**Lea Goldberg and the Petrarchan Sonnet**

**Introduction**

For the male poet, eighteenth-century English poet William Wordsworth explains, the choice of the sonnet is a means to be freed from “the weight of too much liberty.”[[1]](#footnote-1) However, for the female poet, who throughout history was not afforded “too much liberty,” the writing of a sonnet does not constitute an escape from excess creative liberty because from the outset, as Debra Fried claims, “No one seriously expects her to undertake the epic, national or personal; her sonnets are not taken to be preparatory gestures for or lyric retreats from the longer, loftier genres.”[[2]](#footnote-2) As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar demonstrate in their comprehensive review, women writers have always had to face the fact that their very right to write is not obvious, and that their entry into the principally male creative world, was supplemented by a constant anxiety of authorship: they were forced to contend with male dominance that thrusted them outside the writing space or forced them to be satisfied with a limited and marginal field of action within it.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Why, therefore, would a modern female poet who is not obliged to conform to strict poetic norms of form and content choose to write a sonnet? For Hebrew poet Lea Goldberg (1911-1970) the sonnet was in fact a window to liberty, not an escape from it; an experimental creative field and an expression of the controversial issue of female authorship. Of all the genres in which Goldberg wrote her poetry, the sonnet, in its Petrarchan form, was the most prevalent.[[4]](#footnote-4) Her choice of the sonnet demonstrated an ostensible compliance with the formal and thematic dictates of a masculine cultural tradition. But the “feminine” use of the

classic genre that Goldberg suggests updates and changes the common tropes by means of which the sonnet dictates representations of gender and love and renders it a form that subverts the hegemonic male gaze.

Goldberg’s sonnet not only undermines the “masculine” Petrarchan tradition inherent in this form, but also constitutes a focus for confrontation between this classic poetics and the modernist and ideological demands of the—predominantly male—Hebrew poetry of her time. Thus, for Goldberg, the sonnet’s meticulous and methodical form serves as a kind of protective cover that enables her to express individual experiences and political views that deviated from the system of legitimate representations prevalent in Hebrew literature during the first half of the twentieth century.

Upon her immigration to Israel in 1935, Goldberg joined “Yakhdav”—a group of modernist poets, led by Avraham Shlonsky, that operated in Tel-Aviv between 1926 and 1936. The modernist crisis of representation and the effort to destabilize literary conventions produced among the group’s poets a poetics that undermined common representations of human experience and historical temporality, and which was characterized by a neo-symbolic language laden with references to the current reality. As a single female poet in a group of males, Goldberg was forced to fight for equal status and for the assessment of her work in terms applied to the evaluation of the male poets’ poetry. However, despite her attempts to adopt a poetic position that transcends the boundaries of stereotypical gender categories,[[5]](#footnote-5) Goldberg was marked by her peers and by literary criticism as occupying a “feminine” poetic position and offering no more than a softened, weak, and unrefined version of her male peers’ modernist poetics.[[6]](#footnote-6) Her choice of the sonnet constitutes therefore, an experiment by means of which Goldberg strived to demonstrate prosodic, formal, and contemplative virtuosity, and to join the impressive literary genealogy which was characterized throughout history as predominantly male.[[7]](#footnote-7)

At the same time, Goldberg’s choice of the sonnet constitutes an inseparable part of her translation enterprise. Throughout her life, Goldberg translated poems written in Lithuanian, Russian, German, Italian, French, English, Latin, and Arabic into Hebrew in a manner that reflected her aspiration—whose conceptual based is rooted in German Romanticism’s term *Weltliteratur*—to introduce the Israeli audience to past and present world cultures and their shared human underpinnings, and to avoid the monolithic and superficial isolation of the evolving national culture vis-à-vis the cultures of the world.

Moreover, it is not incidental that most sonnets written by Goldberg were collected and published between 1942 and 1955 when the scope of the destruction caused by WWII was revealed. Contrary to others of her generation who insisted on disconnecting from the shackles of the diaspora and the European Jewish past,[[8]](#footnote-8) Goldberg turned to the traditional form of European poetry from within a new awareness regarding the poet’s historical responsibility. In her monographic essay on Francesco Petrarch (1953), Goldberg writes:

