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**Zionism: Neurosis or Cure?
The "Historical" Drama
of Yehoshua Sobol**

We have to begin everything anew, to lay the first stone. Who will do it? Will we? With *our* nature? That is the question.

Our literature evaluates. It is convinced that a true evaluation—even if negative—carries within itself some affirmation.

Y. H. Brenner, *Our Self-Evaluation*
In Three Volumes, 1914

Any repression is dangerous. To be capable of persisting at a time of crisis or to prevent a crisis—one has to expose, not repress.

A. B. Yehoshua, "An Interview,"
1975

IN 1983 THE CONTROVERSIAL Israeli play, *Soul of a Jew*, was selected by the prestigious Edinburgh Festival to open its summer program. This choice surprised most Israelis; it shocked some of them, and to others it seemed a tactless act of public exposure: "It's bad enough that Haifa Municipal Theater chose to bring to life this extreme case of Jewish antisemitism. Why parade it abroad?" This new external pressure sharpened the general feelings of uneasiness and disbelief that had

accompanied the production of Yehoshua Sobol's play a year earlier. It was hard to understand, at least at first glance, what had prompted the Israeli playwright to dig out of the dusty annals of turn-of-the-century Vienna the story of Otto Weininger, the (probably psychotic) author of the infamous treatise *Sex and Character* (1903). Even more overwhelming was the realization that "Otto Weininger's Last Night," the play's original title, became *Soul of a Jew*—reverberating, as it does, with a chilling generalization (particularly in Hebrew, where *Nefesh yehudi* sounds more like "the soul of any Jew" than in its English translation).

Sobol's exceptional choice of historical material, as well as his popular success, was repeated a year later with the production of his play *Ghetto*, again by the Haifa Theater. This time he chose to explore a little-known aspect of Jewish life in the Vilna ghetto, where theatrical productions had been staged to defy starvation and destruction with song and satirical review, drawing large audiences until the final liquidation.¹ Again, public debate reached new heights when, in 1984, *Ghetto* was "exported" to Germany—of all places—where its production by the prestigious Freie Volksbühne of Berlin was received with both enthusiasm and protest.²

The Israeli responses to Sobol's new kind of theater ranged from such statements as "Sobol's *Soul of a Jew* is no doubt the best thing that has happened to the Israeli theater this year,"³ to the attempt of the Haifa Rabbinate to censor this "horrible play" on the charge that "it is full of blasphemy and deformity, depravity and Jewish self-hatred."⁴ Of more significance, however, is another, less extreme and probably less documented polarization, the one between Sobol's theatrical prowess and the quality of his playwriting. There is clearly an intriguing discrepancy between the mass appeal of his productions and the highbrow critique that is directed against them: "The characters [of *Soul of a Jew*] often recite slogans about the disease of Judaism and Zionism (or femininity). . . . These statements are not only alien to them, but there is no attempt to substantiate or discuss them in the play. Consequently, both the personal and the ideational aspects of the characters are lost in the stage performance."⁵ This is no doubt a serious indictment, particularly of a playwright who aspires to create, in his own words, "a dramatic stream of consciousness": "The stage is the arena for the protagonist's internal development; the [dramatic] logic is purely psychological."⁶

In attempting to clarify whether Sobol succeeded in realizing his stated intention, I shall argue that his declared goal does not represent his true creative motivation. His "purely psychological" theater can not and should not be judged alongside the drama of Ibsen or Eugene O'Neill, for Sobol's ostensible psychologism is only a displaced tech-

nique in the service of his all-consuming need "to understand what currently goes on in Israel" (ibid.), namely, the crisis of ideology. I will further argue that Sobol's dramatic career is paradigmatic of the growing ideological involvement of Israeli literature during the last two decades.

Zionism, albeit in different disguises and transpositions, has been put "on trial" in much of contemporary Israeli fiction.⁷ This "trial," moreover, has often been carried out by means of psychological analyses, whether covertly, as in the autobiographical introspections of Shahar and Bartov and the family dramas of Oz and Shabtay, or overtly, as in A. B. Yehoshua's psychoanalytic "allegories."⁸ My examination of the literature of the 70s and 80s led me to the following conclusions: Despite some tenuous beginnings in the late 60s, particularly in the genre of the fictional autobiography,⁹ the literary cult of individualism has given way, once more, to national-ideological concerns. Nevertheless, the literary romance with Freudianism has not abated. There seems to be a clear correlation between the loss of naive confidence in the collective cause and the reappropriation of psychoanalytic introspection. The "trial of Zionism" in Israeli literature is therefore marked by an uneasy balance between the personal-subjective and the national-collective. Predictably, psychoanalysis is often used as a metaphoric grid in diagnosing the pathology of this current malaise. In an ironic twist, Zionism—once the "cure" for the Jewish diaspora neurosis—is now perceived as a pathology in its own right, a new Israeli psychosis.

The compulsive preoccupation with this pathology is perhaps the most neurotic symptom of contemporary Israeli writers. Their inability to distance themselves from their traumatic experience betrays a noncommitted and superficial use of psychoanalytic teachings. With rare exceptions, there is no serious attempt on the part of Israeli novelists to reach a deeper self-understanding through a bold confrontation with the past. The historical, novel, which has always been a problematic genre in Hebrew, still remains so.¹⁰

One exception so far is Yitzhak Ben-Ner's *Protokol* (1982)—an attempt to illuminate the contemporary conflicts by uncovering analogous rifts in the Zionist past.¹¹ Despite the shortcomings of this novel, *Protokol* may be indicative of future literary developments in its harking back to the Palestine of the 20s and 30s, the days of the third and fourth aliyot. This was the era when the political organization of the Yishuv began to crystalize, when the naivete concerning relationship with the Arabs began to dissipate, and when the great cultural and political dichotomies between left and right took shape. These historical materials may prove particularly useful for contemporary writers who feel

disoriented or disturbed by recent ideological shifts and exchanges of positions (e.g., the religious right taking over the idea of "conquering the wilderness," claiming to carry on the spirit of Zionist pioneering that Labor has lost). A return to the beginnings of the central conflicts and divisions plaguing Israel today may allow these writers to project their own anxieties into their fictional protagonists, while trying to understand the historical processes themselves.

