"No Green Leaves"
Yona Wallach and the Theme of Metamorphosis into Tree

Anat Weisman

"Art and nature are siblings, branches of the one tree"
John Fowles, 1979

Introduction

In this paper, I explore "Woman Becomes Tree," an evocative yet lesser-known poem by Yona Wallach, which has been beautifully translated by Tzipi Keller from the Hebrew. By presenting this poem, I aim to shed some light on the mythological and literary motif of individuals undergoing metamorphosis into trees, demonstrating the potential of trees as poetic devices—symbols, metaphors, images, or similes—that establish analogies between trees and various aspects of human existence and offer some thoughts about the interplay between humans, poetry, and trees as botanical beings.

Initially, we will read the poem, followed by some introductory remarks about the poetess and the natural habitus of her generation.

Woman Becomes Tree

Woman Becomes Tree
here her two hands arms
raised to the sky
two branches split
from her body
from a trunk
reposed on invisible knees
she is beheld down to her knees
her thighs the roots of the soil
the alluring curve of her abdomen
the hollow of a trunk
her abundant hair
long boughs
branches

here woman turns to
an ancient trunk
she is so pretty
and perfect
I've never seen her before
but I knew
she is the woman
turned into a trunk
no green leaves
no mark of growth
all had dried long ago
the beautiful face turned wooden
all is uniform
did it happen at once
with no gradations
what can't be transformed
is the flesh
happens instantly in vision
and what can occur first
handiwork comes later
there's no point
it is after all only perception
that creates such an image
I know well whom we're talking about[1]

Yona Wallach (1944-1985), born in Mandatory Palestine, is recognized as one of the most significant and influential poets in Israeli literature. Her debut collection of poetry, *Devarim* ("Words" and/or "Things" in Hebrew), was published in 1966. Scholars and critics continue to be intrigued by the original and enigmatic imagery present in her works, alongside themes that touch upon the erotic, existential, metaphysical, feminist, and social dimensions. Wallach's distinctive poetic voice merges a direct conversational tone with multi-layered, rich, and coded language. By breaking linguistic conventions, her syntax generates obscurity and multiple interpretations, resulting in a complex, musical, and idiosyncratic poetic experience. Despite this, her poetry has also been interpreted as conveying concrete situations that reveal confessional emotional states.

Many poems from *Devarim* (and her subsequent book, *Shney Ganim* – "Two Gardens", 1969) have become canonical in Hebrew poetry. However, Wallach gained prominence in the late 1970s with a third, more comprehensive collection of her poetry. Three more books emerged in

[1] *Poets on the Edge: An Anthology of Contemporary Hebrew Poetry* (Selected and Translated by Tsipi Keller, SUNY Press, Albany, 2008), 165–166.

the 1980s: *Or Pere* ("A Wild Light," 1983); *Tsurot* ("Forms,"1985); and *Mofa'a* ("Appearance," 1985), the latter published posthumously. These works exhibit a vast array of poetic forms, including long poems, sequences of theatrical-thematic poems, and lengthy associative pieces. Wallach's poetry in the 1980s assumes a more performative quality compared to its earlier fairy-tale nature.

In her final years, Wallach battled for recognition and acceptance of the experimental units in her later poetry, simultaneously becoming a cultural icon representing for many Israelis the Western countercultural movements of the 1960s. She participated in live concerts following the release of an album featuring her songs set to music. Her 1982 poem "*Tefilin*" sparked a public scandal, leading to condemnation in the Knesset (the Israeli parliament) and a wide polemic discussion about the boundaries of poetic expression.[2] Her intense, dark, erotic energy, coupled with a psychedelic ambiance and performative art, marked her as a figure of poetic beauty and demonic desires.

Overall, Wallach's profound influence on Modern Hebrew poetry since the 1970s is particularly evident in the syntactic and linguistic liberation of contemporary Hebrew poetry, as well as its multi-layered wild blending of experiences, strong emotions, and imagery. Wallach passed away from cancer in 1985 at the age of 41. Two collections of translations have appeared in English, both edited by Linda Stern Zisquit: *Let the Words* (2006) and *Wild Light*: *Selected Poems* (1997). More of Wallach's translated poems can be found in various collections and anthologies of Hebrew Poetry.[3]

Wallach is remembered as an eccentric figure whose lifestyle was exceptionally extroverted, even among the bohemian circles in which she was involved. Surprisingly, her lifestyle was exceptional in another aspect. Wallach spent most of her life in a relatively rural setting in Kfar Ono (later Kiryat Ono), at her mother's home[4]. The modest house was surrounded by a large, somewhat neglected garden, where trees and shrubs grew undisturbed. Photographs often capture the poetess in her hippie clothing hugging a tree in her yard.

