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## Gender In/Difference in Contemporary Hebrew Fictional Autobiographies

We generally know very little about our own family . . . We know our father and our grandfathers, and we may hear something about our great grandchildren. And nothing more on both ends. I feel sad because I don't know a thing about my grandfather's grandfather, where he was and what he did in the poor Russian townlets, along the muddy paths leading to the frozen lakes across the poplar woods.

"My Father Tells About His Brothers"

in *Rustic Sunset*

(Itzhak Ben-Ner, 1977)

translation by Y. S. F.)

The lack bemoaned in these lines by Israeli writer Itzhak Ben-Ner does not call for much elaboration or interpretation. It clearly speaks of its subject's painful awareness of his unique detachment from the past. This excerpt attests to a yearning for a long-lost sense of continuity with another time, another place. Written as it was in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War (1973), this mood may be readily traced back to that traumatic experience and to the unsettling reconsideration of present realities and attitudes which this has stirred up. Yet when read in their own literary context these lines cannot fail to perplex the attentive reader. For this is the opening of a story which caps Itzhak Ben-Ner's first collection, *Rustic Sunset*. Published in 1977, this book in fact signalled the arrival of a new literary orientation, one which diametrically opposed the unexpected nostalgia expressed in the story quoted above. Most of Ben-Ner's stories actually border on the journalistic, dealing with the harsh realities of present day Israel, and often utilizing a stylized version of contemporary colloquial speech. It is therefore quite surprising to find this kind of longing for the past in the position of a "closing statement" in Ben-Ner's "realistic" recording of actualities. But perhaps it is also symbolic. Perhaps it is precisely this paradox that epitomizes the two avenues available to current belletristic activity in Israel: the frontal facing of the present, and the escape into the past. That the two are interrelated is only too obvious.

It is the inability to come to terms with the here and now that turns writers' gazes to days gone by, whether personal or national. Thus we find in contemporary Israeli prose fiction recreations of the collective past that reach as far back as the first *aliya* (=immigration, 1880s) and at times even earlier than this. Yet within this general trend one can discern a specific fashionable return of a narrative mode that may be classified—provided some allowances are made—as “fictional autobiography.” Originally, I was attracted to this body of literature because of what I had perceived as its significance for the historical poetics of Hebrew prose fiction (see Feldman 1982a, 1983). More recently, however, I have realized that this material may challenge some notions of both genre and gender theories, and particularly the juncture at which these two intersect. Yet it would be impossible to grasp the problematics of the latter without some insight into the earlier ones. In what follows I will therefore briefly outline the theoretical and historical issues involved before focusing on my current concern—gender in/difference in contemporary Israeli fictional autobiographies.

As the spate of recent theoretical writings on the autobiography clearly bears witness, the parameters of the genre are extremely complex and elusive (see Eakin, 1985). Stated briefly, the lively theoretical debate of the past two or three decades has centered around issues of historicity and textuality in the spirit of the post-structuralist era. By its very nature, autobiography is an ideal stage for the drama of representation in language, namely, the conflict between the referential and self-reflexive dimensions of literary expression. No wonder, then, that it is precisely this dichotomy, although in a variety of formulations, that occupies center stage in many recent summaries of the state of the art. Olney, for one, delineated Modernism's shift of emphasis from “bios” to “autos” (=self), only grudgingly acceding to the post-Modernist shift, inspired by French deconstructionism, to “graphé” (=writing, textuality, *écriture*; 1980:19–27). At about the same time, Spengemann elaborated a generic scheme of evolution from “historical” life-writing, through “philosophical” confessions (Rousseau and Wordsworth), to the final stage, “poetic” autobiography, that in fact accommodates much of 20th-century autobiographical fiction (1980:32, 120).

An analogous, though not identical, theoretical progression is witnessed by the work of Phillip Lejeune: starting with the rigid stipulation that an autobiography is “a retrospective account . . . that a *real* person gives of *his own existence*” (1971; 1975:14; emphasis added), he went on to acknowledge the *Autobiographical Pact* (1975), then to legit-

imize the "Autobiography in the Third Person" (1977) and finally to declare *Je est un autre* (1980).