So far, however, this literary option has not materialized. But, while the historical novel is still waiting to be redeemed, its function has, to some extent, been fulfilled by Sobol's "historical drama." It was precisely the rediscovery of both the historical and literary models of the 20s and 30s, as we shall see, that made it possible for him to delve into the past. His major plays (the sociopolitical satires not included) may, in a sense, be viewed as dramatic versions of the "historical novel" still missing from current Israeli literature. Their appeal derives from their courage to probe the psychological motivation of their characters. It is through the prism of these personal conflicts that the ideological identity crisis of the period is reflected. And Sobol follows this historical retrospection to its logical conclusion. From the contemporary scene (*New Year's Eve '72*, 1974), he turns to the Yishuv era (*The Night of the Twentieth*, 1977), finally taking us back to Vienna, to the place and time when it all began: modern antisemitism, Herzlian Zionism, and Freudian psychoanalysis, with its attempt to understand rationally our various modes of behavior, adaptation and defense (*Soul of a Jew*, 1982).¹² With Sobol, psychoanalysis stops being a metaphoric device and becomes a subject in its own right—one of the historical components of the *Weltanschauung* that bred Zionism.¹³

Judging by the popular success of Sobol's plays, both in Israel and abroad, his dramatic directness touched a raw nerve. His presentation of Zionism must be viewed as characteristic of, but bolder than, the treatment of the subject in contemporary Israeli fiction. It is, therefore, in this literary framework that our exploration of his work will be placed. The following is an endeavor to delineate the dramatic representation, with all its problematics, of a question constantly asked in contemporary Israel: "Zionism—neurosis or cure?"¹⁴

Yehoshua Sobol's belated career does not follow any recognizable generational pattern, even though he is very much the spokesman of his generation. Born in 1939, he did not establish his reputation in the early 60s as did his novelist peers, Amos Oz and A. B. Yehoshua, who were born in 1939 and 1936, respectively. Like them, however, he was a member of an Israeli youth movement (in his case, the left wing Hashomer Hatsair), and, upon graduating high school (Tikhon-Hadash

in Tel Aviv), enlisted in Nahal, the kibbutz military service. He was a member of the kibbutz Shamir in the Galilee, from 1957 to 1965. Upon leaving the kibbutz, he went to Paris, where he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne. In the early 70s, he returned and—quite by chance, in his words—he began to work with Nola Chilton of the Haifa Theater on the production of documentary plays.¹⁵ Although he continued to work in this genre, it was not by this activity that his reputation was established. Sobol first reached the limelight in 1974 with his own traditional "well-made" play, *Silvester '72* [*New Year's Eve '72*].

On the face of it, *New Year's Eve '72* is a Chekhovian chamber drama, rooted in the post-Six-Day-War era. The economic boom of the time, associated in the play with ruthless military exploits, is embodied by Boaz, a pragmatic and cynical social climber. (The name Boaz carries with it the derogatory connotation of being one of the land-owners, the Israeli "landed-gentry," as opposed to the laborers, the socialist pioneers.) The action of the play is generated by Boaz's plan to sell the old country house built by Gershon, his father-in-law, so that he and his wife can move to a spacious new "villa" while Gershon is sent to an old age home. The selling of the house (a venerable motif!) requires the signature of Joash, Gershon's "prodigal son," who has been in self-imposed exile for the last fifteen years. The latter's return, however, appears to be motivated less by the prompting of his brother-in-law than by his own need to confront his father. Joash secretly hopes for a dialogue after the long years of estrangement, and perhaps is even thinking of saving the old house. The failure of this attempt is the dramatic center of the play; like Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard*, it ends with the sound of an ax chopping down the olive trees in the garden. Joash turns his back in desperation (Joash = Yoash, from the Hebrew root y.'sh., despair) and returns to his exile.

Rather than stage this as the generation gap revisited, the original production of this play made Gershon, the father-figure, look like Ben-Gurion. This gave a specific historical twist to the son's critique and to the father's emotional and cultural world. This historical specificity was no doubt responsible for the powerfully dramatic impact exerted by the first production of the play. However, reading the script today, one is liable to feel that, with the loss of the direct stage impact, the dialogue has lost some of its daring freshness. Indeed, the play vividly demonstrates the lot of topical theater. Not that it has totally lost its validity; on the contrary, its central conflicts are all too well known today, on account of their tiresome repetition in both reality and literature during the last decade.

As the major confrontation between father and son proceeds, it becomes apparent that Joash's past self-exile was a protest not so much against his father's values *per se*, as against the sociopolitical forces that

prevented the son from doing anything on his own. He absurdly blames his father's connections, "the entire second Aliya," for releasing him from jail, into which he was thrown for his political activities, namely, for his demonstrating against the confiscation of Arab land. Ostensibly, this was the reason for his subsequent running away. But gradually, a different, perhaps heavier accusation emerges: "Try talking to me once in your life," says Joash to Gershon, "Talk to me! See me the way I am . . ." (p. 5). But to no avail. The old man doesn't even understand the charge. His refusal to accept differences anticipates the unbending principles of other fathers later criticized by Israeli novelists.¹⁶ And the result of his blindness is just as paradigmatic; like other "sensitive" protagonists of contemporary Israeli fiction,¹⁷ his own son (who is, predictably, an artist) is bound to desert his home, seeking the will for life which his demanding father seems to have extinguished: "I thought that if I could get away from him, I would finally have the power to accomplish something, the power to live," says Joash to his sister; "I couldn't allow myself a single flaw. One show of weakness, and this is what I get: ridicule!" (p. 10). It is to be expected, then, that the rough and unrefined Boaz will be Gershon's successor. He is to continue the dynasty.