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[2] These introductory remarks are based on an article I wrote for the Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism (2016) https://www.rem.routledge.com/articles/wallach-yonna-1944-1985

[3] On *"Tefilin*" see Ruth Tsoffar "Staging Sexuality: Reading Wallach's Poetry," *Hebrew Studies*, Vol. 43 (2002), 87–117.

[4] The house was located on a street named after Wallach's late father, killed in the War of Independence when Wallach was only 4 years old.

In contrast, most of her contemporaries embraced urban life and thrived in urban settings. Much like Paris for Baudelaire or London for T.S. Eliot, the streets of small, vivid Tel Aviv provided the Israeli Modernist poets with a wellspring of inspiration and exploration. This urban preference is highlighted by an anecdote about the poet Natan Zach, recounted by Sabina Mesag, a pioneer of eco-poetry in Israel:

> Zach was a man of the city. I knew him personally, and he visited our house in the village. He once told me that he also loved nature, so he attempted to move to the artist village of Ein Hod. But he used to get up in the morning and look for something to do and found nothing: there was no need to water the plants because most of them were cacti, and there was no one to talk to either. There wasn't even city noise to listen to. He began to develop clinical depression and the doctor prescribed him a tape featuring the city sounds. When that didn't help either, he returned to his apartment above the "Bookworm" café in Tel Aviv's largest square. There, he felt he had something to do.[5]

This anecdote could easily apply to the urban poets of Wallach's generation, such as Natan Zach, David Avidan, Meir Wieseltier, Yair Hurvitz, or Dalia Rabikovitch, to name but a few. However, it appears that casting Yona Wallach in the role of the urban poet archetype will be challenging, not just from a biographical perspective.

Appearance vs Transformation

I began contemplating the relationship between humans and trees in Yona Wallach's poetry while working on her later works. As mentioned in my introductory remarks, during the 1980s, the poetess wrote endless, exhausting poems reflecting a raw and untamed consciousness. These were so unstructured and wild that her publisher shied away from them. To this day, most of her readers deem them eccentric and bizarre, challenging the traditional notion of a poem as a meticulously crafted literary entity. Some scholars have settled for labeling them as experimental, mentioning the long tradition of High Modernism's use of stream-of-consciousness in poetry.

[5] Sabina Mesag shared this anecdote as part of a tribute to Natan Zach's poetry in issue 17 of the online journal *Odot* (2021) https://www.reviewbooks.co.il/. This anecdote is used to reinforce her argument that in Zach's poems, nature is not portrayed as sharing a kinship or a common destiny with humanity. The focus always remains on the human condition.

In attempting to interpret this body of work as genuine poetry, rather than mere challenges to poetic norms, I discovered "Woman Becomes Tree". I realized that this poem distills the same spirit pervasive in Wallach's exhaustive experimental works but does so more succinctly, akin to a sketch compared to an elaborate oil painting. "Woman Becomes Tree" provided the insight I sought: the transformation of a woman into a tree encapsulates a recurring theme in Wallach's more challenging poems – the quest for transformation beyond the performative self .The theme of metamorphosis into a tree coincides with the dissolution of the boundaries between human and nature, poetry and knowledge, and the Sartrean distinction between "being-in-itself" and "being-for-itself" – the existence mode of consciousness characterized by active, purposeful nature versus the passive existence of ordinary things.

"Woman Becomes Tree" was published in 1985 in the book *Mofa'a* (מופע), the same year Wallach passed away. The title *Mofa'a* carries a dual meaning. It suggests "Show" or "Performance" on one hand, evoking an outward, possibly alluring display akin to a magic or strip show, and implies the objectification of being an external spectacle. On the other hand, interpreted as "Appearance", it can be likened to phases, such as those of the moon reflecting transient or cyclic states of evolution and transformation. Throughout *Mofa'a*, Wallach wrestles with these dual interpretations – show or performance versus a phase or appearance – struggling with the illusion of their coexistence without mutually negating each other.

The poem "Woman Becomes Tree" deftly balances the tension between the performative self and the being-in-itself, utilizing the timeless symbol of a tree. By employing "the art of thinking in images",[6] Wallach articulates it unmistakably: the portrayal of an "ancient trunk" with "no green leaves" represents a desired state of the woman-tree or tree-woman. This is in stark contrast to the conventional admiration for a vibrant, flourishing woman-tree adorned with luscious hair and elegant boughs. More precisely, it highlights the shift from mere superficiality, allure, and seduction to an authentic state devoid of adornment. It underscores the realization that nature – the nature of objects, imagery, and emotions – is a construct of perception: "it is after all only perception / that creates such an image." The poem seems to convey: "now you feel young and refreshed then you felt old and dry" – it is only an impression, but in reality, "all is uniform".