What these models have in common—other dissimilarities notwithstanding—is a tacit awareness of a process of loss. They point to a gradual historical shift from the belief in some kind of presence (be it physical, metaphysical, psychological or metaphoric), which has warranted the possibility of restitution, to a contemporary awareness of absence (of a tangible life, an imagined self or the language to reconstruct it), one that may spell out the death of autobiography. One can readily recognize the ghost of Lacan hovering over his "subjects" and snatching away their last romantic stronghold—their belief in the recreative and individualizing powers of language. "The New Model Autobiographer" is doomed to fail, says John Sturrock (following Mehlman, 1974), because "language is never the possession of any individual, so that to employ it is to be *alienated from the self*" (1977:58; emphasis added).

This is no doubt a harsh verdict, the heavy price paid for post-modernity. But is it irreversible, as may be inferred from the implied diachrony of the theoretical constructs outlined above? Is this a final phase, one from which there is no way back? Have we lost the innocent "presence" of the autobiographic self forever? Put differently, are we to embrace Michel Leiris as the "modern-classic antiautobiographer", as suggested by Olney a few years ago? (1980:26).

My answer is rather vicarious and somewhat convoluted. It consists of a brief detour into the history of Hebrew prose fiction. For Hebrew literature had experienced something of the pangs of the contemporary "cultural moment" (Olney, 1980) already at the turn of the century. For reasons too complex to be explored here, Hebrew writers found themselves leaping, with no training whatsoever, into twentieth-century Modernism as well as into acute feelings of loss and alienation, both personal and national. What we recognize today as a general distrust of language has had an analogous form in their paradoxical situation as "writers without readers" (see, most recently, Feldman, 1986a:7–17). Writing in Hebrew at that time was no doubt an exercise in frustration and alienation, perhaps more tangible than the one theorized today by Lacan's disciples. But it was precisely under those circumstances that some of the best modernist prose fiction was written. More importantly, it was then that the young tradition (since the late 19th century) of the Hebrew autobiography was first transformed into autobiographical *fiction*. This permutation was made possible by the creation, by Y. H. Brenner (1881–1921), of what I would label the first

modern Hebrew "fictional autobiography." *Bachoref* ("In Winter," 1903) was the work of a 21-year-old writer whose psychological problems were no less prominent than those of the French "antiautobiographer" Michel Leiris. As the title makes clear, his is not the "harmonious" recollection of an Edenic childhood, nor the perception of a life of "wholeness" or happy endings (cf. Olney, *ibid.*, p. 25). Furthermore, this open-ended and "incomplete" narrative is interspersed precisely with that self-reflexive commentary that Olney believes to be the prerogative of autobiography proper, as opposed to fiction (*ibid.*). In short, without any known Freudian prodding or help, Brenner was going in the direction of the model currently propagated as the "new" autobiography (see Mehlman, Lejeune, Sturrock, Olney).

One major difference nevertheless remains: Brenner conducted his literary therapy by *fictionalizing* his traumas and complexes. Creating an autobiographic narrator whose name was a synonym of his own name, he pretended to unravel a chronological life-story. By so doing, he introduced into Hebrew a new narrative mode that was instrumental in facilitating the development of modernist Hebrew prose at the beginning of the century, as well as in reintroducing an autobiographic modality into recent Israeli literature.

The overall nature of this modality is the major concern of this essay. Yet in order to properly appreciate the diachronic significance of this recent resurgence, one has to remember that at the time, Brenner's innovations had no followers. For many years Hebrew writers were to produce all kinds of fiction, much of it autobiographic, of course, yet none of which could be classified as "fictional autobiography." Characteristically, some of these narratives were openly subtitled "A Communal Myth" (Agmon-Bistrizky, 1926). In these works, anxieties of the individual were subsumed under and transformed by those of a collective self. Communal life supposedly blocked threatening circumstances from without, and silenced fears from within. We should not be surprised, then, that the earliest attempts to deviate from that literary consensus occurred just *after* the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), when the small community lost its sense of cohesiveness, and by writers who belonged to the *margins* of the newly organized sociocultural system (Tamuz, 1950; Sadeh, 1958; see Feldman, 1987c). Yet these early experiments did not leave their mark on the mainstream. It was only towards the end of the 1960s (post 1967?) that the fictional autobiography and related modalities began to resurface (cf. Frieden, 1983, for a similar situation in recent German literature).

Here is the place to ask "why now?" (cf. Olney, 1980:27). But I

think that once we take a closer look at the material, the answer will present itself without any help. Of more urgency is the question of the distinctive features of this category that I claim to be, in part at least, a return to Brenner's earlier model.

