant that such freedom was necessarily undercut by ideological constraints. That Raab was able to sidestep these limitations in her experimental poetry thus has as much to do with the language itself—its glistening newness and pliability—as with her position on the margins of the linguistic and national revival. Indeed, as bell hooks has argued, the margins have functioned in society as “both sites of repression and sites of resistance.”<sup>11</sup>

As a native-born female writer in a literary culture dominated by immigrants, most of them male, Raab fell under the radar of the dominant culture, but this very marginalization made it possible for her to engage with the language unrestrainedly. As Chana Kronfeld points out in a discussion of Raab’s work, “writing from a marginal position can—perhaps must—destabilize the norm of the literary and linguistic system by marking the unmarked, charging the neutral, colorizing the colorless, particularizing the universal.”<sup>12</sup> Kronfeld further notes that the poet’s particular circumstances as “the first native poet (male or female) in that reborn language . . . make it impossible for Raab to take anything for granted—syntactically, semantically, pragmatically, and, not least of all, prosodically.”<sup>13</sup> Like Kronfeld, I read Raab’s unconventional grammar as a subversive performance aimed at reimagining the symbolic system of language itself. But while Kronfeld points repeatedly to Raab’s ungrammaticality, my argument, borrowing from Roman Jakobson, insists on anti- rather than un-grammaticality as the operative term for understanding

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>10</sup> From an interview with Haim Be’er, as quoted (and translated) by Anne Lapidus Lerner in her essay “‘A Woman’s Song’: The Poetry of Esther Raab,” in *Gender and Text in Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature*, ed. Naomi B. Sokoloff, Anne Lapidus Lerner, and Anita Norich (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1992), 18.

<sup>11</sup> bell hooks, “Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness,” *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989): 21.

<sup>12</sup> Chana Kronfeld, “The Marginal as Exemplary: The Poetry of Esther Raab,” in *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 72. For more on Raab as a marginalized modernist Hebrew writer, see Michael Gluzman, “The Invisible Revolution: Rereading Women’s Poetry,” in *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 100–140, esp. 126–30. For more on Hebrew poetry from 1922 to 1928, see Uzi Shavit, “Ha-shir ha-paru’a: Kavim le-signona ve-le-aqlima ha-sifrutit shel ha-shira ha-Erets Yisra’elit be-shnot ha-‘esrim” [The wild poetry: Features of the literary style and climate of Erets Israel poetry in the twenties], *Te’udah* 5 (1986): 165–84.

<sup>13</sup> Kronfeld, “The Marginal as Exemplary,” 72.

Raab's poetics.<sup>14</sup> Like Jakobson, I understand grammar as fundamental to the practice of poetry, no more dispensable than, to cite Jakobson's example, geometry for the painter.<sup>15</sup> Raab, it seems to me, is never ungrammatical but is, instead, consciously and self-consciously antigrammatical.

The subversive performance I read into (or perhaps out of) Raab's poetry presumes that her idiosyncratic grammar is a mode of resistance and insubordination rather than an amalgamation of slipups and oversights. It seems necessary that I distinguish here between the subversive performance and the erroneous misstep. What, in other words, is the difference between actions we consider performative and all others? According to the performance theorist Herbert Blau's "universals of performance," the distinction amounts to "the difference between the *ado* and just doing," that is, "between just eating breathing sleeping loving and *performing* those functions."<sup>16</sup> For Blau, a central feature of performance is *consciousness* itself, an awareness that what is taking place is, in fact, a performance. More simply put, behaviors that we identify as performative are undertaken consciously, with intentionality, in contrast to the everyday actions that we engage in for the most part unthinkingly and that are characterized by habit or instinct.