In contrast to the scholastic science of the Middle Ages, the people of the Renaissance discovered in Latin culture new sources of ethic, and the relation between fellow man and society. They found new content, and they were Studia Humaniora, the science of man, the science of humanity—a term from which later culled the concept of humanism... the people of the 14th century – specifically, Petrarch—found in the Classical culture not a complete value, worth imitating because of the beauty of its structure, but a wellspring of life from which humanity [...] will be able [...] to born anew, because he was the first to look for and discover the treasures of Classical literature, and interpret them in a way that determined the state of mind of the future to come.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In Goldberg’s view, Petrarch is considered the ultimate representative of the golden age of European civilization and humanism. Like him, Goldberg, who was part of the generation of Hebrew poets who grew up in the shadows of WWII and the Holocaust, believed in the possible existence of a humanistic, enlightened world despite the vast destruction and ruin. Her employment of the sonnet asserts that the Jewish and Hebrew culture—even if it was systematically persecuted by the Nazi annihilation machine—is still an inseparable part of the present world and of European history. As a Hebrew poet writing in the Land of Israel, Goldberg’s choice of the sonnet expresses not only a renewed orientation toward the past—to create a cultural-humanist continuity between it and the present—but also a political attempt to construct the future; to seek out new forms of identity and social experience that deviate from the individual’s affinity with the national experience.

**“Ahavata shel Therese du Meun” (The Love of Therese du Meun)—the other female voice.**

In 1955, Lea Goldberg published *Barak Ba-boker* (Lightening in the Morning), a book of poems a third of which are written in Petrarchan sonnet form.[[10]](#footnote-10) The prominent affinity between Goldberg’s poems in this book and the Petrarchan tradition is not incidental: the collection was published two years after Goldberg published translations of twenty-two of Petrarch’s sonnets into Hebrew to which she added a comprehensive monograph on his life, times, and poetry.

Among the most renowned sonnet cycle in *Barak Ba-boker* is “Ahavata shel Therese du Meun” (The Love of Therese du Meun)—comprised of twelve sonnets in Petrarchan style—that portrays a noble woman’s tormented love for her young lover. At the beginning of this sonnet cycle, Goldberg describes Therese’s fictional identity—a French noblewoman who lived near Avignon in Provence in the late sixteenth century and who fell in love with a young Italian who tutored her sons. Therese dedicated forty-one sonnets to the young Italian, and when he left her home she burned all of her poems and retreated to a monastery. Therese du Meun, the speaker in these sonnets, expresses the disgrace and pain in the unrequited love for a younger man, and finds solace in the writing of the poems themselves.

Goldberg’s deep affinity with the Petrarchan poetics becomes even more evident in by what is implied in her introduction to the sonnet cycle: Avignon is the home of Laura, Petrarch’s lover described in his poem. The other noted details—the historical moment (late sixteenth century), place (France), social status (nobility), the young Italian lover, the France-Italy connection, and the retirement from public life after the loss of the lover—hint at the similarity between Goldberg’s fictitious character and two Renaissance female poets. The first, Gaspara Stampa (1523-1554), an Italian poet of the nobility who wrote sonnets about her unrequited love, and who, following her brother’s death, became a nun; the second, French poet Louise Labe (1524-1566) who was widely influenced by Petrarch’s works, and who retired to her country estate in France after her husband’s death.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Goldberg’s words at the opening of the poem cycle constitute a poetic statement of intentions, which instructs the reader to view her poems as Petrarchan sonnets, together with the formal and thematic conventions derived from this. However, the very ascription of the poems to Therese du Meun modifies the originally masculine Italian Petrarchan tradition: du Meun’s character, the noblewoman, enables Goldberg to combine both voices, the overt-masculine and the dumbstruck-feminine, of the tradition sonnet. The position of the man who sings songs of praise and seduction to an unobtainable mistress is occupied by a mistress with a voice, who sings songs of longing for her young lover of inferior social status who will never hear them. In so doing, Goldberg creates an additional link in a long chain of the female poetic tradition in which female poets—such as the Italian Gaspara Sempra and Vittoria Colonna, the French Louise Labe, and even Elizabeth Barrett-Browning of the nineteenth century—accepted the Petrarchan poetic norms and at the same time maintained an opinionated and complex correspondence with the conventional and fixed model.

“Whoever read my sonnets knows,” Goldberg said in an interview in 1961, “that I used this classical form for absolutely non-classical purposes [...]. Whoever is knowledgeable in poetry knows how extensively I deviate from the actual classical form [...].”[[12]](#footnote-12) Indeed, alongside the adoption of the Petrarchan form and metaphorics, throughout the “Ahavata shel Therese du Meun” cycle there is a subversive process at work that conducts a debate with this poetic tradition.[[13]](#footnote-13) Clearly exemplifying this is the fifth sonnet in which Goldberg questions one of the basic tributes in Renaissance love poetry: sailing in the love object’s absolute beauty, a beauty that provides them with a divine and exalted dimension. In this sonnet, Therese turns to the metaphorical language that the Petrarchan inventory offers, however uses it to express the difficulty in describing the lover’s idiosyncratic and singular beauty:[[14]](#footnote-14)

Perhaps you are not so beautiful, perhaps

a careful, indifferent, sober gaze

will decipher through the magic of your figure

few marks that should be derogatorily interpreted.