[6] This is the definition of symbolism by the Hindu philosopher Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, quoted in J. E. Cirlot ,*A Dictionary of Symbols* (Translated from the Spanish by Jack Sage, 1971 second edition, on Routledge, 1971), 24.

Anyway, the resilient, unyielding “trunk-woman” or “wooden, dry woman” will never kneel and show her thighs to feel her existence.

When we are drawn to the symbolism of a woman’s transformation into a tree, we recall the tale of Daphne and Apollo from Greek mythology and its multifaceted interpretations in Western culture, especially in Ovid’s Metamorphoses. According to the myth, Apollo, the god of music and poetry, became infatuated with Daphne, a nymph who was devoted to the hunt. When Apollo pursued Daphne, she prayed to her father, the river god, for help. In response, Peneus transformed Daphne into a laurel tree to protect her. Apollo, unable to have Daphne as his lover, declared the laurel tree sacred and vowed to wear its leaves as a symbol of victory. The myth can signify the victory of chastity over lust, the protective embrace of nature, the limits of love, or the broader theme of transformation as a reminder of the fluid change itself, the ever-changing nature of existence, of phenomena.

With this in mind, I propose that the central theme of the poem “Woman Becomes Tree" is the very essence of transformation. In this context, Wallach expresses her passion for change, evolving phases, and an insatiable curiosity to understand and experience everything (She often introduced herself on stage by saying, “I’m Yona, and I want to know everything”). All the other themes we recognize in the Daphne-Apollo myth used to be the themes of Wallach’s canonical poetry: desire, obsession, creativity, suffering, femininity against masculinity, violent sexuality, mortal vs gods, etc. The beautiful maiden who hates marriage in Ovid’s version, who runs against the wind that often reveals her legs, reminds us of the female characters from Wallach’s early poetry.

Apparently, in her last years, she felt that it was time for a big, fabulous liquidation sale of all her poetic assets. In her unconventional, extensive, and at times exhaustive poems, which I pointed at the beginning of my reading of the poem, Wallach masterfully enacts the relinquishment of clear distinctions between phenomena. She abandons the comfort of structured, figurative language and the well-established dichotomies: the old tree versus the beautiful young tree, life versus death, poetry versus thinking, woman against tree, mortal against gods. Instead, she allows all images and symbols to dissipate into the vast expanse of the void.

Of course, this poem can also be read differently: we can recognize the symbol of a tree as a poetic device, a metaphor. “Metaphors are one of the various modes of speaking about the world not by means of natural language but by using the ‘language’ of the ‘world’ i.e., using fragments

of world-experience to convey other experiences", says Benjamin Harshav.[7] In that case, we can interpret the poem as a state of mind, a specific emotion, a phase in reality, a "concrete universal" (to use Wimsatt's term). To speak about a woman losing freshness seeking life in a "dead ancient trunk" is a wonderful metaphor for the fear of aging and death. Women can bloom like botanical entities. By using the framework of an "old tree", Wallach codifies something irreducible in her experience, something that can't be expressed by generalizations about women. She can celebrate yet mourn the loss of her youth, feel the situation of being at death's door as "the beautiful face turned wooden," get rid of marks of growth and seductive appearance. While this metaphorical interpretation aligns with Wallach's biography and the conventions of lyrical poetry, it might overlook the opportunity to open the "door of perception" and miss the potential to transcend humanity's obsession with survival and communication.[8] The poem seems to ask if transformation is even possible: "did it happen at once / with no gradations / what can't be transformed / in the flesh". The answer is that change is always sudden, miraculous, ineffable.

In some respects, Wallach seems to sacrifice poetry for the desire to become detached from her body and transcend the confines of language and metaphor. However, I wonder whether the profound alteration of self-boundaries and the act of dementalizing the practice of seeing nature as an object can be done through poetry. Anyhow, I would like to stay open to the idea that poetry can give us a glimpse of seeing the naked existence stripped of symbolism.
I would like to think that Wallach's late poetry does just that.

[7] Benjamin Harshav, "Metaphor and Frames of Reference", in *Explorations in Poetics* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2017), 46.
[8] "To be shaken out of the ruts of ordinary perception, to be shown for a few timeless hours the outer and the inner world, not as they appear to an animal obsessed with survival or to a human being obsessed with words and notions, but as they are apprehended, directly and unconditionally, by Mind at Large - this is an experience of inestimable value to everyone and especially to the intellectual", from Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (Chatto and Windus (UK)Harper & Row (US), 1954), 22.