To understand fully the stakes of Raab's subversive grammar, it is necessary to consider the ramifications of Hebrew's gendered grammar, which, in our current milieu of increasing trans visibility, take on added urgency. In a 2015 essay for the now-defunct feminist literary blog *The Toast*, the Israeli American writer Ilana Masad rendered in literal English translation an announcement she had heard at the Tel Aviv central train station: "Attention all male passengers, the 6:40 female-train to Tel Aviv has been female-canceled due to female-problems with the female-infrastructure at Lod."<sup>17</sup> As the Israeli poet Yona Wallach famously proclaimed in her poem titled "Hebrew": "Hebrew is a sex maniac / wants to know who's talking."<sup>18</sup> Both Wallach's poem and Masad's translation give voice to the sense of being trapped in a language that is unforgiving in its insistence on gender, that not only forces its subjects to gender themselves and one another at all times, but continuously reifies the gender binary by assigning masculine or feminine grammatical gender to all nouns, as well as second- and third-person pronouns (singular and plural). While first-person pronouns (I and we) are not gendered, Hebrew requires that all modifiers, as well as present-tense verbs, agree in grammatical gender. What this means in practice is that gender is almost always marked in Hebrew.

Of course, for native speakers of Hebrew, like those of any heavily gendered language, and indeed speakers of any language, the grammatical aspects of language are not consciously felt at every moment. According to Benjamin Lee Whorf, "the phenomena of a language are background phenomena, of which the talkers are unaware, or, at the most, very dimly aware."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> In addition to "The Marginal as Exemplary," see also Kronfeld's "The Land as Woman: Esther Raab and the Afterlife of a Metaphorical System" (*Prooftexts*, in press), in which she points to what she terms Raab's "queer ungrammaticality" (17, 31).

<sup>15</sup> Roman Jakobson, "The Poetry of Grammar and the Grammar of Poetry," in *Language in Literature*, ed. Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 121–44.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert Blau, "Universals of Performance; or, Amortizing Play," *SubStance* 11/12 (1982): 140.

<sup>17</sup> Ilana Masad, "On Hebrew and Living in Gendered Language," *The Toast*, <http://the-toast.net/2015/03/17/hebrew-living-gendered-language>.

<sup>18</sup> Yona Wallach, "Ivrit" [Hebrew], in *Tsurot* [Forms] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1985), 17–19. Translation by Lisa Katz in *Hebrew Feminist Poems: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Shirley Kaufman, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Tamar S. Hess (New York: Feminist Press of the City University of New York, 1999), 189–91.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Linguistics as an Exact Science," in *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956), 221.

Masad's translation is thus farcical, relying on a kind of hyperbole to draw our attention to the gendered aspects of language that embed themselves insidiously in our subconscious, from which they exert their influence on society and the world at large.

While the notion that language shapes cognition continues to be subject to contentious debate, studies confirm that grammatical gender influences the way we think and that its influence extends not only to what Dan Slobin has called *thinking for speaking*, defined by Lera Boroditsky as "cognitive processes involved in accessing and selecting words, placing them in grammatical structures, planning speech, and so on," but to thinking that is not directed toward speech or that is directed to speech in different and differently gendered languages.<sup>20</sup> Through cross-linguistic comparative studies, scholars like Slobin and Boroditsky demonstrate the far-reaching implications of grammatical gender, which affects not only how we think about gender both inside and outside language but also our perceptions of, among other things, inanimate objects or entities—a country, a book, Earth itself—that are assigned grammatical gender.

Highly gendered languages like Hebrew prove especially useful for demonstrating how language shapes our notions of gender. Consider, for example, the fact that the default gender in Hebrew grammar, which has no neuter gender, is masculine, and that feminine forms tend to derive from the masculine (often through an added suffix), and that because of this, masculine forms are used in the plural for groups consisting of both genders (even one male in a room full of women is enough to render the group grammatically masculine) and in the singular to indicate the indefinite pronoun "one." As Wallach's poem reminds us, "in plural form men have the right of way," and "the Hebrew plural hides a woman."<sup>21</sup>

While languages like Hebrew or French seem necessarily restrictive, even oppressive, as Monique Wittig argues in "The Mark of Gender," even relatively less gendered languages such as English are hardly immune to the impositions of gender. According to Wittig, "Sex, under the name gender, permeates the whole body of language."<sup>22</sup> In particular, Wittig draws our attention to masculine claims to neutrality and universality, something that finds expression in the designation of masculine as the default and hence "neutral" gender. Because women have been historically (and arguably continue to be) excluded from "the abstract form, the general, the universal," which, according to Wittig, is "what the so-called masculine gender means, for the class of men have appropriated the universal for themselves," whenever a woman does speak she is expected to "make her sex public."<sup>23</sup> To put it differently, having long been denied basic rights of personhood, a woman's very ability to speak as an autonomous subject is persistently undermined and questioned, and she must repeatedly stake out her claim to subjectivity in order to speak at all.

