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RACHEL AND THE FEMALE VOICE:
LABOR, GENDER, AND THE ZIONIST PIONEER VISION¹

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אל ארצי

לא שרתי לך, ארצי,
ולא פארתי שמך
בעלילות גבורה,
בשלל קרבות;
רק עץ — ידי נטעו
חופי ירדן שוקטים.
רק שביל — כבשו רגלי
על פני שדות.
אכן דלה מאד —
ידעתי זאת, האם,
אכן דלה מאד
מנחת בתך;
רק קול תרועת הגיל
ביום יגה האור,
רק בכי במסתרים
עלי עניך.

To My Country
Rachel

I have not sung to you, my country.
I have not gloried your name
with great heroic deeds,
or loot from the battlefield.

¹ I would like to thank Naama Rokem for her assistance in the bibliographical research for this article.

My hands have simply planted a tree
on Jordan's calm shores.

My feet have simply formed a path
through the fields.

Indeed, a humble gift it is,
I know this, Mother.
Indeed, your daughter's offering makes
a very humble gift:
Only the thrilling cry of joy,
on the day the light will break through,
only my secret tears for you,
for your present misery.²

INTRODUCTION

The image of the *haluts*, the Zionist pioneer, is essentially a male representation. Even though women took part in the Zionist revival of Jewish life in Palestine, the collective memory of this period tends to focus on male figures and activities. The *halutsah*, the female pioneer, was relegated to the periphery of the pioneer past. While the socialist brand of Zionism, professed by many of the Jews who immigrated to Palestine during the first decades of the twentieth century as part of the Second and Third Aliyot, embraced a belief in gender equality, recent studies reveal that most women continued to fulfill traditional female roles and relatively few women played a public role in the life of the emerging Jewish society in Palestine.³ In the literary field too, the

² The translation is mine.

³ The gap between the myth and reality of the women pioneers has been the subject of recent studies on their social, political, and economic status during that period. See, for example, Deborah S. Bernstein, ed., *Pioneers and Homemakers: Jewish Women in the Pre-State Israel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); Yossi Ben-Artzi, "Between Farmer and Laborer: Women in Early Jewish Settlements in Palestine, 1882–1914," in Yael Azmon, ed., *A View into the Lives of Women in Jewish Societies* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1995), 309–24; Dafna Izraeli and Deborah Bernstein, "Women Workers in the Second Aliyah," in Israel Bartal, ed., *The Second Aliyah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1996), 1:194–306; Eyal Kafafi, "The Psycho-Intellectual Aspect of Gender Inequality in Israel's Labor Movement," *Israel Studies* 4 (Spring 1999): 188–211. Interestingly, women's descriptions of their experiences as pioneers and the discrimination they faced from their male colleagues and companions are included in Bracha Habas, ed., *The Book of the Second*

female voice was largely silenced during the first decades of the twentieth century. Hebrew literature was almost exclusively dominated by male writers and allowed room for only a handful of women writers, mostly poets. Since women's poetry was examined within the predominantly male literary framework, its unique voice and qualities often went unappreciated or ignored. The early female writers' work was therefore considered a minor contribution to the construction of Hebrew culture, and it has only recently begun to attract more scholarly attention.⁴

It is within this context that the present essay focuses on a distinctly female voice portraying the experience of the Zionist pioneers (*halutsim*). The poem selected for this discussion addresses a central theme in the Zionist pioneer ideology, namely, the importance of working and settling the land. A close reading of this poem suggests that a female interpretation of the pioneering ideals can vary significantly from that of the male *haluts*. The discussion of this particular female labor poem will therefore include a comparison with a poem written by a male pioneer on the same theme around the same time. The comparative perspective will allow us to explore the particular intersection of gender, ideology, and literature in this historical context.

The poem on which this essay focuses, "To My Country" ("El artsi"), was written in 1926 by the *halutsah* and Hebrew poet Rachel Bluwstein. Known by her first name, Rachel was one of the few female poets who

Aliyah [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1947), 487–582, perhaps owing to the fact that the editor herself belonged to that group. The limited place assigned to women pioneers is still evident in recent studies of the Second and Third Aliyot. In one publication, only seven out of a total of eighty-three biographies are allotted to women: Zeev Tzahor, ed., *The Second Aliyah* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1996), vol. 3. Women are not at all represented in a study devoted to the examination of gaps between myth and reality of the Third Aliyah: Baruch Ben-Avram and Henry Near, *Studies in the Third Aliyah (1919–1924)* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1995).

