theories and methodologies

Anna Herman and the Goldberg Variations

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THE CAPACIOUS FIRST ISSUE OF *HO!* (הו!), A PROMINENT ISRAELI LITERARY JOURNAL THAT DEBUTED IN 2005, INCLUDED A SEVEN-PAGE questionnaire titled "Goldberg Variations" (וריאציות גולדברג), a pun on Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, a composition for the harpsichord. The purpose of the questionnaire was—and still is, if you choose to do it—to answer the question "Are you Leah Goldberg?" (האם את/ה לאה גולדברג), Goldberg being one of the major Hebrew poets of the twentieth century.[1] The short epigraph that followed this question was two lines from the opening poem of her debut collection *Smoke Rings* (1935; טבעות עשן):

גַּבּוֹת מְחוֹגְגִים מוּרָמוֹת וּתְמֵהוֹת.
שׁוֹאֲלוֹת: "הַאַתְּ הִיא, הַאַתְּ?" (Taba'ot 'ashan 1)

The raised, surprised eyebrows wind around
asking: Are you *her*? Are you?

The implication being that the question "Are you Leah Goldberg?" is one that the poet asked herself. Whether or not you are Goldberg is decided by your ability to answer several biographical questions and correctly complete lines from her poems. The list of thirty questions concludes with a portrait of Goldberg holding a cigarette, one of many iconic images that featured her smoking (fig. 1), but this image stands out not only as a nod to the title of her first book but also because her pose is both an invitation and the final question, as if to say that sharing a smoke with Goldberg is the final test of identification with the poet (her death from lung cancer notwithstanding?). In successfully completing this test, you become one of Goldberg's "variations."

When Goldberg emigrated in 1935 from Germany to Palestine, *Smoke Rings* was already in print and guaranteed her entrée into the *moderna* (מודרנה), a group of Hebrew modernists whose affiliations were predominantly with Western European and Russian poetry of the fin de siècle and early twentieth century. These were relations that *Ho!*'s first issue revived in its choice of translations (mostly drawn from French and Russian literatures) and its penchant for

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FIG. 1 Leah Goldberg, 1946. Photograph by David Eldan © National Photo Collection, Israel.

neoformalism and classical prosody (which opened the journal to charges of anachronism). But Goldberg, who was born in Kovno in 1911, fashioned her Israeli identity from many cultural, linguistic, and historical sources, and this prismatic lens accorded well with *Ho!*'s transnational and translational framing of modern Hebrew literature (Manor 13). Nevertheless, encouraging reader identification with Goldberg, however playful, raises questions concerning *Ho!*'s investment in Goldberg as a paragon and in the transfer of capital that occurs when her name and texts are cited, appropriated, and rewritten—not to mention the question of the value of that capital when anyone, as the questionnaire suggests, can be Leah Goldberg. These questions are raised particularly by a contribution, among those that follow the questionnaire, from the poet Anna Herman: the sonnet sequence "Fourteen Sonnets after Leah Goldberg" (י״ד סונטות בעקבות לאה גולדברג), where "after" renders the prepositional phrase בעקבות—literally, "on the heels of" (Herman 124).

In this essay I use Herman's poem as a case study for an autoexotic reading of contemporary Hebrew poetry and how it reabsorbs, rewrites, and revises its own canon and sources toward a comparative and transnational framing of Israeli literature. Herman's intertextual engagement with and appropriations of Goldberg have been the most extensive of those by the *Ho!* poets, but her work, including this text, rejects the patrilineal and hierarchal tropes of legacy and affiliation that persist in modern Hebrew literature and its scholarship. Comparing the sonnet sequence that Herman published in *Ho!* with the later version that appeared in her 2006 collection *The Book of Simple Remedies* (ספר הרפואות הפשוטות) allows me to trace the development of a cannibalistic poetics of relation through Herman's practice of naming, citing, and rewriting other (usually, earlier) poets—Goldberg in particular. In her reading of North American poetry of the twentieth century, Rachel Galvin proposes that we understand relations between texts and authors according to a "cannibalistic logic" (22): "[I]nstead of seeing the literary canon as a *source*—a point of origin that engenders progeny, reiterations, borrowings, and references—cultural cannibalism proposes that later texts absorb, devour, or radically re-author earlier works" (18). In contemporary literary studies, the cannibalistic turn to which Galvin refers traces back to Oswald de Andrade's landmark 1928 text "Manifesto antropófago" ("Cannibal Manifesto"), which proposed a countercolonial revision of Brazilian literature's relation to its European precursors. Invoking the Tupi people, who reportedly ate their enemies to absorb their power and strength, Andrade and his contemporaries proposed aggressive strategies of textual appropriation and translation that drew from a range of cultures and languages to create—or in their words, *trans-criar* ("transcreate")—texts that

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complicate, recontextualize, and multiply their relation to their precursors.