Sobol is naturally appalled by these prospects. But, unlike his novelist peers, he is not content with diagnosing the disease. Already in this play he tries to get at the causes, and later, he will devote the better of his plays to this end. Amos Oz's father figure keeps asking, "Where have we erred?" and "Were the foundations rotten?";¹⁸ Shabtay's father figure is certain there is nothing wrong with him, consequently bringing about his son's pursuit of a finite way out, suicide.¹⁹ By contrast, Sobol endows Gershon, who is trying unsuccessfully to write down his memoirs, with some measure of self-knowledge:

In my case, the mast broke during the storm, the engines were flooded, the dials were covered with seaweed. Stranded in the middle of the ocean at my peak, I didn't write a word. And why? . . . I had to smother contradictions. I went on as if the fire still burned. I was a heretic, but I pretended. Inside—lies. . . . The ideal, the values . . . I was spouting words. Inside—death. All my life, I never gave it a name. I was afraid of upheavals. How can one person be so full of contradictions? (pp. 4-5)

The nature of these contradictions is partially dramatized in Gershon's wild spurts of reminiscence. This is where Sobol's documentary talent comes to the fore. By suffusing the dialogue with relevant literary allusions and thematic cues, he manages to authenticate the old man's "good old days" with all their inner contradictions. The names of Alfred Adler, Nietzsche, Herzl and Maupassant help underline the major moral and psychological issues: "The morality of aristocrats, the morality of slaves. But suppose you find they are both inside the same

soul, then what do you do?" asks Gershon (p. 25). Another statement points to the early 1920s, when the clash between the Zionist belief in communal redemption and the personal (and erotic) needs of the young individuals participating in these communes was particularly pressing: "The salvation of the individual and that of the commune are both contingent on 'consummated Eros,'" avers Gershon, unaware of how out of context this claim sounds in 1972.

These conflicts become Sobol's subject in his next play. Meanwhile, he only hints at the tragic roots of what sociologist Yonatan Shapiro has recently called "An Elite without Successors."²⁰ Boaz and Joash he regards as objectifications of the polar opposites struggling within Gershon's soul: the idealist and the pragmatist. The coexistence of these opposites may have ensured the achievement of the early Zionist enterprise, but it may also have bred "neurosis" (p. 25). As a result of this neurosis, the two elements split apart in the second generation. The separation of these opposites constitutes a threat to the healthy continuation of the community, as dramatized in this play both by Joash's weakness and by Boaz's coarse strength.

Written and produced in 1974, *New Year's Eve '72* could be read as a direct social commentary on post-1967 Israel. One cannot miss the playwright's irony when Boaz boasts (in a play produced just one year after the 1973 *Yom Kippur* war): "Another war? After the beating they took, we're going to have quiet around here for generations. I'd say twenty years, maybe" (p. 17). This and other period-tokens prompted some critics to see the play as a realistic social drama (although not a political one).²¹ The truth is, however, that the realistic veneer only served to camouflage Sobol's deeper anxieties. In fact, the "first draft" of this play had been written exactly a decade earlier, in the form of a short story (published in *Keshet*, Spring 1964).²² The title of the story is rather transparent: *Ma'asei avot* [acts of the fathers] calls for the well known completion—*siman lebanim* ([serve as] an example or a model for the sons). The family we meet in *Ma'asei avot* is not much different from the one we met in *New Year's Eve '72*. "Father" is already blind and is planning to write his memoirs, while forcing his eldest son, the potential artist Joash, to give up his dreams so he can assume responsibility for the house and vineyard. The role of Boaz is fulfilled here by a couple of "dummies"—the identical twins Tam and Ram, who are all muscle and instinct and have neither mind nor soul. They are the heirs of the father's material possessions, while Joash squanders the spiritual inheritance. In defiance, he is typing his father's life story on an empty typewriter, using no paper at all. All that will be left for future generations is a pile of blank papers. Meanwhile, the youngest son, the nameless narrator, can no longer abide the deterioration. Leaving the spiritual desolation behind, he vows to "conquer" for himself a new

place and build a home that will avoid the degeneration afflicting "father's home." Since just such a vow stands at the beginning of father's story, the irony is inescapable.

Despite the irony, this story is clearly the work of a novice, a curious *mélange* of several narrative models popular in the early sixties. Although pretending to be an autobiography, it lacks local or temporal color. In its symbolic-universal presentation and in its expression of violence and destructiveness, it brings to mind the (nonautobiographical) fiction of Yehoshua and Oz that had been published earlier in *Keshet*.²³ One is tempted to speculate what direction Sobol would have taken had he continued to write fiction; but, after an interval of almost a decade, part of it spent at the Sorbonne, Sobol began writing for the Haifa Theater. *New Year's Eve '72* was his first nondocumentary piece.

Upon his return, it was this early story he took up again, proceeding to write a "second act." The prodigal son did not build himself a new home in Europe after all; the diaspora, it seems, was not a viable alternative. Yet his homecoming (in the play, at least) is just as disappointing; the venom and vengeance of youth have gone, but the protagonist's mature judgment of the current picture is just as severe. Indeed, it is hard to determine which enrages Sobol more: the ostensibly senile degeneration of the founding fathers or the crass cynicism of their successors. Curiously, he incorporates into that cynicism a new element, the attitude toward women, a subject not too popular in today's Israel.²⁴ Against the background of Gershon's romantic involvements, which are divided between his "saintly" relations with his angelic wife and his affair with fun-loving Taniche Feiffer (p. 4), Joash registers his horror at the decline of his sister. Once an aspiring artist, she is now miserably married to the crude and unfaithful Boaz. Suspecting that Dina is on the verge of a breakdown, Joash inquires whether she is in therapy and if she has a job; Boaz nonchalantly instructs him: "Give a woman three things—financial security, children and home—and you've given her the world . . ." (p. 21). Because he takes for granted that the "villa" will solve all their problems, he is, of course, oblivious to the implications of his declaration: "My wife is a princess. Someone has to raise the kids and be a homemaker . . ." (*ibid.*).