What I label as "fictional autobiography" is any *fiction* that pretends to give an account of its protagonist's self, provided this account is done *retrospectively*. I propose to treat "the autobiographic situation" as a modality (rather than as a genre) so that it may cut across issues of presentation (fictional vs. factual) or formal features (first vs. third person narration). The major condition distinguishing this modality from the "epic situation" is naturally the *double* existence of its narrator/protagonist. This existence is to be measured by the retrospective distance between the two stages of the projected self; measured, that is, by the degree of the regression into the past of the narrated "I," on the one hand, and the extent of the pulling forward (to the present) of the narrating "I," on the other. Put differently, the autobiographic modality is to be gauged by the tension between two (or more) versions of the speaking "I," as these are shaped by a process made conscious via the act of autobiographic writing. It is precisely this conscious awareness, this insight gained in the process of writing, that holds the promise of integration, even of change.

That the literary model lurking behind this narrative modality is psychoanalytic is quite obvious. Yet it is neither Lacanian, nor orthodoxly Freudian. For unlike traditional literary psychoanalytic criticism that has used its model as *content*, *function*, or *mode of representation*, I have shifted my paradigm to the "psychoanalytic process" itself, as proposed by Meredith Anne Skura's book of this title (1981). More specifically, I follow current modifications of Freudian psychoanalysis, according to which the *present* of the psychoanalytic situation is of utmost importance for (transference) interpretation. (See, for example, the recent neologism coined by the Sandler, 1983, "*The Present Unconscious*"; for a more detailed discussion see Feldman, 1986b). It is therefore the *narrating* moment, the *present* of the autobiographic self, that is underscored in my working definition of the autobiographic situation.

Now the question is, to what extent has such a modality in fact materialized in contemporary Israeli literature? How well integrated is the "I" emerging from the autobiographic process? Has it managed to successfully bridge the gap between its past and present, or between the different versions of the self?

To begin with, Israeli literature is still struggling to mean "I," even

when it says *ani* [I]. Paradoxically, the leading writers of the “new wave” of the 60s, those who ostensibly substituted their “first person singular” for the “enlisted” “first person plural” of their predecessors (see Shaked, 1971) did not create an autobiographically personal self. Their cult of individualism was as removed from a private “I” as that of their predecessors’ collective types. Their narrative or poetic “I,” to the extent that it was used, was that of a universal Everyman, one detached from the sights and sounds of his childhood. Although this state of affairs has since changed, particularly in the last decade, I can still point to such a central novelist as A. B. Yehoshua (b. 1936) whose autobiographic persona is paradoxically well hidden behind the psychoanalytic grid of his fictional characters (e.g., *The Lover*, 1977 and *Late Divorce*, 1982; and see Feldman, 1987c). (Yehoshua himself, by the way, is aware of this fact to such a degree that he has parodied it in his recent play, “*Objects*,” 1986, discussed it in several lectures and interviews, and, most tellingly, published a single chapter from what seems to be an autobiographic novel—but so far left it unfinished).

So it seems that the concept of a “new wave” in Hebrew prose fiction of the 60s can be challenged, at least on some grounds. Furthermore, my own earlier evaluation of the literary output of the 70s (1982a, 1983) also calls for some modifications. After claiming that the fictional autobiography, in conjunction with the device of the child-narrator or the child as “center of consciousness,” constitutes “one of the most intriguing themes as well as narrative techniques to surface in recent Israeli fiction,” I concluded:

The use of autobiographic materials runs the gamut from an objective, detached and omniscient narrator (as in the novel of the late Yaakov Shabtai, *Zikhron Devarim* [Past Continuous], 1977) to the direct subjectivity of the sensitive child-narrator in the novellas of Yehoshua Kenaz (*Moment Muzikali* [A Musical Moment], 1980). This trend can be discerned in the works of veteran writers such as Hanoah Bartov, Amos Oz, Yoram Kaniuk, and Itzhak Orpaz as well as in the works of the younger writers Hayim Beer and David Shitz. The dominance of this trend signifies the coming of age of Israeli fiction. It’s a symptom of the need and ability to come to terms with one’s own past on a personal, and not merely on a national level (Feldman, 1983:100–101).