This discourse is largely absent in the Hebrew context, though a "cannibalistic logic," as well as a poetics of displacement, translation, and recycling, pervades the work of modern Hebrew and Israeli poets through the twentieth century to the present day. For example, in her 1973 essay "Words like Rare Birds," the Israeli poet Esther Raab (1894–1981) described herself as a "wild vine" (גידול פרא) in the field of Hebrew poetry, a parasitic metaphor that rejected traditional models of Hebrew literary affiliation (419). Raab, who was celebrated as the first native modern Hebrew poet, absorbed the languages, styles, and forms of Western European poets like Walter Calé, Charles Baudelaire, and Germaine Beaumont, but these relations have remained relatively unexplored in studies of her work.[2] Raab herself used the term *influence* ambivalently, instead remarking, in terms that accord with the cannibalistic mode, "[T]hey only nourished me, they didn't influence me" (הם רק הזינו אותי, אבל לא השפיעו עליי; 419).

By the title "Goldberg Variations," the reader of *Ho!* is meant to understand Herman's poetic sequence as an homage, as an acknowledgment of a Goldberg legacy to which Herman feels her work is affiliated and indebted. Readers familiar with Goldberg's oeuvre also would identify the opening line of Herman's poem—"how they bloomed, the lover's wounds!" (אֵיכָה הִתְלַבְלְבוּ פִּצְעֵי אוֹהֵב!)—from Goldberg's 1952 sonnet sequence "Lover's Wounds" (פצעי אוהב). The expression the "lover's wounds" appears as the closing line of Goldberg's first sonnet, whereas in Herman's poem it opens the sequence—yet another indication that Herman's text follows "on the heels of" Goldberg's. The differences between this and the subsequent version of Herman's poem reveal her strategies for claiming the primary and original status of her poem through a radical reauthoring of Goldberg and other textual sources.

Although *variation* signifies degrees of replication and copying, in the work of the *Ho!* poets appropriations of Goldberg's work and biography—through paraphrase, citation, allusion, and rewriting—are fundamentally creative. (Situating a female poet as your paragon is arguably also fundamentally feminist, given the male-centeredness of the modern Hebrew canon.) But if the desire is, as *Ho!*'s manifesto insisted, to transform, revise, and innovate, how can such appropriation be framed and activated in ways that are not hierarchical and linear—for example, "on the heels of"—but rather transcreative and relational? Like Glenn Gould's famed interpretation of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, how can Herman's variation of Goldberg stand on its own?

In the sequence that Herman published in *The Book of Simple Remedies*, a few changes are notable, notably a change of title. The new title "The Lover's Wounds," at first glance appears simply to replicate Goldberg's title. The addition of an epigraph confirms Goldberg's authorship of the line "how they bloomed, the lover's wounds" (אֵיכָה הִתְלַבְלְבוּ פִּצְעֵי אוֹהֵב) These changes reinforce Herman's acknowledgment of Goldberg's influence on her work. In molecular biology, the relation between a cell and the cells that emerge from its division (which carry identical replications of its DNA) is described in genealogical terms: mother cell, daughter cells. The changes made to the second version of Herman's poetic sequence strengthen the genetic affiliation between Herman's and Goldberg's poems, but the addition of the epigraph also unsettles it. In the epigraph, the line "how they bloomed, the lover's wounds!" is a clearly marked and authored citation, appearing, as is customary, in quotation marks and followed by Goldberg's name. But the line that opens Herman's poem, though lexically identical to Goldberg's line, is copied and inserted into the text without quotation marks, which otherwise would differentiate the line from the remaining text.

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In other words, it appears in the poem as if it were originally written by Herman:

אֵיכָה הִתְלַבְלְבוּ פִּצְעֵי אוֹהֵב!
תְּשׁוּבָה לְכָךְ אֵינֶנִי מְבַקֶּשֶׁת
כִּי לֹא נוֹתַר לִי אֶלָּא הַכְּאֵב
וְלֹא נוֹתַר מִכָּל צִבְעֵי הַקֶּשֶׁת

בְּכְחוֹל פִּצְעִי שׁוּם צֶבַע מְלַבְלֵב.
נוֹתְרָה רַק נְקִישַׁת אִשָּׁה עִקֶּשֶׁת,
שֶׁהִיא אֲנִי, רַק נְקִישָׁה בַּלֵּב.
וְעַל דַּלְתִּי יָדְךָ אֵינָהּ נוֹקֶשֶׁת.
(sonnet 1, lines 1–8)

How they bloomed, the wounds of love!
I'm not looking for an answer
because nothing remained but the pain
and no colors of the rainbow remained

In the blue of my wound no color blooms.
Only the knocking of a stubborn woman
remained,
and that is me, only a knock on the heart.
And on my door your hand won't knock.