Seeking to right this wrong, Wittig proposes a feminist reimagining of language in which the feminine would serve as the default gender, with all its associated claims to the abstract and the universal. As part of this project, Wittig advocates for the adoption of the feminine plural *elles* as the generic plural form, one that would make no pretenses toward inclusivity but rather, by

<sup>20</sup> Dan Slobin, "From 'Thought and Language' to 'Thinking for Speaking,'" in *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*, ed. J. J. Gumperz and S. C. Levinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Lera Boroditsky, Lauren A. Schmidt, and Webb Phillips, "Sex, Syntax, and Semantics," in *Language in Mind: Advances in the Study of Language and Thought*, ed. Dedre Gentner and Susan Goldin-Meadow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 62.

<sup>21</sup> Wallach, "Ivrit."

<sup>22</sup> Monique Wittig, "The Mark of Gender" (1985), in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 79.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

retaining its particular feminine form and resonances, would exclude the masculine Other. What Wittig is suggesting here is not a simple corrective or compensatory gesture but rather a radical overhaul of the symbolic system of language that shapes how we think about the world and our place within it. Among other things, Wittig is fighting against the kind of thinking that led Raab to say of her own poetry that it emanated from her “masculine side.”<sup>24</sup> Even more fundamentally, Wittig is trying to rewrite the gendered life scripts according to which we act—or against which we react—in situations ranging from the quotidian to the exceptional.

A recent sociolinguistic study focusing on speech patterns among gender-queer Israelis bears directly on the specifics of Hebrew’s grammatical gender, expanding the critique put forward by Masad and Wallach while also offering a way out of the conundrum presented by Hebrew’s reliance on the gender binary. In “Speech Creates a Kind of Commitment: Queering Hebrew,” Orit Bershtling argues, on the basis of a series of interviews she conducted with six gender-queer Israelis, that Hebrew’s very reliance on grammatical gender affords its speakers unique opportunities for subverting, undermining, and manipulating the gender binary itself.<sup>25</sup> Bershtling shows how her interviewees deploy the constraints of Hebrew grammar to perform their own gender-nonconforming identities. Among the tactics used by Bershtling’s interviewees are the consistent or context-specific adoption of “*inverse personal pronouns*,” which Bershtling defines as “pronouns that belong to the gender category ‘opposite’ to the speaker’s biological sex”; the alternation between or mixing of feminine and masculine grammatical forms; and the avoidance of gendered self-reference altogether.<sup>26</sup> In addition, Bershtling shows that the adoption of male gender markers by some of her interviewees is motivated not by a desire to identify as male or masculine but rather by the need to stake out a neutral territory, which, in Hebrew, is the domain of the unmarked masculine forms. As Bershtling explains, this move can be understood as a form of “strategic essentialism . . . wherein alignment with oppressive ideologies can be put toward subversive ends.”<sup>27</sup> Also significant for the author is the frequent use of negation in interviewees’ accounts of themselves, as in the case of Eyal, who asserts that “I am *neither* a male *nor* a female; . . . I am *not* a woman. . . . I am *not* male.”<sup>28</sup> As Bershtling takes care to note, negation, gender code-switching, and various other ways of “queering Hebrew” are not effortless moves in a language game but contortions of language (that involve, for example, to first-person past or future tense or to passive forms) that can prove difficult to sustain for the speaker and will invariably confuse potential listeners. And yet, in their refusal to conform to grammar conventions, and by resisting legibility, Bershtling’s subjects compel us to reconsider how language and grammar can be deployed for reimagining personhood, gender, and ambiguity itself. As I will demonstrate, Raab’s poetry presages Bershtling’s findings, employing, in the early 1920s and 1930s, many of the strategies that Bershtling’s subjects adopt nearly one hundred years later. The critical difference, of course, is that Bershtling’s findings are based on oral autobiographical