⁴ See, for example, Dan Miron, *Founding Mothers, Stepsisters* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1991); Yaffah Berlovitz, *Inventing a Land, Inventing a People* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996); Michael Gluzman, "The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 59–78; Tova Cohen, "From within and without the Culture: The Appropriation of Father Tongue As a Means of Shaping Intellectually the Feminine Self" [Hebrew], *Sadan: Studies in Hebrew Literature* 2 (1996): 69–110; Hamutal Bar-Yosef, "In the Trap of Equations: Woman = Nature, Man = Culture, and Esther Raab's Poem, (Holy Grandmothers of Jerusalem)," in Azmon, *A View into the Lives of Women in Jewish Societies*, 337–47.

achieved prominence during the Yishuv era (i.e., the Zionist settlement period prior to the foundation of the State of Israel). Born in Russia in 1890, she arrived in Palestine in 1909 at the time of the Second Aliyah and subscribed to the labor Zionist ideology. After working in an agricultural farm near the Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee), she returned to Europe to study agronomy. The outbreak of World War I interrupted her studies and forced her back to Russia. In 1919, she joined members of the Third Aliyah and returned to the pioneer commune she had left. Afflicted with tuberculosis, she was soon forced to leave the commune and her farming work and move to the city. She encountered an early death in 1931 at the age of forty-one.⁵

Rachel embarked on her literary career as a Hebrew poet in 1920 with the publication of her first Hebrew poem. She continued to publish her poetry in the literary section of the main socialist daily *Davar* and became close to leading figures of the Labor movement. "To My Country" is among her best known poems. It became part of the literary canon of the pioneer period as well as one of the most popular "songs of the Land of Israel."⁶ The poem has also been taught as part of the Hebrew curriculum in the Israeli public school system.⁷

LABOR AND PATRIOTIC OFFERING IN RACHEL'S "TO MY COUNTRY"

The tribute to the Land of Israel suggested in the title of "To My Country" can be understood on two levels. On one level, the poem focuses

⁵ Uri Milstein, ed., *Rachel* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 1985), 9–51; Rachel is also one of the few women whose bibliography is included in Tzahor, *The Second Aliyah*, 3: 336–43.

⁶ "To My Country" ("El artsi"), first published in 1926, was reprinted in Milstein, *Rachel*, 156. Milstein remarks that this poem is probably the most popular of Rachel's works (315n25). On its status as a song, see Natan Shaḥar, "The Eretz Israeli Song, 1882–48," in Zohar Shavit, ed., *The Construction of Hebrew Culture in Eretz Israel* (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy for Sciences and Humanities and Bialik Institute, 1999), 525. Shaḥar notes that out of thirty of Rachel's poems that were turned into songs, ten are often included in song anthologies or performed by singers. The melody for "To My Country" was composed by Yehuda Schertok [later, Sharet] and was first published in Jacob Schoenberg, ed., *Songs of Eretz Israel* (Berlin: Yudisher Ferlag, 1935), 154. I would like to thank Natan Shaḥar for this additional information.

⁷ See, for example, the discussion of the educational value of Rachel's poetry in a brochure on the instruction of Hebrew and general literature designed for high school, published by the Department for Training High School Teachers, The School of Education of the Hebrew University, and the Ministry of Education in 1962 and 1966.

on the female pioneer's reflections on the significance of her contribution to the homeland. On another level, the poem itself can be seen as the poet's gift to her land. The female speaker uses familial terms to define the relationship between her and the country, alluding to the homeland as a mother and to herself as the daughter. The female bond adds another important dimension to their relationship and introduces an air of intimacy. The feeling of closeness is reinforced by the use of direct speech and the possessive pronoun ("my country"), as well as the speaker's conversational tone and confessional style. Indeed, readers might feel as if they were eavesdropping on the daughter's private confession meant only for her mother's ears. The poem displays consistency in form (the *ḥalutsah's* direct speech addressing the country) and substance (her offering to the homeland). The country, the silent addressee throughout the poem, is cast in the role of the recipient, the object of the speaker's action and affection. This asymmetry violates our expectations that within a parent-child relationship, the mother would be the one to play the nurturing role. The poem thus creates a role reversal that would fit a relationship between a mature daughter and an aging parent, thereby reflecting the Zionist view that the ancient Jewish homeland has been waiting for the return of its children to be rescued from its desolation. The analogy is therefore of an elderly mother who depends on her children's help and support, and it is within this framework that we should understand the significance of the female pioneer's offering.