The values represented by these "maxims" are obviously light-years away from those declared by the Zionist revolution, particularly in its socialist version. It is this chasm which has served as the impetus for Sobol's career as a playwright. His subsequent theatrical activities have been divided into two separate genres: documentary and satirical drama, devoted to contemporary sociopolitical issues, and historical

plays, based on detailed research. In the latter, he continued to pursue the questions that troubled him in *New Year's Eve '72*. Now, however, he presumably abandoned the vantage point of the present. Immersing himself in the historical and literary sources of the period, he tried to understand the founders from within, portraying them as young pioneers.

Thus, in 1976, he surprised the Israeli theater-going public with *The Night of the Twentieth* (*Leil ha'esrim*), a one act play which imaginatively reconstructs "The night of the twentieth of October, 1920" as it unfolded in "a tent on a mountain in Galilee." The unusually detailed description of time and place is matched by a no less exceptional dramatic technique; the structure of the play more closely suggests a tense group-therapy session than a traditional well-made play. The characters participating in this session are seven young pioneers in their late teens or early twenties, "the first graduates of Hashomer Hatsair youth movement in Vienna . . . and other towns of the former Austrian Empire" (The Prologue). As described in the program, the play tells the story of "a group of newly arrived halutzim, passing their last night in a temporary camp on a hilltop in low Galilee. It is 3:00 A.M., and the youths who have spent the night dancing and singing have lain down to rest on the packed baggage and are now waiting for the lorries which will take them to their permanent settlement (in Mansurin at the foot of the hill). Repose, however, not to mention sleep, is quite beyond them. A manic urge to confess, to expose inner selves, and a terrible thirst for human contact take hold of the young men and women and move them to question, to communicate and to act upon each other all the things which until this night had been *repressed and blocked* inside them. And so, in *heightened clarity, or, perhaps, in greater confusion*, the group sets out to face the future" (emphasis added).²⁵

My emphases are meant to underline Sobol's deviations from the norms of the traditional settlement drama as well as his own ambivalence about the inner truths his play uncovers.²⁶ Unlike other literary reconstructors of the pioneering saga, he is not interested in the heroic moments, nor in the uplifting communal dance and song (the classic expressions of which are Yitzhak Lamdan's "Masada" and Natan Bistritzky's *Days and Nights*). In a seemingly daring move, he undercuts the Third Aliya "myth." Moved by the strain and anticipation of "the morning after," his "heroes" lay bare the hidden motivations that have driven them to join the Zionist enterprise. These range from one's adolescent disgust at her bourgeois parents' philistine or cynic morality, to another's shame over his parents' (and his own) lower-class education and manners; from one's fear of antisemitism at the University of Vienna, to another's horror at the sight of starvation and murder in the

Austrian Army of World War I. The last word on this issue belongs to Naphtali, the clown of the group who is the fool of the play and, therefore, also the author's *raisonneur*:

... Because I am a clown. You consider me a pleasant joke (Slowly undresses). . . . I've thought a long time that something is wrong with me. For when I compare myself with you, I see that you are the bearers of important ideas and strong feelings, and I . . . that's why I wanted so much to go to Erets Israel. I told myself: Naphtali, if you perform such an important act, perhaps finally you will become a man; with ideas and a history and morals. Here I am and it hasn't happened—I'm the same old Naphtali. Now I say to myself: Mansurin! Settling the land! Yes, this should strengthen you. And I await this great event . . . keeping an eye on myself so as not to miss that moment when the useless lump called Naphtali turns into a hero whose exploits will quicken the pulse of the coming generation. People will say: there were giants once on earth. In the meantime, we can undress. (pp. 44–45)

Is this the stuff heroes are made of? one is tempted to ask. Yet despite its superficially light touch, Naphtali's comic self-exposure is a reflection on the major conflict of the play and points to the ideological argument underlying it. One can hear in this monologue echoes of Brenner's anguished question, quoted in our epigraph, concerning the *quality* of the "human material" that would be shouldering the burden of the Zionist revolution. It also reaffirms Brenner's conclusion: the environment cannot change human nature. The change has to come from within. This brings us, of course, to the opposition between Ahad Ha'am's "spiritual Zionism" and the pragmatic Zionism of the settlers of Erets Israel. Actually, Sobol presents us with a variation on this dilemma. As the play opens, Naphtali expresses his reluctance to give up the group's solitary existence on the hilltop and join the ranks of the "practitioners" (*magshimim*): "Why don't we hang on? What is the hurry to leave the mountain?" He is immediately supported by Akiva: "But we don't even know what kind of society we want. We've had no time to sort it out. They should give us more time" (p. 13).