Perhaps a meticulous miser will notice

the waste of a careless nature’s hand,

[the waste] which was embellished in your adulthood by the innocence of a boy, but yet to me you were endlessly beautiful.

Shall I compare you to a dewy pine,

which only the hand of the loving wind

knows how soft is its sprig above?

Shall I compare you to a bluish light,

trembling delicately in the heart of a flame?

To me you were beautiful beyond compare.

The speaker seeks to describe her lover’s beauty which does not abide by the dictates of beauty and aesthetics associated with the genre of Renaissance love poetry. In doing so, Goldberg subverts the universal and unified perception of beauty, and circuitously seems to criticize the idealization produced by the male gaze which desires female beauty. The speaker’s hesitations and questions regarding her male lover’s beauty indicate her difficulty in submitting to the system of representations of courtly Renaissance poetry, and in applying the ideal of female beauty, represented in the figure of Laura, the Petrarchan speaker’s love object—which he describes as “Her hair pure gold, and hot snow her face,/her eyebrows ebony, her eyes twin stars”—in describing her young lover.[[15]](#footnote-15)

At the same time, the speaker’s representation is still founded on materials borrowed from the world of content she rejects. The references to the flame and the heart, which are set against the wind and dew, replicates, to a large extent, the familiar Petrarchan contrast between the flame and frost. As “a silent radical revolutionary”[[16]](#footnote-16) who presents a gentle and subtle game between the conventional and the innovative, Goldberg’s subverts the Petrarchan tradition deliberately from within it, and by employing familiar tropes. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, Goldberg makes minor use of love poetry’s major language: she exploits the existing language to deviate from her traditional “normalcy” and expose her partiality.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Goldberg is not offering the reader a new set of representations, but rather extracts an alternative poetic language from within the hegemonic and masculine language of the Petrarchan sonnet. Thus, for instance, the lover’s beauty is not that of the flame, but the light blue radiance at the flame’s core. Befitting the Petrarchan tradition that makes frequent use of wood figures, the lover is compared to a tree, but the choice of a particular type of tree (Pine) reflects an intricate and unpredictable complex of metaphorical characteristics: it is indeed an ever-green and perennial tree, but its leaves are pin-like and spikey, not broad and beautiful to look at. These examples illustrate how Goldberg manages to deviate from the conventional tropes and create a private and original discourse of love precisely against the background of her marking her affinity with an existing tradition of love poetry.

It is interesting to note the conspicuous similarity between Goldberg’s sonnet and Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130. Like Shakespeare, who contemplates how to describe his unconventional lady, Goldberg transforms her poem into a meta-poetic debate that opposes the hollow and saccharine representations of the love object’s beauty in the generic poetry. But unlike Shakespeare, who is satisfied with pointing to the fundamental gap between the poetic sign and its real-life referent, Goldberg suggests a genuine poetic alternative. Although this alternative is formulated in Goldberg’s sonnet as a series of questions and not as unequivocal answers, the questions also glimpse a revision and alternative, if only the subtlest, to trite images.

Goldberg’s subversion of the normative scheme of representations associated with the Petrarchan tradition is also contingent on a renewed focus on the Bible’s epic and mythic foundations. While Renaissance poetry conducts an extensive intertextual dialogue with Greek and Roman myth and epic of the classical era, Goldberg conducts such a dialogue with the biblical text, which conveys the history of the Hebrew nation through a patriarchal dynasty of fathers and sons.

And were you to banish me to the desert

abandon me to loneliness and sorrow

to death, to hunger, to wild-beasts,

as Abraham banished his bondmaid Hagar.

if my heart’s blood spilled forth before your eyes,

if you abused me like a concubine,

still my spirits would not rise up and rebel,

nor would my cry be bitter and dry.

But I am for you exalted, untouchable,

a noble lady whose name

you dare not to take in vain.

A fortified wall. The way is blocked.

The fear of disgrace restrains every step

and my fists pound on the barricade.

Goldberg positions the biblical figure of Hagar[[18]](#footnote-18) at the center of this sonnet. In the biblical story (Genesis 16), Hagar was Abraham’s wife Sarah’s handmaiden. Due to Sarah’s enduring infertility, she asked Hagar to give Abraham a son. After Hagar became pregnant by Abraham, Sarah abused her and banished her to the desert. Given God’s promise that he would protect her, Hagar returned from the desert and gave birth to a son, Yishmael. However, after Sarah too conceived and gave birth to her son Isaac, Sarah implores Abraham to banish Hagar and Yishmael so that her son (Isaac) will be granted the birthright and become heir to Abraham.