In describing her gifts to the country, the speaker begins by qualifying what they are not: they are neither heroic songs nor loot brought from the battlefield. This opening is designed to accentuate the modesty of her contribution, but it also suggests that the female pioneer feels compelled to measure her activities by male standards of patriotic offering. In the historical context of the Second and Third Aliyot, whose members regarded the organization of Jewish self-defense as one of their major achievements, armed struggle was clearly marked as a male domain. The *ḥaluts's* mythical image portrayed a man holding the plow and the gun, the symbols of his dual commitment to work and defense. Yosef Trumpeldor, the *ḥaluts* who was said to have uttered the famous words "It is good to die for our country" before he died, provided a concrete model for the pioneer ethos of heroism and self-sacrifice.⁸

⁸ The *ḥaluts* was also portrayed as toiling the land during the day and guarding at night. For further discussion of this image and of Yosef Trumpeldor as its symbolic representation, see Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 91–93, 148–57. On the relatively small participation by women in the early defense organizations, see also Ben-Artzi, "Between Farmer and Laborer."

Within this context of patriotic offering, the female *halutsah* continues to evaluate her gifts through the lens of her otherness. In contrast to men's heroic deeds, the speaker's activities are marked by their simple, mundane nature: she plants a tree and forms a pathway in the fields, and she performs these acts by using her own hands and feet. Her contact with the land is physical and direct. Her body leaves its imprint on the country's body, thereby transforming its landscape. The two bodies remain distinct but maintain an intimate bond.⁹

The physical closeness is further reinforced by her emotional attachment. The speaker identifies with the country as a daughter would identify with her ailing mother: she weeps for the land's current state of misery, and she will rejoice with the country when it is redeemed. The centrality of this view of the relationship between the pioneer and the land is clearly manifest in Rachel's writing. In another poem she wrote in the same year, the speaker refers again to the land as her symbolic mother and testifies to her capacity "to be saddened by its sadness, to rejoice in her humble joy."¹⁰ The close physical contact and the intensity of the emotional bond thus indicate that the female pioneer sees herself connected to the land in both her body and soul.¹¹

⁹ It is interesting to note that in a later poem entitled "Change" ("Temurah," Milstein, *Rachel*, 163), originally published in 1927, Rachel addresses her imminent death and describes how her disintegrating body would eventually become part of the soil of the land. Death would thus dissolve the distinction between the pioneer and the land. This female version of ultimate giving resembles the ultimate sacrificial act typical of the male pioneer whose blood merges with the soil as he dies in the defense of the country.

¹⁰ See Rachel's poem "Here on the Face of Earth" ("Kan al penei ha'adamah"), written in 1926 (Milstein, *Rachel*, 160).

¹¹ It is interesting to compare this description of individual grief for a mother figure with Bialik's poem "Alone" ("Levadi," 1902), reprinted in his *Collected Poems* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1966), 181–82. In the latter, a male speaker expresses his empathy for the mother *shekhinah*, representing the world of Jewish tradition, with whom he was left alone in *beit hamidrash*, the traditional house of religious learning. In both these poems, the speakers contrast their own relationship with the mother with those who chose other routes (heroic deeds or words in Rachel's poem, the outside world of the Enlightenment in Bialik's poem). The speakers who remain alone with the mother are huddled in dark or hidden corners; the others are associated with a dramatic movement, bold colors, or a bright light. There is a fundamental difference between the two poems that may be implied in their titles. While both address a state of transition, they point to a dramatically different trajectory. The male speaker acknowledges that the greater pull of the Enlightenment would eventually tear him away from the mother,

Although Rachel emphasizes the female pioneer's humble view of her own patriotic offering, the analysis of the broader semantic meaning of her offering challenges this perception. Tree planting appears as a mundane act, but trees are important icons of Zionist national revival and its success in "striking roots" in the ancient Jewish homeland.¹² Planting trees became a sacred ritual in national Hebrew culture, and Rachel's choice of the biblical term for sacrificial offering (*minḥah*) accentuates the sacred nature of her contribution.