The thought verbalized by the two friends is the axis around which the play's *agon* revolves. In the name of "the important ideas"—Jewish history, the national renaissance, the Homeland, messianic hopes (pp. 11, 36)—Ephraim urges his comrades to suppress all weakness, to overcome despair, "to free ourselves of internal contradictions" and simply "do it" (pp. 16–17, 23). Yet, like Gershon, the father in *New Year's Eve '72*, he sees the social revolution as dependent upon the redeemed individual, upon a synthesis between "the personal and the communal erotic drive" (p. 15). In voicing this fuzzy translation of the Freudian concept of sublimation, Ephraim submits himself to the severe critique of his rival, Moshe. Moshe is fully aware of his own inadequacy, and, in

this, he is reminiscent at times of Brenner's notorious complexes: "Am I ugly? Ugly in the deep sense. An ugly soul in an ugly body? . . ." (p. 25). "I am crammed with shame, down to the roots of my soul. . . . A man full of self-shame can't be sexually very attractive . . ." (p. 27). "I am a weak Jew, a nervous soul in a sick body" (p. 38). He manipulates the others into admitting the gaping chasm between Ephraim's "big words" and their own intimate feelings and emotions. Far from being ready to establish the new society about which they dream, they show, by their confessions and the erotic group dynamics these disclose, that they are no different from any other group of teenagers. Three of the four young men are in love with the same woman, the aristocratic Shifra, while Nehama, the ideologue, complains about being lonely and unloved. Shifra, in her turn, laments her inability to love, but the implied truth is that she is secretly in love with Ephraim. Ephraim, meanwhile, surprises everyone by announcing his intention to enter a "family tent" with Miriam, the only one who has "accepted her sexuality." In response to the storm of protest this arouses, he rationalizes:

A "couple" scares you, doesn't it? It makes you cower! Involvement, goodby to childhood, responsibility, fatherhood. . . . Tomorrow, or the day after, each of us will have to make a fierce choice: to take responsibility for the sexual drive impelling him toward woman, or else become the most wretched of earth's creatures: an old child. Perhaps our problem is the renewal of the family. There was such an erotic force in the Jewish family! (p. 30)

This may have been historically and psychologically true, but the obvious contradiction between Ephraim's personal position and the general theory he has enunciated does not fail to elicit the mockery of the others. After a few more maneuvers, Moshe seems to have achieved his goal; the myth of fraternity, of "group eros," is completely shattered. From here, it is only a short step to demonstrating the psychological (and moral) inadequacy of the group and particularly of the myth by which it lives and in the name of which these young people had been about to risk their lives:

This country has neither spirit nor secrets. It has no need to be loved. It is matter, shapeless substance. . . . Only human beings have [souls]. Looking into my soul, I don't find country, people or history there. Only a terrible desire to live like a human being together with human beings. That's something people haven't done anywhere. Let's begin by telling the truth. Without resort to people, country, the erotic drive-of-the-generation. . . . (p. 39)

With this introspective insight, the ideational conflict of the play comes to a head: "country" against "human being"; national and social renaiss-

sance vs. the gratification of individual needs; "vacuous symbols" pierced by the "naked truth" (dramatized in the play in Moshe's suggestion, mockingly carried out by Naphtali, to undress). In this round, Zionism is revealed as an unsubstantial myth; its mythical heroes are stripped of their great deeds; their weaknesses and neuroses are exposed; finally, its pragmatic achievements are presented as being based on "repression," on "rotten myths" (p. 43), while its leaders are accused of psychological cowardice: "If Berl's afraid to understand his own traumas and complexes, that's his business!" (p. 31). In short, the attempt to achieve rebirth has failed. *Galut*, diaspora existence, still follows the newcomers wherever they are, even in the heart of the Zionist enterprise (p. 27).

The alternative, however, is left unclear. "What do you suggest we do?" asks Naphtali. Moshe's answer is rather vague: "Peel off the shells . . . get to know each other" (p. 39). This is a strange mélange of kabbalistic language ("shells" = *klippot*) and psychotherapeutic technique (confessing, undressing, sitting in silence, staring into each other's eyes): It is also the weakest link in an otherwise quite pointed dialogue. The moment Moshe suggests the establishment of "a society based on ultimate values" (p. 38), he is trapped in his own net. The marriage of his social utopia ("It is a society about which I know nothing because it doesn't exist here or anywhere") with his vision of unrepressed individuals sounds idiosyncratic, to say the least. Here we might be tempted to fault Sobol's dramatic imagination for going too far in his search for the roots of the Zionist neurosis. But that is not the case. History is sometimes more dramatic—even melodramatic—than the artist's imagination. In fact, Sobol's characters are based on real life models, whose experience in Bitanya was recorded in the collection *Kehilyatenu* (*Our Commune*, 1922), the first publication of the Hashomer Hatzair movement in Erets Israel. Some of the play's less believable phrases (at least to the contemporary viewer) are quoted verbatim from this exceptional book.²⁷

Although the methods of modification, condensation and telescoping employed by the playwright in transforming his literary/historical sources are of no small interest, it is not this aspect of his work that is our concern here. For the immediate significance of Sobol's unearthing of the Bitanya experience lies more in its ideological context than in the artistic/dramatic quality of his endeavor. The truth is that Sobol's play was a dramatic response to memoirs about and scholarly reconstructions of an "infantile trauma" that the collective Zionist memory had suppressed for almost fifty years. Although mythicized immediately by Natan Bistrizky in his expressionistic novel *Days and Nights*,²⁸ the experience of Bitanya was later regarded by those in the group as a youthful episode, part of their adolescent identity crisis. It took only

two years for Meir Yaari, the charismatic leader and instigator of the confessional sessions (and later the leader and ideologue of the left-wing party Mapam), to write his renegade essay "Empty (or Discarded) Symbols."²⁹ In a few more years, Hashomer Hatsair as a whole reneged on its dream of a nonpoliticized social commune (*edah*), based on special comradeship ("social eros") and on a new attitude toward women. They replaced Freud with Marx—or combined them, at least to a certain extent—and tried to forget about their infantile flirtation with the cult of the individual and their dangerous, because unprofessional, game of group therapy (years before it was invented in the West). It took fifty years for the old sore to be reopened. This was done by an antagonist and dissident, later the director of the Bank of Israel, the late David Horowitz, who, in 1970, published his autobiographical version of the famous Bitanya affair, *My Yesterday*.³⁰ Yaari responded immediately, and, a year later, Elkana Margalit's thorough study of the early years of Hashomer Hatsair (1913–1936) tried to set the score straight.³¹ Sobol's interest in the subject was no doubt aroused by these publications. They brought back the memory of his own experience as a youth in Hashomer Hatsair and particularly of the movement's special tradition of confessional discussion (*siḥat haken*).