Hagar represents therefore, a double minor position, as a woman lower in status than the legitimate mistress (Sarah), and as ‘other’ and foreign given her Egyptian origin. The reference to the character Hagar, and its positioning at the center of the poem, point to Goldberg’s focus on the national ‘other’ and on her preference for an alternative female dynasty to that presented in the Bible: not one identified with Sarah, the mistress who the biblical patriarchy embraced, but rather one identified with Hagar, the woman whose right to be included in the familial dynasty that germinated the Hebrew nation was taken away.

The speaker in the poem hopes to be Hagar, the figure of female sacrifice who is expelled outside the patriarchal dynasty, and still sees in her marginal position a liberating potential. It is precisely from this position, that is not obligated to comply with the social code, can the speaker express, in an unmediated fashion, her anger and respond in an unrelenting emotional outburst. However, as evident in the sestet where she states, “But I am for you exalted, untouchable, / a noble lady [...],” occupying the position of the noble mistress, the legitimate and normative love object in Renaissance poetry, carries a price: a commitment to the aristocratic decorum and to a system of gendered expectations that does not enable the authentic expression of the loving woman’s emotions.

Contrary to Petrarch’s speaker, who presents himself (albeit in a fashion revealed as lacking credibility) by way of a rhetoric of helplessness and weakness, Therese recognizes her authority and power and does not attempt to conceal them. Her demand “[...] whose name / you dare not take in vein,” is an allusion to one of the severest of commands in the Bible that prohibits taking God’s name in vein: “Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the Lord.” [[19]](#footnote-19) By means of this allusion, the speaker not only illuminates the gap in social status between her and her lover, but also hints at the resemblance between her and God—who is not only merciful and invisible, but also “jealous and avenging,” not to be disobeyed.[[20]](#footnote-20) In contrast to the octet that describes Hagar as a human and vulnerable figure, exposed “to death, to hunger, to wild-beasts,” the sestet constructs the noble and untouchable speaker as a powerful divine entity that is forced to restrain all the emotions that the culture prohibits women from expressing—rage, anger, violence, and revenge.

Therese’s portrayal as “A fortified wall” serves as another biblical allusion—to Song of Songs. Song of Songs describes the love between a young man and woman. The woman, Shulamit, is portrayed as a daring youth who initiates the dialogue between her and her beloved, and in so doing proves that she is equal to him in status (contrary to Therese du Meun whose status is superior to that of her young lover). When Shulamit’s brothers attempt to protect her innocence and control her, she makes it clear that she can protect herself and expresses this by means of combative metaphorics, saying: “I am a wall, / and my breasts are like towers” (Song of Songs 8:8-10). This statement expresses not only Shulamit’s strength and independence, but also her vital and erupting sexuality. The speaker in Goldberg’s poem is also described as a fortified wall, however this wall is not an expression of female eroticism but rather of a sense of suffocation and the emotional restraint expected of her. In so doing, Goldberg stresses the stern restrictions the loving woman is subjected to, and how social conventions prevent her from breaching the fortified wall and from fully and authentically expressing her feelings and desires.

The sonnet’s literal and formal characteristics also convey the movement between the longing for explosive emotional expression and the demand for restraint and self-control. The opening of the poem with the connector “And” indeed constitutes an imitation of biblical language but can also imply that the things said are a continuation of flowing and unconstrained speech. The presence of “And” at the poem’s beginning indicates that the accounts are not presented from their beginning and that there is something left unsaid—or prohibited from being articulated—in its entirety. The inadvertent presence of speech that has been “cut” and left outside the sonnet’s boundaries and which was deprived of integration within the framework of its established form, reflects the speaker’s unconventional emotions imprisoned within a façade of respectability and restraint.

Notwithstanding the gendered criticism described above, it seems as if the “Ahavata shel Therese du Meun” cycle—that deals with unrequited love—validates the literary criticism’s position according to which Lea Goldberg’s poetry is personal, expressive, and a-political, and that erects an intransigent barrier between Goldberg and history and current events.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, this critical viewpoint ignores the fact that behind the secluded position in the classical form there is also a moral standpoint, which displays a deep responsibility toward the past and history. The twelve sonnets that establish Goldberg’s poetic imagination resurrect the forty-one sonnets burned by the fictional Therese. Yet, in her preface to the sonnet cycle, Goldberg does not insist upon constructing realistic fiction that will link Therese’s poems to her own: she does not claim that her twelve poems are a relic rescued from the fire and does not aspire to present a substitute for the forty-four burned sonnets. Herein one glimpses a profound statement: the twelve sonnets are a partial variation of a corpus that has disappeared from the world and that no longer has a realistic existence. The “original” text’s physical state, as Ariel Hirschfield explains, represents the cultural truth of a generation that experienced, given the events of WWII, the annihilation of a whole Jewish world, including its cultural, spiritual, and material spheres.[[22]](#footnote-22) By way of the poetic fiction, which contains, in its very being, what has dissipated from the world, Goldberg provides a poetic response to the generation’s trauma and discloses the poem’s role in terms of a corrective activity that redeems the past from the abyss of forgetfulness. This is evident in the first words of the last sonnet in the cycle, which connect between the ashes of Therese du Meun’s burned poems and the live words on the page of Goldberg’s poem: “What will remain? Words, words like the ash.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