The poet makes it a point at the onset to distinguish between Goldberg's words and her own. The line in the epigraph belongs to Goldberg, but how Herman copies and circulates it, and the new relations that result in the process, is entirely Herman's labor. In the earlier, 2005 version, on the other hand, the title and particularly the phrase "on the heels of" assign a source status to Goldberg's text (and body): in this explicit frame of influence, Goldberg's poem offers a point of reference for reading and understanding Herman's. But in the 2006 version Herman activates a transfer of capital between Goldberg's poem and her own while simultaneously initiating a process of recombination that results in an entirely different, unique sequence.

Cannibalistic appropriations of this kind recur throughout Herman's poem, where one finds images and expressions, even whole lines, from Goldberg's original sequence absorbed to create something new. Herman also copies and recycles her own text—for example, opening a sonnet with the line that closes the one preceding it or repeating lines throughout the sequence and across her two collections. This autoexotic mode of self-citation, simulating the ways in which she cites Goldberg, complicates her own authorship. In the seventh line of the first sonnet, the phrase "that is me" (שֶׁהִיא אֲנִי) appears in parentheses, which Herman removes in the 2006 version, thus opening her speaker (and herself) to the possibility of being absorbed fully by and into the text to further multiply, transform, and recombine.

Although Herman's poem reproduces the exclamation in Goldberg's line, Herman also discerns that Goldberg is posing a question here ("How did they bloom?"), which Herman's speaker acknowledges but will not resolve: "I'm not looking for an answer" (תְּשׁוּבָה לְכָךְ אֵינֶנִי מְבַקֶּשֶׁת), her speaker declares emphatically. Goldberg's poem was later published in the 1955 collection *Lightning in the Morning* (ברק בבוקר) and is addressed, as many poems in this collection are, to an absent "young man" (הנער). Herman takes this estranged addressee and reabsorbs him, textually and figuratively, into her poem, where he is embodied parasitically in the line: "I dream that you are an embryo" (אֲנִי חוֹלֶמֶת שֶׁאַתָּה עֻבָּר). Herman, like the Israeli poets Yonah Wallach and Dahlia Ravikovitch, who are also devoured by Herman's text, consistently uses maternal metaphors in her work, sometimes in relation to the poem itself. But her embryo is not Goldberg's progeny; rather, this figure represents Herman's appropriation and reimagining of the young man. Indeed, Herman rejects Goldberg's tendency to express desire, specifically female desire, in abstract and figurative terms. In Herman's poem, the "lover's wounds" bleed and scar; the pain they cause is real, present, and material. Outside the poem, Herman's speaker acknowledges, the lover "continues to move in the yellow desert of estrangement" (sonnet 2, lines 3–4; בְּצָהֹב מִדְבַּר / הַהִתְנַכְּרוּת אַתָּה מוֹסִיף לָלֶכֶת) but for Herman a strange world begins to stir and come together, made possible by the dream of his re-creation.

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Hans Christian Andersen's "The Snow Queen" (Snedronningen) provides the connective tissue between Herman's sequence and the new context that emerges out of this dream. In "The Snow Queen," a mirror, the handiwork of an evil, mischievous troll, reflects back not the good things of the world but a hideous and deformed image of them. One day the mirror shatters, and its shards fall to the earth, where they scatter, blowing into eyes and hearts, wreaking havoc with human perspective. In Herman's poem, the speaker compares herself with Gerda (Greta in Herman's poem), the young protagonist of Andersen's tale. Gerda sets out to find her lost friend, Kai, who has fallen under the spell of the trollish mirror. He falls into a deep depression when the world turns, in his view, dark, and he becomes vulnerable to the enchantments of the Snow Queen, whose kisses induce amnesia. At the end of the tale, Gerda finds Kai, and her tears loosen the shard from his eyes, restoring the beauty of the world to his gaze. But in Herman's reworking of the story, the poem's addressee is arguably also Goldberg herself, transcreated in Herman's poem into the disillusioned Kai, in the thirteenth stanza of the cycle:

אַךְ בְּדַרְכִּי אֲנִי עוֹדִי כּוֹשֶׁלֶת,

נוֹהָה אֶל יָפְיֵךְ אֲשֶׁר חָמַק אֶל
מַלְכוּת קְפוּאָה. מִשָּׁם בְּסִלּוֹאוּ צָמוּד
נִרְקָד בְּיַחַד לְצִלְילֵי ג׳וֹרְג׳ מַיְקֶל.