Planting thus represents a deliberate action that has both practical and ritual significance. The creation of a path, on the other hand, is the unintended outcome of the even more mundane activity of walking that would hardly qualify as an offering. Yet here too, the seemingly humble gift is imbued with major symbolic significance. Secular national Hebrew culture has elevated walking and hiking in the country as a ritual enactment of ownership over the Land of Israel and as a means of reconnecting with ancient Hebrew identity. "Knowing the land" (*yedi'at ha'arets*) was one of the most important subjects in Hebrew education, and youth trips were considered an expression of patriotic devotion.¹³ The path created by the speaker's repeated walks through the fields represents her fulfillment of an important patriotic ritual and her ability to become part of the native landscape.

whereas the female speaker conveys her confidence in her continuing support for and identification with her mother country.

¹² The view of planting as a sacred ritual was promoted by the Jewish National Fund and developed by the educational system especially around the celebration of the Tu Bishvat festival. See Tsili Doleve-Gandelman, "The Symbolic Inscription of Zionist Ideology in the Space of Eretz Yisrael: Why the Native Israeli Is Called Tsabar?" in Harvey E. Goldberg, ed., *Judaism Viewed from within and from Without* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 257–84; Yael Zerubavel, "The Forest As a National Icon: Literature, Politics, and the Archeology of Memory," *Israel Studies* 1 (1) (Spring 1996): 60–99; and Yoram Bargal, *An Agent of Zionist Propaganda: The Jewish National Fund 1924–1947* [Hebrew] (Haifa: Haifa University Press and Zmora Bitan, 1999).

¹³ On school trips as early as the 1880s, see Yaffah Berlovitz, "Let's Go Out to the Gardens in Dressed Up Zion" [Hebrew], *Etmol* 12 (73) (June 1987): 3–5; Yehuda Hershkovitch, "The Trip As an Educational Tool" [Hebrew], *Lamadrikh* 5 (1943): 3–32; Shaul Katz, "The Israeli Teacher-Guide: The Emergence and Perpetuation of a Role," *Annals of Tourism Research* 12 (1985): 49–72; Zali Gurevich and Gideon Aran, "On the Place" [Hebrew], *Alpayim* 4 (1991): 9–44; Orit Ben-David, "Tiyyul (Hike) As an Act of Consecration of Space," in Eyal Ben-Ari and Yoram Bilu, eds., *Grasping Land: Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 129–45.

The *halutsah's* humble acts of giving appear limited and circumscribed within her immediate reality, yet their symbolic meaning carries the promise of national redemption that far exceeds the boundaries of the present. This realization calls into question the speaker's initial reference to men's offering as the yardstick by which her gifts to the country should be measured. In the end, Rachel introduces the male heroic ethos in order to subvert it and question its prominence within the Zionist pioneers' culture. The reader realizes that for the female pioneer the fulfillment of the mission of rebuilding the nation and redeeming its land would not be achieved through the glory of heroic actions and their colorful materialistic gains. For the *halutsah*, the path to the future will be achieved through small, private acts of giving to the land that are performed out of love and commitment.¹⁴

SHLONSKY'S "TOIL" AND THE PROMISE OF REDEMPTION

Avraham Shlonsky first came from Russia to Palestine before World War I, spent the war years in Russia, and returned to Palestine as part of the Third Aliyah. He was both a *haluts* and a poet whose labor poetry emerged out of the pioneers' ideals and experiences. His poem "Toil" ("Amal") was published in 1927,¹⁵ a year after the publication of "To My Country." The two poems share a profound recognition of the significance of the ideal of working the land, and both entered the literary canon of the Hebrew national culture.