**The Pain of two homelands: the sonnet as a political option.**

Only few of Goldberg’s sonnets in *Barak Ba-boker* deal with events of her time. Still, it is precisely these sonnets, notwithstanding their small number, that embody Goldberg’s reason for turning to this genre. Such is the sonnet “Oren” (Pine),[[24]](#footnote-24) which although written in the Petrarchan sonnet form, does not present distinctive Petrarchan themes, but is dedicated to exploring the price of immigration and the mental fissure generated by the national demand to silence the diasporic aspects of Goldberg’s identity.

Here I will not hear the voice of the cuckoo.  
Here the tree will not wear a cape of snow.  
But it is here in the shade of these pines  
my whole childhood reawakens.  
  
The chime of the needles: Once upon a time –  
I called the snow-space homeland,  
and the green ice at the river’s edge –  
was the poem’s grammar in a foreign place.  
  
Perhaps only migrating birds know –  
suspended between earth and sky –  
the heartache of two homelands.

With you I was transplanted twice,  
with you, pine trees, I grew –  
roots in two disparate landscapes.

In this sonnet, Goldberg eschews the customary expressive style in masculine Zionist poetry, and portrays the double loyalty dilemma of the speaker who has a sense of belonging to two homelands simultaneously. In so doing, she deviates from her generation’s political obligation and from the official national discourse and presents the mental price of immigration to the Land of Israel which is described in the Zionist meta-narrative as a conflict-less movement “from exile to redemption.” Contrary to modernist European poetry that praises diasporic life as a preferable spiritual position, the speaker’s irresolute movement between two homelands is not described as an absolute joy, inspiring liberty, or blessed multiplicity.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The “Oren” manuscript reveals that it was initially written in Shakespearean sonnet form, and later revised and published as a Petrarchan sonnet.[[26]](#footnote-26) In contrast to the Petrarchan sonnet, which is comprised of an octave and sestet, the Shakespearean sonnet contains three quatrains (four lines in a group) and a closing couplet comprised of two lines only. The Shakespearean sonnet’s different inner division produces a difference in the thematic development throughout it: while the *volta*—the turn or the release—occurs in the Petrarchan sonnet at the transition from one large poetic unit (the octet and sestet) to another, the Shakespearean sonnet’s form dictates a more rapid dynamic than the *volta*, summarized in the couplet. Perhaps for Goldberg the sharper strophic tension in the Petrarchan sonnet constituted a more effective sound box for describing the sense of mental split and the unresolvable tension between one homeland and the other.

The Petrarchan tendency for the abstract representation of the landscape exists in Goldberg’s poetry and it obscures the rift between the external physical environment and the internal meditative environment of the soul. The snowy and pine forested environment portrayed in her poem is foreign to the Israeli climate and topography and hints, in a stereotypical and generic manner, at European territory. However, the mentioning of the pine trees’ shadows indicates their being under the harsh Israeli sun.[[27]](#footnote-27) The absence of concrete local markers renders the possibility of locating the speaker in an identifiable environment and the exact site where the poem takes place difficult. The anaphoric repetition of the deictic signifier “here” further underscores the tension between the decisiveness of the speaker’s location in a particular place (“here”) and the absence of a distinctive referential signifier that will clarify its identity. These poetic phenomena are in explicit contrast to representations of reality in the poetry of Goldberg’s contemporaries, in which an abundance of sites and natural landscapes unequivocally identifiable as Israeli appear. The absence of distinctive identifying characteristics of the Israeli landscape in Goldberg’s poem point to the difficulty in creating an intimate and total connection with this landscape and to the sense of alienation and exile glimpsed precisely in a place that should be a home.

At the center of the poem a figurative transformation takes place by means of which Goldberg challenges the national territorialization. The speaker characterizes herself by way of the tree figure, which is planted twice, both in European soil (the diasporic homeland) and in the soil of the Land of Israel (the aspired homeland). At the same time, in the transition from the octave to the sestet, the speaker describes the migrating birds that signify a nomadic subject position, and which in turn are reminiscent of the rootless exiled Jew figure—the national vision’s “other.” Contrary to what is expected, these figures, as is discovered throughout the poem, are not opposed to one another, but rather constitute variations that reflect one another. Although the tree may symbolize a stable rooted existence, its double planting renders it—like the nomadic migrating birds—a symbol of uprooting and the passage from one territory to another.