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<sup>24</sup> S. Shifra, “Re’ayon im Esther Raab: Ka’asher ani meriha ahava ani rotsa shoshanim” [Interview with Esther Raab: When I smell love I want roses], *Masa*, June 1, 1973, 1, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Orit Bershtling, “Speech Creates a Kind of Commitment: Queering Hebrew,” in *Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Lal Zimman, Jenny L. Davis, and Joshua Raclaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 35–61.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

accounts, which are rendered by Bershtling herself in academic prose, while Raab's subversive grammar is put into play in poetry.

In interviews and autobiographical accounts of her childhood, Raab makes frequent references to the gender dynamics of her family, in which she was a second child and an only daughter surrounded by brothers, one older (in addition to an older half brother) and two younger: "I always tried to be like my brothers—not to appear weak or excessively feminine," she said.<sup>29</sup> Those efforts seemed to pay off, at least for a time, and Raab recalled that her father treated her as equal to her brothers, up to a point. Alongside them, she was taught how to shoot, swim, and ride horses, activities typically associated with boys. Whether because of some innate proclivity or, more likely, because she felt pressured to demonstrate that she was deserving of her father's magnanimity, Raab proved adept at these sports and often surpassed the boys. But the gender equity that Raab longed for, and that she achieved, at least in part, through her skillful performance of masculinity, came to an abrupt halt when the school she and her brothers had all attended transitioned from a gender-segregated model to a coed one, at the behest of a new school administrator. Though not particularly religious, Raab's father retained something of his conservative Orthodox upbringing, and while he could conceive of his daughter riding horses and shooting guns, he could not abide the thought of her pursuing an education alongside her male peers. For Raab, who was fifteen years old at the time, to be suddenly deprived of an education on the basis of her sex was a profound betrayal.<sup>30</sup> As she later recalled, the repercussions of this event, and its impact on her education, would remain with her for the rest of her life. Compounding her sense of betrayal was the fact that she had always regarded her father as "progressive, enlightened, good," the parent whom she favored and arguably the person with whom she most identified.<sup>31</sup> Even worse, Raab recalled, with more than a hint of bitterness, that while her older brother was sent to Jerusalem to continue his studies, her "brilliant, wonderful" father could muster for her only an offhand comment about how she would "marry and have children," a comment that stayed with Raab, who insisted that "such discrimination I can neither forgive nor forget."<sup>32</sup>

In "The Poetry of Grammar and the Grammar of Poetry," Jakobson suggests that one of the defining principles of poetry is the centrality of grammar to the construction of meaning in a poem. Pointing to what he perceives as a "clear-cut discrimination" in language between the material/lexical and the grammatical/relational aspects of language, Jakobson argues that poetry relies on grammar—on relational rather than "pure" meaning—to produce its poetic effect.<sup>33</sup> According to Jakobson, what matters more than the choice of words or images in a poem is how these words and images are combined. To put it differently, poetry privileges meaning that depends upon the relations between, for example, parts of speech over the "pure" lexical meaning that may inhere in a word independent of its situatedness in a given text. Comparing the role of grammar in poetry to that of composition for the painter, Jakobson argues that just as the painter relies on geometrical order to create the work of art, whether that work is based upon or revolts

<sup>29</sup> Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la'ana*, 74.

<sup>30</sup> See Tamar Hess, *Self as Nation: Contemporary Hebrew Autobiography* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016), 194n24, citing Ehud Ben-Ezer as suggesting that Raab's father's decision may have had more to do with financial hardship. Still, the fact that her brother was able to continue to attend school, albeit in Jerusalem, while she was not, underscores the gender biases at work.