In both poems the speakers' gender corresponds with that of the poets. The speakers use a direct speech to address a mother figure with whom they share their own experience as *halutsim*. Shlonsky's poem begins with the speaker's call to his mother:

¹⁴ In fact, Rachel opposed the very idea of presenting the pioneers as making great sacrifices for the country. See her sharp criticism of Moshe Beilinson's 1929 article in *Davar*, marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Second Aliyah. In this article, he glorified the sacrifices the pioneers made by going to the Land of Israel and living there. In her response, Rachel argues that working the land is an act of love and joy and should not be made into a sacrifice. Both texts are reprinted in Mordechai Naor, ed., *The Second Aliyah, 1903–1914* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, 1984), 71–75.

¹⁵ Shlonsky's poem "Toil" was published in the collection *Bagalgal* (1927), reprinted in Hebrew and English translation in T. Carmi, *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 534 (a bilingual edition). The translation quoted here is Carmi's. I have followed his translation as is (except in one case, see n. 16 below), but chose to follow Shlonsky's original line breakup in Hebrew rather than follow Carmi's modified lines.

הַלְבִישִׁינִי, אִמָּא כְּשֶׁרָה, כְּתַנְתְּ פָּסִים לְתַפְאֶרֶת
וְעַם שְׁחֵרִית הוֹכִילִינִי אֵלַי עֲמַל.

Dress me, my pious mother,¹⁶ in a glorious robe of many colors
And at dawn lead me to [my] toil.

Whereas Rachel's speaker refers to the country as a mother, Shlonsky's speaker addresses an actual mother, perhaps a generalized figure of the Jewish mother whose roots are still attached to the world of tradition.¹⁷ The country is introduced in the following stanzas in which the speaker describes its transformed landscape:

עוֹטְפָה אֶרְצִי אור כְּטָלִית.
בְּתִים נִצְבוּ כְּטוֹטְפוֹת.
וְכַרְצוּעוֹת־תְּפִלִּין גּוֹלְשִׁים כְּבִישִׁים, סָלְלוּ כְּפִים.
תְּפִלַּת־שְׁחֵרִית כֹּה תִּתְפַּלֵּל קִרְיָה נְאֻה אֵלַי בּוֹרְאָה
וּכְבוֹרָאִים
בְּנֶךְ אֲבְרָהָם,
פִּיטָן סוֹלֵל בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.

My land is wrapped in light as in a prayer shawl.
The houses stand forth like frontlets,
And the roads paved by hand, stream down like phylactery straps.

Here the lovely city says the morning prayer to its Creator.
And among the creators is your son Abraham,
A road-building bard of Israel.

Shlonsky's speaker, the "road-building bard of Israel," presents his labor as a process of colonization and focuses on the results that it has produced. The city appears as the centerpiece of the pioneer's work, an urban environment that stands in opposition to the natural landscape as the marker of modernization and change.¹⁸

¹⁶ Note that Carmi's translation refers to *imma kesherah* as "my good mother." I prefer the translation "my pious mother," which preserves the religious connotations of the original Hebrew.

¹⁷ On this meaning of the mother figure, see also Lea Goldberg, "Four Poems by Shlonsky" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 37 (1974): 275–85.

¹⁸ As Dan Miron remarks, Shlonsky returns to the city as a symbol of Zionist success in overcoming the desert in "Facing the Desert" ("Mul hayeshimon"), where he

In contrast to the female speaker's deliberate attempt to play down her own importance, the male speaker places himself at the center of the poem and celebrates the achievements of the pioneers' labor.¹⁹ The speaker asks the mother to take him to perform his labor duties at dawn, the time when traditional men go to the synagogue for their morning prayer and children are taken to the religious school (*heder*) to study Torah.²⁰ His request reflects a child's trust that his mother shares his conviction about the importance of working the land and, like him, sees it as analogous to sacred rituals, such as praying or learning. He enjoys the confidence of a favorite child who is loved and supported by both parents who dress him in a robe of many colors and provide him with blessings:²¹

ובערב בין השמשות ישוב אבא מסבלותיו
 וכתפלה ילחש נחת:
 הבן יקיר לי אברהם,
 עור וגידים ועצמות.
 הללויה.
 הלבשיני, אבא כשרה, כתנת־פסים לתפארת
 ועם שחרית הוביליני
 אלי עמל.