Goldberg’s reservations as to the Zionist viewpoint that is committed to the idea of negating the diaspora and of an uncompromising detachment from the historical Jewish past is strongly linked to the sonnet’s formal structure and therefore, may justify its choice. The sonnet’s strophic dialectic form manifests not only the sense of splitting and crisis in a speaker who is torn between two opposing homelands, but also the historical movement that the contemporary poets sought to deny.[[28]](#footnote-28) The interior dialectic discourse between the sonnet’s parts constitutes therefore, an equivalent to history’s own dialectic movement: as Georg Lukács argues in his renown essay “Narrate or Describe?”[[29]](#footnote-29) in a literary work written from within a sharp and revolutionary awareness of the historical reality, the dialectic, dynamic, and mutable pattern of this reality is reflected—not only in terms of content but also (and mainly) in terms of form.

However, the dialectic relations between the parts of Goldberg’s sonnet are Hegelian because they do not lead to synthesis or resolution. Although the octave presents the dilemma of dual belonging and the speaker’s being torn between two homelands, the sestet does not offer a response to this dilemma but rather sharpens the indecisiveness by way of the figure of the nomadic migrant birds. The speaker, who has difficulty in detaching from her European homeland and integrating exclusively in the Israeli landscape, “solves” the problem of dual belonging by memorializing a nomadic existential mode that leaves her in a liminal position and in a state of perpetual longing. Contrary to the Hegelian dialectic, that brings synthesis with it, Goldberg presents a negative dialectic, in Adorno’s terms, that duplicates the antithetic level and stops there.[[30]](#footnote-30) Thus, Goldberg discloses the repressed inner conflicts of the Zionist meta-narrative, which failed to offer an identity formation that would constitute a synthesis between the diasporic past and the national present.

Goldberg’s poetry reveals its decisive role in the formation of an alternative Israeli identity—of an ambivalent affinity with the nation’s value—that was expressed in Hebrew literature only in the nineteen eighties and nineties. The use of the sonnet not only constitutes for Goldberg a means to lament the lost regions of her childhood, or to foster an historical and aesthetic relationship between Jewish particularism and humanistic universalism, which faced insolvency in the twentieth century. This classic and elitist genre, with its methodical and molded appearance, enables Goldberg to inject a “Trojan horse”[[31]](#footnote-31) into Hebrew poetry and to take a profound account of the mental price required for the establishment of the national identity.