<sup>31</sup> Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la'ana*, 104.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Jakobson, "Poetry of Grammar," 122.

against such order, so, too, the poet is always in dialogue with grammar, and poetry is thus always “either grammatical or antigrammatical but never agrammatical.”<sup>34</sup>

If, in fact, poetry is constituted through grammar, and if its meaning is thus fundamentally relational, it makes sense that women, whose claims to autonomy have for so long been undermined by a patriarchal system that views them as relational beings (the [m]other/sister/wife/lover/daughter of man), would seize on poetic language to articulate female selves. Indeed, Raab’s antigrammaticality is not simply a subversion of grammar but a rejection of the very hierarchies of language and of the imposition of order—an order that, in the Hebrew language, is seemingly imposed by a higher authority, namely, the divine—which she inverts to enact her own identity as a female Jewish poet writing in a nascent modern Hebrew tongue. Her poetry is thus an enactment of what Julia Kristeva regards as the revolutionary potential of poetic language to transgress the boundaries separating the semiotic from the symbolic.<sup>35</sup>

“Raab, like Emily Dickinson, stands outside the poetic mainstream,” writes Anne Lapidus Lerner, citing the poet and translator Harold Schimmel, who would release the first (and only) book-length translation of Raab’s work into English in 1996.<sup>36</sup> As Schimmel notes, “The line of woman poets in Palestine was fostered by the northern breed of Russian nightingale, a tradition, ready-made, which both allowed the feminine voice and gave it music, subject and stanza.”<sup>37</sup> These women, including Yocheved Bat Miriam, Lea Goldberg, and Ra’hel (as well as Elisheva), all of them Russian immigrants, were influenced by “sturdy Russian models,” chief among them Anna Akhmatova.<sup>38</sup> By contrast, Raab’s “two great sources of inspiration are, as with Dickinson, the Bible and nature.” More pertinent to this study are what Schimmel refers to as the “Dickinson-like aspects of Raab’s poetry,” evident in the latter’s “quirky punctuation, her occasional obscurity (not difficulty), and her fractured grammar.”<sup>39</sup> In her excellent study of Dickinson’s poetic grammar, Cristanne Miller points to “ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning” and a “provocative, riddling quality” that ring just as true for Raab’s poems, where they are made manifest through irregular syntax and morphology.<sup>40</sup> All these qualities are brought to bear in the following untitled poem:<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>35</sup> Julia Kristeva, “The Semiotic and the Symbolic,” in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 19–106.

<sup>36</sup> Lerner, “A Woman’s Song,” 17.

<sup>37</sup> Harold Schimmel, introduction to *Thistles: Selected Poems of Esther Raab*, trans. Harold Schimmel (Jerusalem: Ibis, 2002), 19.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Cristanne Miller, *Emily Dickinson: A Poet’s Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 26.

<sup>41</sup> Esther Raab, *Qimshonim [Thistles]* (Tel Aviv: Hedim, 1930), 33–34 (my translation).

הַיּוֹם עֲנָוָה אֲנִי כַחֲזֵה,  
 שְׁטוּחָה כְּכָרֵי דְשָׂא רוֹיִים,  
 בְּיַד קִטְנָה שְׁמֵינָה אוֹבִיל חַי  
 אֶל הַרְחָמִים וְאֶל הַיְלָדִים.  
 הַיּוֹם יִקְרַב אֵלַי  
 כֹּל זָר וְכֹל כּוֹאֵב,  
 כְּגֶשֶׁם סְבִיבֵי יִשְׁתַּקְשִׁקוּ  
 מִתְּנוּת-לִבִּי הַקִּטְנוּת  
 וְהַמָּחָר כְּבָר אֲנִי נוֹשֵׂאת—  
 כְּבֹד סָגוּר  
 וּמְזֻנֵק שׁוֹב  
 אֶל הַבְּלִי יָדוּעַ.

Hayom 'anavah ani keḥayah,  
 shtuḥah kekharei deshe revuyim,  
 beyad qetanah shmeinah ovil ḥayai  
 el haraḥamim v'el hayeladim.  
 hayom yikrav elai  
 kol zar vekhol koev,  
 kegeshem svivai yishtaqshequ  
 matnot-levavi haqtanot  
 vehamaḥar kvar ani noset —  
 koved sagur  
 umezanek shuv  
 el habilti yadua'.

