**Yonna Wallach** (1944-1985), born in Mandatory Palestine, is known as one of the most prominent and influential poets in Israeli poetry. She lived most of her life in her mother’s home in the town of Kiryat Ono , located on a street  named after her late father (killed in the Israeli Independent War in 1948 when Wallach was 4 years old).

Wallach was known as an eccentric figure whose lifestyle was exceptionally extroverted, even among the bohemian circles in which she was involved. Her stormy and intense relationships with both men and women, free and open sex life, experiences with drugs, and frequent hospitalizations in psychiatric institutions are described in detail in Yigal Serna’s 1993 biography.

Her first poems appeared in 1964 and her first collection of poetry, *Devarim* (“Words,” or “Things”), was published in 1966. Scholars and critics were fascinated by the richness of the poems, and stressed their original and enigmatic imagism as well as their erotic, existential, metaphysical, feminist and social concerns. The esthetic and emotional visions appearing in her poems, have been at times deciphered as abstract depictions of actual and concrete events in Wallach’s life, and at times as expositions of all revealing inner confessions.Wallach’s original poetic voice combines a direct conversational tone with multi-layered, rich and coded language imbued with multi-cultural allusions. Her syntax breaks linguistic conventions and creates a sense of obscurity and multiple meanings. The result is a complex, musical, and idiosyncratic poetic experience.

Her second collection, *Shney Ganim* (“Two Gardens”) can also be characterized as a unique and surprising combination of various elements: the abstract with the concrete, linguistic and thematic roughness with delicate lyrics, psychedelic visions combined with a sense of realism, venerability and softness with sexual and violent valor. Here she developed innovative and experimental poetic formulas. The poem “Two Gardens,” for example, introduces the formational, repetitive and abstract poetry which will become much more prevalent in her later poems:

And in one garden all the fruits are yellow and ripe and it’s all around

and in one garden all weeds and thin trees

and when round garden feels thin garden feels round

and when think garden feels round garden feels think…[[1]](#endnote-1)

Many of the poems of *Devarim* and *Shney Ganim* became canonical in Hebrew poetry; however, Wallach gained her full status as a leading Hebrew poet only in the late 1970s. In 1976 a third, more comprehensive collection of her poetry appeared. This included poems from her previous books and a selection of new poems.

Three more books of her poetry appeared in the 1980s: *Or Pere* (“A Wild Light,” 1983); *Tsurot* (“Forms,” 1985); and Mofa (*Appearance*,meaning also “performance” in Hebrew, 1985), which was published after her death. One finds in these books a huge variety of poetic forms: long poems (poemas), sequences of theatrical-thematic poems, and long and associative poems. The impression these poems leave is of an automatic writing, an uncontrolled ecstatic concatenation of ideas, words and emotions. Many poems include scientific, philosophic and religious vocabulary. In the 1980s, Wallach’s poetry becomes more performative in comparison with its previous fairytale nature.

In her last years, Wallach fought against the Israeli literary establishment for recognition and acceptance of the experimental unites in her poetry. At the same time, she became a sort of a cultural hero, representing for many Israelis the “counter culture” of the 1960s, which fought for freedom from various limitations on one’s lifestyle including sex, social norms, and the burden of the daily routine). The intensive dark erotic energy of her figure and work became associated with an affinity between poetic beauty, demonic desires, and insanity. Her 1982 poem “Tefilin” for example triggered a public scandal, a condemnation in the Israeli Parlament ( Kneset), and a wide polemic discussion about the boundaries of poetic expression. The poem ends with the following lines:

I’ll pull and I’ll pull

till your soul leaves you

till I choke you

completely with the tefillin

that stretch the length of the stage

and among the stunned crowd.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Wallach gave many newspaper and TV interviews in the early ‘80s and participated in live concerts following the appearance of an album of her songs that were set to music.

She died of cancer in 1985 in the age of 41. Posthumously her work became the focus of numerous scholarly articles and books, many of which concluded that she played a crucial role in shaping Hebrew poetry in general and the poetry of Hebrew women in particular. She was described as the herald of the post-modern Israeli poetic form and even the “New Age” spiritual journeys in Israeli culture.

Her great influence on modern Hebrew poetry since the 1970s is particularly apparent in the syntactic and linguistic liberation of contemporary poetry, and in its multi layered and un-organized blending of experiences and images. Two collections of translations have appeared in English, both edited by Linda Stern Zisquit: *Let the Words* (2006) and *Wild Light*: *Selected Poems* (1997).

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1. Translated by Linda Stern Zisquit: *Let the Words* (The Sheep Meadow Press, 2006), 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)