1. Byrne, Peter, and Leslie Houlden, eds. *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology*. Routledge, 2002. pp. 752. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Fried, Debra. "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets." *Twentieth Century Literature* 32.1 (1986): 1-22. pp. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Goldberg began her literary journey in 1929 with the publication of a short sonnet sequence entitled “In the Convent of Foziseli” and continued writing many sonnets which were integrated into her various books of poetry: five sonnets in *From My Old Home* (1944), two sonnets in *On the Blossoming* (1948) thirty-three sonnets in *Lightening in the Morning* (1955), two sonnets in *Sooner or Later* (1959) and two sonnets in *With this Night* (1964). In the framework of her work as a translator and professor at the Department of Comparative Literature at Hebrew University Jerusalem, Goldberg studied Petrarch’s poetry at length and translated twelve of his sonnets. Her research on the Petrarchan tradition, as well as her knowledgeability in the tradition of Hebrew sonnets (early sonnets written by Immanuel Haromi in the thirteenth century up to modern sonnets written in the twentieth century by Shaul Tzcherichovsky) led to her deep knowledge of the genre’s formal and thematic conventions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Goldberg was not considered a writer with an acknowledged feminist viewpoint, but she expressed misgivings regarding the category of “female writing.” Ruth, the heroine of her book *Mihtavim M’nisiyah Meduma* (Letter from an Imaginary Voyage; 1937) and Goldberg’s own double (unclear?), states: “I am not a young woman who writes poems—I am a poet. My poem is not a substitute for jewelry. Is not coquetry. A poem is a poem [...]” (Goldberg, 30). With her words she creates a distinction between herself and other sentimental girls who write lyrical poetry for the dresser drawer. Already in her youth in Lituania, Goldberg signed her poems with the pseudonym “Leah Poet,” and in children’s newspapers in the land of Israel, in which she published extensively, she signed using male names, such as “Mati” or “Matea” (Shamir, Ziva. *Lashir b’sfat Ha-kokhavim*: al Yitzirat Leah Goldberg. Tel-Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meukhad, year missing, p. 29. [Hebrew]). In contrast to Shamir’s opinion that Goldberg did not consider the author’s gender important and focused on the aesthetic qualities of the literary text (ibid, 28), in my opinion, her conscious choice to obscure her femininity and to adopt the position of the male subject constitutes a political strategy that recognizes male hegemonic dominance in the literary power centers and in the subversive strength of gender transgression as a means to distill a unique poetic voice. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Hebrew literary criticisms efforts to position Leah Goldberg as a “female” writer and to mark a clear distinction between her and the male authors active with her in the “Yakhdav” group is particularly prominent in two venomous critiques of her poetry, one by poet Natan Zach; the other by literary scholar Dan Miron. In his critique of her collection of poems *Mukdam o Miuhar* (1959) in *Davar* newspaper of November 6, 1959, Zach asserted that Leah Goldberg’s poetry was narrow in scope and does not present major, revolutionary poetic figures. A few months later, Miron published a harsh critique in *Ha-aretz* (“On Leah Goldberg’s Poetry,” January 1, 1960, pp: 10, 15) of Goldberg’s book in which he recounted and supplemented Zach’s arguments with academic authority. He claimed that Leah Goldberg’s principle failure is rooted in her inability to create a crucial and contemplative mood in her poems, or to exploit daring and sophisticated metaphors. Both Zach and Miron argue that Goldberg’s minority stems from the pale and traditional images in her poetry, in which there is no first-rate poetic achievement. Other critics, who took a more supportive tone, also erred in their stereotypical feminization: Binyamin Harshav characterized her poetic style as “calm and domestic” (Harshav, Binyamin. *Shira Modernit: Modernist Poetry: Selected Translations*. Tel-Aviv: Am-Oved, 1990: p.12) and Hamutal Bar-Yosef claimed that the most prominent characteristic in Goldberg’s poems is simplicity, and therefore her poems do not demand a tiresome interpretative effort on the part of the reader (Bar Yosef, Hamutal. *Leah Goldberg*. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2012: p.15 [Hebrew]). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Goldberg persistently aspired to penetrate creative areas that were considered, in the Hebrew culture of her time, “male,” including dramaturgy, translation of works from world literature, and literary and theatre criticism (ibid, ibid). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Zionist project of normalizing Jewish life, in which modern Hebrew literature took part, was contingent on negating the diaspora and perceiving it as a pathological and abnormal link, deserving of erasure from the history of the Jewish people. As a national movement, Zionism created an “invented tradition,” in Eric Hobsbawm’s terms (*The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), by constructing the “authentic”—national, deep-rooted, territorial—Jewish subject and by creating a historical sequence that bypasses the diasporic existence, while directly linking the national existence in the Land of Israel in biblical times to the efforts for the national rebirth of the Jewish people in the present. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Petrarch, Francesco. *Franceso Petrarch, a Collection of Poems and an Essay on his Era* [Hebrew]. Translation and essay by Leah Goldberg. Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Ha-poalim, 1953 : 83-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Goldberg, Leah. *Barak Ba-boker*. Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Ha-poalim, 1955. [Hebrew] [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Other details, as Ofra Yaglin notes, point to an affinity between Therese’s fictional character and Leah Goldberg’s own biography: the age “about forty” is Leah Goldberg’s age at the time of the writing of the sonnets. The number of ostensibly lost sonnets, “some forty and one,” is the number of sonnets Leah Goldberg wrote until “The Love of Therese Du Meun” (Yaglon, Ofra. *Ulay Mabat Aher: Modern Classics and Modern Classicism in Leah Goldberg’s Poetry*. Tel-Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meukhad, 2002: 50-52). These similarities have tempted many literary scholars to reveal the poems’ psycho-biographical foundations and to identify the love pain described in them with Goldberg’s private romantic suffering, who never married and lived with her mother until the day she died. Hamutal Bar-Yosef outlines in her biography of Goldberg the concrete contours that were, in her opinion, in the background of the writing of this sonnet cycle: the story of her love for Jacques Adout, an academic colleague from Switzerland, who interned at Hebrew University and who was a few years younger than her (Bar-Yosef: 250-51).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Yardeni, Galia. “Leah Goldberg.” *Sixteen Conversations with Authors*. Tel-Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-meukhad, 1961: 119-32. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Notably, the first sonnet in the “Ahavata shel Therese Du Meun” cycle, which I do not discuss in this paper, seems as a complete realization of the Petrarchan poetics and creates an innocent façade of poetic expression, which is violated in the other sonnets. Like Petrarch, the speaker in the first sonnet describes the Petrarchan contradictions and opposites at the foundation of unrequited love: she accuses love and the irrationality of emotion that sabotaged her serenity and self-respect. Her wisdom contrasts with creation and her desires (“my rebellious body cries out – You!). The experienced speaker’s maturity contrasts the lover’s youth, and love is portrayed as illness or curse, which only the lover can heal (“This unrelenting curse with which I am cursed, / the innocent call it Love—”). The speaker’s multiple direct addresses toward her lover (“You,” “Oh, if you knew how I’ve sunk,” “Oh, pity me,” “Oh, take pity on my age”) is fitting of the character of the lamenting Petrarchan lover and is evocative of the unmediated language register employed by French Renaissance poet Louise Labe. Moreover, the speaker, who acknowledges that “Strands of old age already silver my curls” clearly positions herself as the mirror image of Laura, for whom Petrarch foresees in late life “the golden hair spun fine as silver” (Sonnet 12 [‘Se la mia vita da l’aspro tormento’] from *The Complete Canzoniere* (<http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/petrarchkline.htm>>). The appearance of “a single unanswered glance” as well in Therese’s words, reconstructs the tragic gaze relations entwined in Petrarch’s poetry and the lack of reciprocity that characterizes it: the loved one does not gaze back at the lover because she does not return his love (Goldberg, Lea. *Selected Poetry and Drama*. Translated by Rachel Tzvia Back and T. Carmi. New Milford: The Toby Press, 2005: 98). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Goldberg, 1955, p. 28 [my translation].