Today humble am I as a beast,  
 flattened like pastures of drenched grass,  
 with a small, fat hand I'll guide my life  
 toward Mercy and toward the children.  
 Today every stranger and all in pain  
 draw near to me,  
 like rain surrounding me  
 small gifts-of-my-heart splish-splash  
 and the Tomorrow I already bear —  
 a weight, closed  
 and leaping forth once more  
 into the unknown.

The poem's first four lines establish a rhythmic give-and-take through shifts in grammatical gender, particularly between the feminine-singular suffix *-ah* and the masculine-plural ending *-im*. The speaker is gendered feminine through the feminine declension of the second word in this poem, "humble," *'anavah* (masculine: *'anav*), which is followed by the *-ah* ending of the word for "beast," *ḥayah*, a grammatically feminine noun. The effect is unmistakable, and also unmistakably ambiguous: "Today *anavah* am I as a *ḥayah*." Which is it, one wants to ask—humble or beastly? The opening word of the next line, *shtuḥah*, once again genders the speaker ambiguously. The grammatical form is feminine, but flatness—especially when likened to the masculine-gendered "drenched pastures of grass"—implies expansiveness, a largesse more typically coded masculine. Taken together, the grassy meadows, water, and guiding hand in these lines seem to allude to Psalm 23, in which the speaker declares: "The Lord is my shepherd, / I shall not want. / In grass meadows He makes me lie down, / by quiet waters guides me."

But there are notable differences between the biblical verses and Raab's modernist composition. The animal self asserted in Raab's poem is a beast, or wild animal, a *ḥayah* rather than a *behemah*, or domesticated animal, a category that would include sheep. The distinction is a critical one in Jewish tradition, something Raab was surely familiar with. While both words are grammatically gendered feminine, and are often used pejoratively in both Yiddish and Hebrew, in modern Hebrew *ḥayah* carries positive connotations as well. Through its evocation of organic rootedness, a natural or innate oneness with the land and its environs, and of virility, robust health, and freedom, *ḥayah* functions as a synecdoche for the nativist aims and designs of a Zionist ideology that sought to invent a new Jew who would be native-born, free, and full of the vigor and vitality denied to him over the centuries of his diasporic existence. It was these very traits that were latched onto by both Raab's earliest critics and by Statehood Generation poets like Natan Zach who "rediscovered" and "revived" her work as part of their own poetic project.<sup>42</sup>

While Raab employs the grammatically masculine כְּרֵי דְשָׂא (pastures of grass), the psalmist uses the synonymous but grammatically feminine נְאוֹת דְשָׂא. Moreover, the psalmist grammatically genders the waters feminine, מֵי מְנוּחוֹת (quiet waters), while the declension of Raab's water is masculine: רוֹיִים (drenched). Later in this poem the verb להשתקשק (splish-splash) is conjugated masculine (and takes the masculine-plural, future-tense form (ישתקשקו), thus gendering the waters masculine once more. Finally, the psalmist genders guidance, which, in the psalm, comes from God, as masculine, יְהוָה יְהַלְכֵנִי (he will guide me), while in Raab's poem the speaker is self-guided,

<sup>42</sup> For more on Raab's reception history, see Tsamir, "Ahavat moledet ve-si'ah ḥershim"; Tsamir, "Migdar ve-teritoriah nifgashim."

אוביל חיי, “I’ll guide my life,” a form (first-person future) that is not marked for gender. In this way, Raab subverts the notion of guidance as the domain of a masculine-coded God, asserting in its place individual, female agency. The oppositions here are many: between grammatical genders, between passivity and agency, between the human and the divine, and perhaps most notably between the purportedly male speaker of Psalm 23, the biblical King David, whose stance and tone are decidedly feminine, and the female speaker in Raab’s poem, who speaks with a masculine-coded authority. In rewriting these biblical verses Raab demonstrates her facility with the biblical texts, thus asserting her claim on Jewish literary tradition while directing it toward subversive ends.<sup>43</sup>

The assertion of a self-directed path coincides in this poem with a shift from present to future tense, which gives way to a bold move in line 4: “toward Mercy and toward the children”; or, alternatively, and with only a subtle shift in vowels: “God of mercy and God of children.” This would be the same God invoked in the Jewish funeral prayer *El Maleh Raḥamim* (God Full of Mercy), a God that Yehuda Amichai famously denied in his poem by the same name. Whichever meaning one chooses to ascribe to this verse (and the point, of course, is that there is no one meaning), in either case, the grammatical gender is masculine—as is evident in the recurrent *-im* endings in *raḥamim* and *yeladim*.