The use to which Sobol put these sources transcends their personal significance. Characteristically, his search for psychological insights into today's ideological ills took him back to the time and place where he could survey "the road not taken." There he found both the literary and real-life models through which he could reexperience the fundamental oppositions plaguing Zionism since its inception. History demonstrated that the attempt to synchronize the national renaissance with the rhythm of the individual's psychological revolution was too tall an order. Similarly, despite his intentions, Sobol's fictional Moshe did not stay on the hilltop. While earlier literary reconstruction could still support the belief in the therapeutic power of the commune, as did Bistrizky in 1926, later ones cannot.³² Just like Ben-Ner's novel *Protokol, The Night of the Twentieth* is bracketed by historical facts that validate, perhaps against Sobol's intentions, the values of the Zionist consensus. In history as in drama, the lid of repression had to be put back on if any practical results were to be achieved.

But not for Sobol. Like a patient compulsively returning to his painful traumas, he keeps coming back to the same ideational conflict. In his succeeding plays, he has dug further down into the soil that gave rise to the Bitanya experiment, only to come out at the other side of the tunnel: the Holocaust (in *Ghetto*). On his way, he lifted the lid off still another collective trauma, the one he sees as symbolically responsible

for the Zionist revolution. In fact, just as *The Night of the Twentieth* is indebted to Sobol's personal memories of his youth movement experience, his next play, *Soul of a Jew*, is indebted to the historical sources he researched while working on *The Night of the Twentieth*. Otto Weininger and his theories, which figure several times in the play, are *not* a dramatic invention. *Kehilyatenu* and the earlier writings of Brenner (an additional source for Sobol's historical reconstruction) both attest to the significance of Weininger's role in shaping the young Zionists' worldview. In a sense, their whole enterprise was an answer to Weininger's accusations, an attempt to disprove his derogatory equation of Judaism with femaleness. Hence their apotheosis of activism (in contrast to his charge of passivity), of idealism (to answer his charge of Jewish materialism) and of the "guilt complex," which Weininger absurdly attributed to the exclusive domain of Christianity.³³ Hence, also, the special emphasis on a new kind of psychosexual relationship; the status of woman had to be salvaged from Weininger's horrifying scenario, and, with it, the status of Judaism as a whole.

Nevertheless, as the cases of Brenner and the fictional Moshe demonstrate, Weiningerian self-hatred is not to be contained by conversion, suicide or even the Zionist revolution.³⁴ Sobol makes Weininger a symbol of that part of diaspora Judaism that refuses to be transformed, that is responsible for the reincarnation of *Galut* within the Zionist spirit. Dramatically, he does this by embellishing, beyond the historical information available, Weininger's brief and enigmatic life (1880–1903); he invents Clara, an ostensible friend or lover, who is, conveniently enough, an ardent Zionist. In every other detail, Sobol faithfully follows Weininger's own writings, the few memoirs written by his contemporaries, and particularly the psychological exposé written by the psychiatrist David Abrahamsen (1946), who, from a vantage point of four decades later, attempted a diagnosis of the Weininger case.³⁵ Of course, Sobol is not much interested in this aspect of the story. That is why he has to invent a girlfriend, even though it was precisely Weininger's inability to form such a relationship that led Abrahamsen to his conclusions.

The division between historical and fictional characters in *Soul of a Jew* is apparent in the play's uneven language. As long as he is presenting Otto's personal conflicts or his theoretical expositions, Sobol is content to let the sources speak their own language. The chilling paragraph of introspection signalling the turning point in Otto's progress toward insanity and suicide (Act II, scene 1) is an almost verbatim quote from Weininger's description of the "self-haters" which Abrahamsen cites as Otto's indirect indictment of himself:

A house whose shutters have been boarded for ever . . . A bitter and melancholy house that refuses to open to the light. What goes on inside?

Feverish activity . . . Everything is being emptied out, cleared away. . . .
Darkness, slow and terrifying, is creeping over the house. . . . Don't ask
me what goes on inside it. . . .³⁶

The dialogues between Otto and Clara, on the other hand, smack of contemporary jargon. It is hard to overlook the traces of A. B. Yehoshua's "Essays on Zionism"³⁷ in the following dialogue (most of which was not included, by the way, in the English version of the play; therefore—my translation):

- Otto: . . . You tell me about Zionism because you know that I see it as the last remnant of nobleness left in Judaism. . . . But there is no chance. You will not go to the east, neither will the Jewish people.
- Clara: . . . We are all guilty. . . . We have to return to the place of our crime against ourselves. . . . There we have to start all over again, avoiding the pitfalls that brought our demise.
- Otto: Had Jews been able to recognize their guilt, they would have deserted the diaspora long ago, at the time of the Second Commonwealth, when they had an independent state. *But the diaspora is the Jews' typical way of life: they choose it of their own free will.* (Act I, scene 6; emphasis added)

There is too much recent Zionist hindsight in this exchange for it to be convincing as a reconstruction of the authentic characters. The same holds true for Titz's statement: "Our handsome Karl [Lueger, Vienna's antisemitic mayor] and your pretty-boy Herzl are a couple of weeds growing out of the same crack in the crumbling foundations of liberal Austria" (II.1.). Again, this is an after-the-fact evaluation, probably inspired by recent scholarly descriptions of the period (e.g., Janick and Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna* [N.Y., 1973] which Sobol read, by his own admission, while working on the script).