נִרְקָד בַּקֶּצֶב שֶׁלִּבְּךְ מַפְעִים.
(sonnet 13, lines 8–12)

But I still stumble on my path,

longing for your beauty which has slipped
into the frozen kingdom. Over there we'll slow
dance together to George Michael.

We'll dance to the rhythm your heart beats.

Both Herman and Goldberg allude to Proverbs 27.6, which cautions, in the King James translation of the Hebrew, that "the wounds of a friend are faithful; but the kisses of an enemy are plentiful" (נֶאֱמָנִים פִּצְעֵי אוֹהֵב וְנַעְתָּרוֹת נְשִׁיקוֹת שׂוֹנֵא)—note that "wounds of a friend" here and the title "The Lover's Wounds" translate the same Hebrew phrase, פִּצְעֵי אוֹהֵב. In Andersen's story, Gerda's kiss restores Kai; in Herman's poem, the two bodies come together, dancing to the beat of the lover's heart, an embodiment of the prosodic beat of the sonnet, Goldberg's favored form. It is the beat of a heart coming back to life and living on in rhyme:

וְשָׁם הָלַכְנוּ יָד בְּיָד לָנֶצַח
אַתָּה יָדַעְתָּ שֶׁאֲנִי אִתְּךָ

מִסּוֹף הַדֶּרֶךְ עַד סוֹפָהּ, וְאָנוּ
עָמַדְנוּ שָׁם כְּמוֹ נְשִׁיקָה בַּמֵּצַח.
וְיָפְיֵךְ עָמֹק מִן הָאוֹקְיָנוֹס.
(sonnet 14, lines 10–14)

And there we walked hand in hand, always
you knew that I was with you

from end to end, and we
stood there like a kiss on the forehead.
And your beauty was deeper than the ocean.

The phrase "like a kiss on the forehead" returns us to a cannibalistic poetics, to the ravenous kisses the Snow Queen gives Kai. The first kiss numbs; the second erases the memory of friends and family, like the vampiric kisses in an untitled 1917 poem by Marina Tsvetaeva, which closes with the promise "A kiss on the head—erases memory" (line 7). A third kiss would kill Kai—but the queen holds this one back.

In Herman's poem, the kiss is a somatic metaphor for the encounter between the lovers, an encounter that happens שם ("over there"). In Herman's "there" there are crystalline echoes as well of Wallach's poem יש שם (sham yesh; "There There Are"); for both Herman and Wallach, "there" is a quasi-Edenic space for unpredictable pairings, not unlike the intertextual encounter between two very different texts, or for the ludic and unexpected combinations that hinge on rhyme.

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But "there" is also Europe, the other unnamed lover of Goldberg's sequence. Goldberg's "The Lover's Wounds" is among many things a lamentation for the distance that separates the poet from her European, diasporic home. It also features in a key moment of her 1945 essay "Your Europe" (אירופה שלכם; tiropah shelakhem). Addressing her beloved Europe of "Dante, Giotto, Michelangelo, Goethe and Flaubert, Mozart, Stendhal, Verlaine, Rilke, Rodin, Cézanne, Stravinsky, James Joyce" (דנטה, וג'וטו, ומיכלאנג'לו, גתה, ופלובר, ומוצרט, וסטנדהאל, וורלן, ורילקה ורודן, סזאן, וסטרבינסקי וג'ימס ג'ויס) she invokes again Proverbs 27.6: "We won't forget, you, we won't forget the wounds of the lover, the wounds of the enemy" (ואנחנו לא נשכח, אותך, את פצעי האוהב ואת פצעי השונא לא נשכח). Through her retelling of Andersen's "The Snow Queen," Herman revives and reworks this relation in her own sequence.

Redescribing the relation between Herman and Goldberg in terms of cultural and literary cannibalism not only deemphasizes tropes of patrimony and lineage, linearity and continuity that prevail still in modern Hebrew literary scholarship but also calls attention to the extensive comparative, transhistoric, and multilingual relations that Herman's poem activates and transfers back to Goldberg. A third kiss would wipe away the lover's/Goldberg's wounds, but instead Herman's kiss remains in a state of suspension between restoration and death, facing a "beauty deeper than the ocean" and projecting the boundless possibility of both texts, and both poets, to connect or disconnect, retreat or approach, erase or digest.

Notes

All translations, unless indicated otherwise, are mine.

1. The inspiration for this feature was a questionnaire published on the bicentennial of Victor Hugo's birth (Launet and Lindon).

2. My forthcoming book *Strange Cocktail: Translation and the Making of Modern Hebrew Poetry* (U of Michigan P) discusses these relations at length.

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