The Hebrew word for “mercy,” *raḥamim*, is morphologically anomalous; though a singular noun, its form is indistinguishable from that of the masculine plural. To complicate matters further, the root from which it derives, *reḥem*, means “womb” but is grammatically gendered masculine. A conflict thus emerges between the root’s grammatical gender and its embodied gender and is also coded into *raḥamim*, whose grammatical gender is masculine despite its derivation from the word for “womb” and the fact that the characteristic of compassion is typically coded feminine.<sup>44</sup>

To summarize: in lines 1 through 4 we witness the unfolding, in the present tense, of a complex, ambiguous identity (humble and beastly, both flat and fat, and also small) in view of a sexually charged masculine saturation (drenched pastures) and toward, on the one hand, a mercy-/children-infused future and, on the other, a transformation of self into an omnipotent God. In contrast to the assertions of a complex gender identity in the first four lines of the poem, lines 5–8 posit a female speaker as passive subject who is constituted through a set of actions performed independently of the speaker herself. In line 5 the actors are external: strangers and those in pain (both gendered masculine). But in lines 7 and 8 they are the ambiguous, internal “gifts” of the speaker’s “heart” that surround her. But perhaps these lines are not quite as passive as they at first seem: the statement “Today every stranger and all in pain / draw near to me” can also be translated in the imperative, “Today every stranger and all in pain / *shall* draw near to me.” And the description of the outpouring of heart-gifts can also be rendered, instead of “like rain surrounding me / small gifts-of-my-heart splash-splash,” as a command: “like rain surrounding me / *shall* small gifts-of-my-heart splash-splash.” Moreover, the speaker in this section is clearly located at the center, positioned in such a way that all approach her. Likewise, rains “surround” her. She is, in other words, the center of gravity in the world she describes, and perhaps commands.

<sup>43</sup> Translations from Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 78.

<sup>44</sup> Notably, the Jewish mystical tradition, whose metaphorical system relies heavily on the gender binary, assigns masculine gender to *raḥamim* (compassion).

The absence of conspicuous gender markers in this section of the poem is itself a mode of gender-queering for a language so heavily invested in the gender binary.

The final section of this poem marks yet another shift, with the speaker now declaring herself the bearer of a masculine-coded “Tomorrow.” Grammatical gender is unambiguous here, with the feminine-marked *noset* (to bear) denoting strength and empowerment: “I bear.” But this assertion of control has its limits—the tomorrow is closed, it is heavy, and it leaps forth into the unknown. If we trace this poem to Raab’s own biography, as Ben-Ezer does, the reference here is to pregnancy (hence, “I bear”), a pregnancy that culminates, as all of Raab’s tragically did (“once more”), in loss.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the dialectic with which the poem began, between the feminine *-ah* and the masculine *-im*, gives way, in this final section, to a kind of coming together of a feminine will-to-bear with a masculine drive to insertion, which culminates not in procreation, or futurity (tomorrow), but in mutual recognition of the limits of knowledge and knowability, of self and other, of the human and the divine, and of gender itself. The poem thus circles back to its opening gesture toward humility, this time emptied of its gendered resonances.

As someone who came of age inside, as well as alongside, an emerging modern Hebrew language, positioned as an insider-outsider—as a “native” poet in a literary culture largely composed of nonnative writers and as a woman writing in a traditionally male poetic tradition—Raab manages to transgress both grammatical and gender norms, enacting not only her own idiosyncratic identity but new iterations of female-Jewish identity in the twentieth century and beyond. A

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<sup>45</sup> Ben-Ezer, *Yamim shel la'ana*, 387.