All this amounts to the fact that the more historically documented Sobol's plays grow, the less historically accurate his characters become. This is not meant normatively, but descriptively. There is no doubt that since *The Night of the Twentieth*, Sobol has been less concerned with the psychological motivation of the dramatis personae than with the ideas they stand for. Despite the historical details in both *Soul of a Jew* and *Ghetto* (which is also based quite closely on period documents), these are not realistic plays. The diminution of their realism (as compared to the earlier plays) is accomplished by intensified theatricality. Reminiscent of Strindberg's dream-play (*Soul of a Jew*) or of Pirandello's theater within the theater (*Ghetto*), these plays exhibit Sobol's growing confidence in creating highly theatrical dramas of ideas, rather than well-made psychological plays. Such plays function more as the playwright's mouthpiece than do other dramatic genres. This may be why some critics so readily identified Sobol with Otto Weininger.³⁸ But it may be

argued that since Sobol did not use his poetic license to alter Weininger's personal lot, Otto's diatribes against Zionism should be interpreted as the expression of a demented soul, in the play as in life. Countered as they are by the deeds and words of other characters (Clara and Berger, Freud, his parents), they are meant not as a verdict, but as a preventive measure.

If Sobol had originally been attracted to Weininger's ghost because he wanted to understand the roots of the Zionist neurosis, namely, Zionism's disposition towards self-destruction, he discovered, I believe, that the process of introspection cannot stop there. The soul of a Jew, be it Weininger's or Gens' (the head of the Vilna Ghetto *Judenrat*), does not exist in a vacuum. It cannot avoid absorbing the emotions and attitudes permeating the environment. Whether the latter is Vienna, Vilna or Palestine, each with its peculiar external dangers and internal contradictions, is, of course, one's own choice. But the idea that choosing the latter guarantees an automatic cure of these or other inner conflicts is a psychologically naive proposition. It is only when both the characters and their creators learn to live *with* their conflicts that the Zionist neurosis, drawn so vividly by Sobol and his novelist peers, will turn into a cure.

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NOTES

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1. As in his other "historical" plays, Sobol prefaced *Ghetto* with an informative introduction, in which he spelled out his documentary sources—annals of the ghetto, survivors' memoirs, victims' diaries—and particularly the diary of Herman Kruk, the Bundist librarian (who is also one of the leading characters in the play). Sobol quoted Kruk's diary from January 17, 1941: "One should not produce theatrical shows in a graveyard"; but he also concludes that without this theater, and other expressions of vitality, "the survival-victory of the defenseless . . . would have been unthinkable. To the mystery of this vitality I owe this play." Yehoshua Sobol, *Ghetto* (Or-Am, 1984), p. 13 (my translation).

2. See Thomas Freeman, "Die Kontroverse um Sobols Musical 'Ghetto'," in *Jüdische Komponenten in der deutschen Literatur—die Assimilationkontroverse*, eds. Walter Röll and Hans-Peter Bayerdörfer (Tübingen, 1986), pp. 81-93. My thanks to David Roskies for calling my attention to this article.

3. Dafna Raz, "An Adolescent" [Hebrew], *Theater Column, Rehov rashi* (Tel Aviv, 7 September 1983):32.

4. *Ma'ariv*, 15 October, 1982, quoted in Dan Oryan, "The Polemics over 'Soul of A Jew'" [Hebrew], *Bamah* 100, (1985):82.

5. Gideon Engler, letter to the editor, *Ha'arets*, 29 November 1982, quoted in Oryan, p. 85.

6. Dafna Raz, *ibid*.
7. See Yael S. Feldman, "Zionism on Trial in Contemporary Israeli Fiction," *Herzl Yearbook* 1987, ed., David Sidorsky and Ruth Kozodoy (forthcoming). For an earlier Hebrew version see *Hadoar* 65 (31 January 1986):19-22.
8. References are to: Hanoach Bartov, *Shel mi ata, yeled?* (Tel Aviv, 1970) [*Whose Little Boy Are You?*, Philadelphia, 1978]; Amos Oz, *Har ha'etsa har'ah* (Tel Aviv, 1976) [*The Hill of the Evil Council*, New York, 1978]; *Menuha nekhona* (Tel Aviv, 1982) [*A Perfect Peace*, San Diego, 1985]; Yaakov Shabtay, *Zikhron devarim* (Tel Aviv, 1977) [*Past Continuous*, Philadelphia, 1984]; *Sof davar* [Past Perfect] (Tel Aviv, 1984); David Shahar, *Heikhal hakelim hashvurim* (Tel Aviv, 1969) [*The Palace of Shattered Vessels*, Boston, 1974]; A. B. Yehoshua, *Hame'ahev* (Tel Aviv, 1977) [*The Lover*, New York, 1985]; *Gerushim me'uharim* (Tel Aviv, 1982) [*A Late Divorce*, New York, 1985].
9. See my "Gender In/Difference in Contemporary Autobiographic Fiction in Israel," forthcoming.
10. See Yael S. Feldman, "Historical Novels or Masked Autobiographies?" [Hebrew], *Siman Kria* 19 (1985):208-13.
11. Yitzhak Ben-Ner, *Protokol* (Jerusalem, 1982). This novel illuminates the Zionist ideology from the perspective of its dissident periphery, the small communist cell that had split off the mainstream of Socialist Zionism in the early 20s and finally returned to Russia. Although echoes of the contemporary "Peace Now" movement may be read in the ideas attributed to those early communists, the failure of the communist experiment, underlined by intrigue and violence, serves to uphold mainstream Zionist values. Cf. Gershon Shaked, *Gal ahar qal* [Wave after Wave in Hebrew Narrative Fiction] (Jerusalem, 1985), pp. 158-70.
12. See Yehoshua Sobol, *Silvester '72* [New Year's Eve '72] (1974; private manuscript), for the use of which I am indebted to the playwright himself. (The play was never published and is not in print.) *Leil ha'esrim* (Tel Aviv, 1980) [*The Night of the Twentieth*, trans. Chanah Hoffman, Tel Aviv, 1978]; *Nefesh yehudi* (Tel Aviv, 1982) [*Soul of A Jew*, trans. Betsy Rosenberg and Miriam Schlesinger, Tel Aviv, n.d.]. Page references to the English versions will henceforth be given in the text itself.
13. For one of the earliest literary representations of the conflict between these two components, Zionism and Freudianism, see my "The Latent and the Manifest: Freudianism in *A Guest for the Night*," *Prooftexts* 7 (1987):29-39.
14. Because of this thematic prism, our analysis focuses on the script of Sobol's plays, not on their stage performances. Sobol's general contribution to the Israeli theater deserves a separate discussion. He has had a major role in initiating the current trend of topical drama and political satire, thereby reducing the impact of the universalistic Theater of the Absurd that had overtaken the Israeli stage in the 1960s. Cf. my "The Sacred as the Absurd: The Passion of Job," in *Sacred Theatre Around the World*, ed. Bettina Knapp and Dan Gerould (Greenwood, Florida, 1987).
15. Oral communication, April 1985.
16. For a detailed discussion of this charge against the "fathers" of Zionism in contemporary fiction, see my "Zionism on Trial."
17. Cf. the figure of Na'aman, the "delicate soul," in Benjamin Tamuz's *Rekviem lena'aman* (Tel Aviv, 1978), [*Requiem for Na'aman*, New York, 1982].
18. See Amos Oz, *Menuha nekhona*, pp. 252, 190.
19. See Yaakov Shabtay, *Zikhron devarim*.
20. Yonatan Shapiro, 'Elit lelo' mamshikhim [An Elite without Successors] (Tel Aviv, 1984).
21. See Michael Wilf, "'Silvester '72' by Yehoshua Sobol" [Hebrew], *Basha'ar* (Jan.-Feb. 1978):87-88.
22. Yehoshua Sobol, *Ma'asei avot* ["Acts of the Fathers"], *Keshet* 6:3 (1964):5-19.