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Petrarch, Francesco. Sonnet 157. <<http://petrarch.petersadlon.com/canzoniere.html?poem=157>> [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Shamir, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Translated by Dana Polan. University of Minnesota Press, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Goldberg, 2005, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Leviticus 19:12. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Nahum 1:2. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. On this misleading and problematic critical discourse see: Shamir, 2014, p.36, 181-182 (seems to be a mistake here); Hever, Hanan “Ha-Zemer Ha-Tam: Leah Goldberg writes War Poems.” In *A Meeting with a Poet: Essays and Studies on the Works of Leah Goldberg*. Ron Karton-Blum and Anat Weissman (eds.). Jerusalem: The Institute for Jewish Studies. Hebrew University and Sifriyat Ha-poalim, 2000; 116-134. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Hirschfeld, Ariel. “Al Mishmar Ha-naiviyut: al Tafkida Ha-tarbuti shel Leah Goldberg.” In *A Meeting with a Poet: Essays and Studies on the Works of Leah Goldberg*. Ron Karton-Blum and Anat Weissman (eds.). Jerusalem: The Institute for Jewish Studies. Hebrew University and Sifriyat Ha-poalim, 2000; 135-151. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Goldberg, 2005, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The speaker’s position described in the poem echoes that which appears in the sonnet cycle “The Regrets” (1559) by the French Renaissance poet Joachim du Bellay (1522-1560). Du Bellay, who spent four and a half years in Rome, and lamented in his poetry the leaving of his home in France and the unsettling experience of exile. Like Leah Goldberg, who writes about her affinity with the European homeland from within the longed-for Israeli territory, du Bellay, who is present in the capital of the ancient world and in the Renaissance paradise, Rome, writes about his desire to return to a safe harbor at his home in France. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Tickotsky, Giddon and Ofra Yaglin. "The Miracle of the Sonnet." Poems of Love and Gold: Leah Goldberg's Sonnets. Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 2008. pp. 149-161.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Goldberg’s choice of the pine tree in particular is not incidental in light of its important role in the Zionist settlement project in the land of Israel. The Keren Kayamet L’Israel, a Zionist organization established in 1901 that purchased land in pre-state Israel and readied it for Jewish settlement, planted many forests in pre-state Israel, mostly of Jerusalem pine trees whose seeds are not indigenous. Like in European colonization processes, in the framework of the Zionist foresting enterprise, an attempt was made to impose a European environment on the new settlement spaces. Since most founding fathers of the Zionist foresting enterprise came from Europe, mainly Eastern Europe, their vision of forests familiar to them were of East and Central European forests. The desolate and plant-less view of the land of Israel, so different from East and Central European landscapes, was a shock for them, and therefore the foresting was for them a means to imitate and reconstruct the European landscape formation in the land of Israel. However, the hope that the Israeli pine forests would in time become “European” forests was disappointing, and instead of lush, dense forests, mainly “park forests” came into being in Israel—forests whose trees are dispersed at large intervals. The pine has remained therefore, as kind of foreign element in the Israeli space, which signifies, like Leah Goldberg’s poem, the difficulty in easing the irreconcilable tension between the Jewish people’s different living environments and the difficulty in adapting to a new habitat after being uprooted from a natural habitat. For more on Keren Kayemet forests see:

    Liphschitz, Nili, and Gideon Biger. *"Green Dress for a Country": Afforestation in Eretz-Israel: The First Hundred Years, 1850-1950*. Jerusalem: Ariel, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. This by way of their describing the pioneering existence as total, stable, and static, lacking tradition and historical depth. For more, see: Shamir, p. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Lukács, Georg. “Narrate or Describe?” *Writer and Critic and Other Essays*. Translated and edited by Arthur D. Kahn. New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970 [1936]. pp. 48-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Adorno, Theodor. *Negative Dialectics*. Routledge, [1966] 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 31Ticotsky, Giddon. “Reading Lea Goldberg’s *On Blossom* as a Palimpsest.” *Dappim: Research in Literature*18 (2012): pp. 34-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)