And in the evening twilight, father will return from his travails
 And like a prayer, will whisper joyfully:
 My dear son Abraham, skin, sinews and bones
 Hallelujah.

emphasizes the hostile relations between the two. The poem was originally published in *In These Days, 1928–30*, reprinted in his *Collected Poems* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1965), 1:311–17. See also Miron, *Founding Mothers, Stepsisters*, 210.

¹⁹ On Shlonsky's tendency to magnify the image of the speaker and the impact of the Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky on his work in this regard, see Dan Laor, "The Gilboa Poems and the Third Aliyah Ethos" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 49 (1989): 138–39.

²⁰ See Lea Goldberg's interesting analysis of Shlonsky's use of traditional Jewish figures and symbols. Goldberg points out the association with Isaac as the chosen son led by his father at dawn to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah (Goldberg, "Four Poems by Shlonsky").

²¹ The obvious analogy here is to Joseph, whose status as his father's favorite son was indicated by the robe of many colors (Genesis 37:3). Similarly, the father's use of the phrase *haven yaqqir li Avraham* ("my dear son Abraham") draws on Jeremiah's verse (31:20) referring to Ephraim as the beloved son: *haven yaqqir li Efrayim*.

Dress me, my pious mother, in a glorious robe of many colors
 And at dawn lead me
 To [my] toil.

In drawing upon traditional texts, figures, and rituals, Shlonsky makes his boldest claim for the sanctity of labor. The father's use of key words from Ezekiel's prophecy of the resurrection of the dry bones (37:1–14), his depiction of the city as a Jew in prayer, and his reference to the pioneer as Creator modify their traditional interpretation to fit them into the Zionist pioneers' vision. While this sacrilegious attitude produces a shocking response, it also achieves the effect of establishing continuity between the worlds of Jewish tradition and that of the Zionist pioneers.

Shlonsky's poem conveys constructive optimism and confidence in the power of labor. In his work, the country is full of light, and the new settlement is associated with prayer and hope. The poem is charged with positive energy and emotions, and the choice of dawn as a temporal framework highlights the sense of a new beginning. The allusion to creation reinforces the theme of mythical rebirth, and the image of Abraham the patriarch resonates with the promise of national redemption.

THE FEMALE AND THE MALE VERSIONS OF WORKING THE LAND

The emergence of "labor poetry" in the first decades of the twentieth century reflects the importance of labor Zionism and the acceptance of its values as representing the new Hebrew culture in the Land of Israel. Both Rachel and Shlonsky participated in that early wave of ideological poetry of the 1920s that preceded, as Hannan Hever points out, the politicized poetry of the following decades.²² Rachel, who passed away a few years after the publication of "To My Country," has remained associated primarily with that early literary wave. In contrast, Shlonsky's poetry continued to evolve in other directions, and he eventually became the spokesman of modernism in Hebrew poetry.

In spite of their shared ideology, these poems demonstrate the diversity within labor poetry in which female and male versions offer different

²² Hannan Hever, *Poets and Zealots: The Rise of Hebrew Political Poetry in Eretz Israel* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), 44–59. See also Uzi Shavit, "The Wild Poem: Notes on the Style and Literary Climate of Hebrew Poetry in the 1920s" [Hebrew], in Reuven Tsur and Uzi Shavit, eds., *Te'udah: Studies in Hebrew Literature; A Memorial Book for Uri Shoham* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1985), 165–83.

interpretations of the pioneer vision of settlement and work. The female *halutsah* enjoys the direct, physical contact with the open landscape and a harmonious relationship with land and nature, while feeling alienated from the city.²³ The male *haluts* focuses on the city, the roads, and the houses, the markers of civilization that the pioneers' labor has produced. He ignores the native landscape and the forces of nature and associates the newly created urban environment with the promise of redemption.

The juxtaposition of "path" and "road," used by Rachel and Shlonsky respectively as symbolic outcomes of the pioneers' labor, is quite telling. Both terms imply an established route that can also be used as a metaphor for a future direction. There is, however, a major difference between them. "Path" is a narrow dirt road that is formed by repeated movement along the same route; a paved road requires a plan, the use of tools, and the imposition of foreign materials on the ground. The association of paved roads with the use of force over the landscape is apparent in Hebrew, where the terms for "road" (*kevish*) and "conquest" (*kibbush*) derive from the same linguistic root. Paths are formed in natural settings by both people and animals, and they are essentially narrow and unimposing, hidden in the fields. In contrast, the paved roads are imposed on the country's landscape, like the phylactery straps that bind the arm.