23. On the characteristics of the short fiction published in *Keshet* in the early 60s see Nurit Gertz, *Hirbet hiz'ah vehaboker shelemohorat* [Generation Shift in Literary History: Hebrew Narrative Fiction in the Sixties] (Tel Aviv, 1983), p. 37. For a scathing critique of Sobol's *Ma'asei avot* see, Michaiyhu Elinadav, "Children Have Eaten Sour Grapes and Parents' Eyes Are Blunted" [Hebrew], *Hedim* (April 1965): 140-43.

24. See my "Inadvertent Feminism: The Image of Frontier Women in Contemporary Israeli Fiction," *Modern Hebrew Literature* 10:3-4 (1985): 34-37. And see Esther Fuchs, *Israeli Mythologies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction* (New York: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

25. From the English summary of the play in the program for *The Night of the Twentieth*, Stage 2, Haifa Municipal Theater, 19-6. Emphasis is mine.

26. On the traditional features and motifs of the settlement drama, see Gideon Ofrat, *Adamah, adam, dam* [Man and Ritual in Israeli Drama] (Tel Aviv, 1980).

27. *Kehilyatenu* [Our Commune] (Hashomer Hatsair, 1922).

28. Natan Bistrizky, *Yamim veleilot* [Days and Nights] (Tel Aviv, 1926). For a discussion of the novel, and a comparison between its two versions, see Nurit Govrin, "Yamim veleilot—From the Distance of Time" [Hebrew], in *Maftēhot* [Keys] (Tel Aviv, 1978), pp. 203-225; and Gershon Shaked, "The Revolutionary Scream" [Hebrew], a chapter of vol. 3 of his *History of Hebrew Narrative Prose* which he was gracious enough to show me in MS.

29. Meir Ya'ari, "Discarded Symbols" [Hebrew], *Hedim* 2 (1923): 93-106.

30. David Horowitz, *Ha'etmol sheli* [My Yesterday], (Tel Aviv, 1970).

31. Meir Ya'ari, "Something about a Person's Life" [Hebrew], *Al hamishmar*, August 28, 1970. Elkana Margalit, "Hashomer Hatsair"—*mé'adat né'urim lemarxism mahapkhani* [From Youth Community to Revolutionary Marxism] (Tel Aviv, 1971).

32. The story of Bitanya has been retold twice, in Yehuda Ya'ari's *Ke'or yahel* [Shining Like Light] (Tel Aviv, 1937), and in Natan Shaham's *Even 'al pi habé'er* [Stone Over the Well] (Tel Aviv, 1956). Both novels are much more sober and realistic, as opposed to the earlier ecstatic version of Bistrizky. Recently, Shaham has reworked the experience in an overt return (down to the physical-graphic layout of the original book) to the model of *kehilyatenu*. See *Hahar vehabayit* [Utopia—Sixty Years Later] (Tel Aviv, 1984).

33. See Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character* (Authorized translation from the Sixth German Edition; London and New York, 1906).

34. On this issue, see Baruch Kurzweil, "Self-Hatred in Jewish Literature" [Hebrew], *Sifrutenu ha'hadashah—hemshekh o mahapekha?* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, 1971), pp. 329-401.

35. David Abrahamsen, *The Mind and Death of a Genius* (New York, 1946).

36. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

37. A. B. Yehoshua, *Bizkhut hanormaliut* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, 1980) [*Between Right and Right: Essays on Zionism*, New York, 1981].

38. See, for instance, Gideon Ofrat, "Modern Hebrew Drama: Sobol's Night of 1903," *Modern Hebrew Literature* (Fall-Winter 1983), pp. 34-41.