The female version of working the land places the country at center stage and emphasizes the *process* of giving (i.e., planting, walking, crying) and plays down the outcome (a tree, a path, a cry). The *halutsah* minimizes her own significance, and her attention is entirely directed at the country: she is important only as far as her offering to the country is concerned. In contrast, the male version revolves around and magnifies the pioneer as well as the outcome of his labor. The male pioneer is the focus of love and attention and even worship. The city thus establishes his symbolic role as the master of the land, praying to him as a man would pray to the Master of the Universe. The male pioneer appears at one and the same time as a child in relation to his parent whose blessings he seeks and as an aggressive and domineering male in relation to the feminized land.

In relating to the country as an object to be conquered and transformed, the male speaker conforms to Zionist pioneer rhetoric that often

²³ In the poem "Rachel" (1926), the poet attributes her love of the desert to her identification with her biblical namesake, Rachel, who was a desert person: "Therefore is my house narrow / and the city strange / because her scarf once fluttered / in the desert wind" (reprinted in Hebrew and English translation by Robert Friend in Shirley Kaufman, Galit Hasan-Rokem, and Tamar S. Hess, eds., *The Defiant Muse: Hebrew Feminist Poems from Antiquity to the Present, A Bilingual Anthology* [New York: Feminist Press, 1999], 85).

refers to the process of colonization as a war and a struggle and to the pioneers' success as "conquest." This view is clearly reflected in the idiomatic Hebrew expressions of that period, such as "the conquest of the wilderness" (*kibbush hashemamah*), "the conquest of labor" (*kibbush ha'avodah*), or "the conquest of education" (*kibbush ha'hinukh*).²⁴ The collective representation of the pioneer as a conquering male figure in relation to the "virgin land" is deeply ingrained in the pioneers' culture and literature. This framework suppressed the role of the female pioneer and the possibility that she may relate differently to the land.

Rachel's portrayal of the female pioneer is embedded within a relationship of harmony and support, and although the reference to the country as "mother" has the potential of introducing issues of power and control, the mother's current state of misery and dependence reduces this possibility. The devotion and concern that permeate the relationship between the two female figures stand in dramatic contrast to the power relations between the male pioneer and the feminine representations of the country (earth/land/city).

Rachel's poem is written in a minor key and is characterized by its restrained style and tone. The pioneers' achievements are limited, and the country still suffers from impoverishment. The *halutsah* does not doubt that the promise of light lies ahead, but this will occur at some vague point in the future. Shlonsky's work, on the other hand, celebrates the pioneer's achievements and attributes the light to the present ("my land is wrapped in light"). The *haluts*'s use of the biblical term "hallelujah," which appears at the conclusion of several psalms, suggests a sense of accomplishment and completion, and its bravado provides a clear contrast to the silent tears of sorrow and pain shed by the *halutsah*.

Shlonsky's poem describes the pioneer as acting within the framework of community, history, and tradition from which he derives strength and support. The sacred character of his labor is thus enhanced by his reference to collective male prayers and rituals.²⁵ Unlike the male

²⁴ For the common use of the concept of "conquest" during the pioneer period and the early State period, see, for example, the titles of two chapters in Habas, *The Book of the Second Aliyah*; Z. Yoeli and A. S. Stein, eds., *Conquerors and Builders* [Hebrew] (Petach Tikvah: Union of Petach Tikvah's Workers, 1955). See also Gurevich and Aran, "On the Place"; and Yael Zerubavel, "The Desert As a Mythical Space and Site of Memory in Hebrew Culture," in Moshe Idel and Itamar Grunwald, eds., *Myths in Jewish Culture* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for the Study of Jewish History, forthcoming).

²⁵ Shavit points out that Shlonsky, Lamdan, and Uri Zvi Greenberg saw themselves as the true heirs of Bialik in writing grand poetry that draws on mythical

poets, most notably the Hebrew national poet, Hayyim Nahman Bialik, Rachel shies away from major historical schemes, national epics, and collective frameworks. Her work is embedded in the immediate present, her close environment, and her mundane tasks. Rachel's minimalist approach, conversational tone, and plain vocabulary contribute to the female pioneer's simple, down-to-earth presence. Indeed, she herself states somewhat ironically in another poem that the circumscribed character of her poetry is the outcome of her limited view of the world, which is "as narrow as that of an ant."²⁶

Rachel's personal style and her focus on the immediate reality of the pioneer experience were often seen as a function of her lack of familiarity with traditional Jewish sources or of her limited ability as a poet.²⁷ More recently, however, feminist critics have challenged this view, arguing that Rachel's style stems from a deliberate artistic choice. This interpretation is supported by her declaration that although she knows many fancy words and flowery expressions, she prefers words "that are as innocent as a baby and as humble as soil."²⁸ Furthermore, feminist critics have pointed out that Rachel's poetry represents women's writing and sensibilities that do not conform to the predominant male poets' emphasis on the Zionist mission of conquering the land and reshaping it and their hostile attitude toward its nature and landscape. Feminist readings of women's writing disclose an emphasis on an organic bond with the country, love for its native landscape and nature, and a desire to focus on everyday experience.²⁹ "To My Country" can therefore be seen as an

figures and events yet does not recognize the boundaries between the individual and the collective (Shavit, "The Wild Poem," 175–78).

²⁶ "I Can Only Tell about Myself" ("Raq al atsmi lesapper yadati," 1930), reprinted in Milstein, *Rachel*, 223.

²⁷ Dan Miron addresses the difficulties that the female poets faced at that period, yet in discussing Rachel's rise to relative prominence he attributes it to politics of the literary world: the new challenges by younger poets in the 1920s and the controversies that divided the Hebrew literary scene. According to Miron, Rachel's poetry was hailed as an expression of antimodernism and as a poetic representation of labor ideology during the Socialist-Revisionist conflict. Miron's discussion of her work indicates that he continues the earlier view that devalues the literary merit of her work (Miron, *Founding Mothers, Stepsisters*, 114–26, 161–77).

²⁸ The poem "Expression" ("Niv"), originally published in 1926, is reprinted in Milstein, *Rachel*, 150.

²⁹ See, for example, Gluzman, "The Exclusion of Women from Hebrew Literary History"; Cohen, "From within and without the Culture"; Bar-Yosef, "In the Trap,

example of what has been identified as the female poetic preference "to withdraw from the historical moment and from matters of contemporary relevance, to the sphere of the feminine self."³⁰

Interestingly, the feminine qualities of Rachel's writing are also the main source of its continuing appeal. The widespread aversion of Jewish youths to the high pathos and verbosity of patriotic rhetoric has been a characteristic feature of Israeli society since its early days.³¹ Rachel's refusal to dress up patriotic values with imposing language or pedagogical overtones, her move away from the national and the heroic, and her emphasis on the individual experience have preserved the freshness of her perspective. For a society that has grown more individualistic and is relatively more open to a diversity of views, Rachel's poems remain both accessible and meaningful. Furthermore, a growing nostalgic yearning for the vanishing pioneer culture has contributed to the lasting appeal of Rachel's poems and songs that represent a simple yet intense bond with the land for contemporary Israelis.

of Equations"; Barbara Mann, "Framing the Native: Esther Raab's Visual Poetics," *Israel Studies* 4 (Spring 1999): 234–57. Another example of a later female writer who deliberately chose to use a low register of speech in her Hebrew prose in defiance of accepted literary norms is Netiva Ben-Yehuda, who, echoing Rachel's analogy of herself to an ant, compared herself to writing from a worm's perspective. On the case of Ben-Yehuda's writing and the earlier rejection of her style, see Yael Feldman, *No Room of Their Own: Gender and Nationalism in Israeli Women's Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 179–80.

³⁰ Nehama Ashkenazi, *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 27. See also Hamutal Tsamir, "The Love of the Homeland and a Deaf's Dialogue: A Raab's Poem and Its Reception by Men" [Hebrew], *Te'oria Uviqoret* 7 (1995): 125–45.

³¹ Rachel Elboim-Dror, "Here He Comes amongst Us, the New Hebrew: On the Youth Culture of the First Aliot" [Hebrew], *Alpayim* (1996): 125–27, 133.