Taking a second look at the work of David Shahar, whom I identified then as the pioneer of this trend and as the model of several younger writers (Shabtai, Be’er), and who is known in France as “the Israeli Marcel Proust,” I am now compelled to retract some of my former

observations. True, there is no doubt that Shahar's still-unfinished cycle of novels, *The Palace of Shattered Vessels* (1969, 1971, 1976, 1983, 1986; 1975) was inspired by Proust, who clearly emerges as the father of my autobiographic modality, as well as of modernist autobiography in general (in opposition to Michel Leiris's *post*-modernist model). Still, Shahar deviates from both his model and my own definition in one basic detail: the place of the narrating "I" in the narrated action. This deviation may elude the reader, because Shahar makes every effort to foreground the historical fit between his own factual identity and that of his fictional narrator. In addition, he elaborates, particularly in the later segments of his cycle, on the retrospective gap between the past and the present of his narrator. All this notwithstanding, it is difficult to think of this persona as the focal "self" created throughout the narration: he is clearly a witnessing narrator rather than a protagonist-narrator.

When we move to the work of the late Ya'akov Shabtai, the problems change form. As I have observed elsewhere (1982b), Shabtai's early work greatly resembled that of Shahar's: some of his short stories in *Uncle Peretz Takes Off* (1972) are told from the limited perspective of a child-narrator who is attached to idiosyncratic uncles rather than to his own parents. Like Shahar, Shabtai moves from these discreet insights into childhood to the integrating framework of an overall urban mythology whose autobiographic impulse is beyond doubt. And like him, he embeds segments of his earlier stories and figures in later works. Yet the result is quite different: in *Past Continuous* (1977) there exists a tension between different consciousnesses, but its action is spatial rather than temporal. Consequently, the process of integration, made possible by the play between the different developmental stages of a self, is totally absent. In contrast, works by other contemporary writers (Shamosh, Orpaz, Oz and Kenaz) lack another element of our definition—the *present* of the narrating consciousness—thereby failing to complete the autobiographic process.

We would not be mistaken, then, in arguing that despite the overt autobiographic impulse surfacing in Israeli literature since the late 60s, the retrospective confrontation between the two versions of the protagonist's self (the one we claim as a necessary condition for an autobiographic modality) is often missing. Inasmuch as this element is instrumental in effecting a psychological integration, its absence may point to an arrested enterprise, to an experiment halted midway. The causes of this arrest may obviously be personal and psychological. Yet the frequency of the phenomenon compels us to consider sociocultural

factors that may overrule individual motivations. A clue to these factors is to be found in another fictional modality that has enjoyed a certain vogue since the late 70s: novels wherein the autobiographic impulse is transposed into a family chronicle. In these works a personal life story is expanded to fill the contours of a Marquesian saga of several generations whose span of time usually corresponds to that of the history of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish settlement in the Land of Israel since 1880). This is the case with B. Tamuz's *Requiem for Na'aman: A Chronicle of Family Addresses 1895-1974* (1978), Yoram Kaniuk's *The Last Jew* (1980), and, to a lesser degree, Orpaz's *The Mistress* (1983). True, these are no fictional autobiographies in the conventional sense, but each of these novels seems to be a reworking of an earlier, "failed" autobiographical experiment (e.g., *Ya'akov* by Tamuz, 1971; *Tomojena Street* by Orpaz, 1979; *Great Aunt ShlomZion* by Kaniuk, 1975).

The fact that all those semi-allegorical chronicles were written towards the end of the 1970s or later is no doubt instructive. It would seem that by that time, the relative freedom from communal constraints previously enjoyed by the Israeli writers who had indulged in telling their own individual stories, was no longer felt to be warranted. In the crisis of identity that stimulated these recent novels, the personal and the ideological are totally interwoven. These works fall short of either historical novels or psychological autobiographies. They are hybrids in which an autobiographic impulse is projected into the outline of a *collective* history or of a *representative* personal life-story. In either case the result is the creation of what Israeli psychoanalyst Rafael Moses has called a "group self," rather than an individualized "I" (Moses, 1982).

Aided by this insight, I now return to the body of fictional autobiographies surveyed above, trying to define the nature of the precariousness plaguing the "self" narrating these life-stories. Predictably, it is *not* (or at least not merely) the post-modernist alienation through language, nor the insubstantiality of the fictional "I" that impinges on these narratives. Rather, it is a crisis caused by the pressure of socio-political realities that has instigated their autobiographic impulses. Evidently, a certain ideological disorientation has inspired the search for readjusted definitions of life's verities conducted through autobiographical retrospection. Even in the most personally idiosyncratic example of this genre, Shahar's *The Palace of Shattered Vessels*, the narrator's recalling of the past constantly converges on the painful realities of present-day Israel. Thus the year 1936, that functions as a magnetic center from which his narrative proceeds and to which it



repeatedly returns, points in two directions: the calamitous explosion of Arab riots during that year undoubtedly marks the end of the ten-year-old narrator's Edenic childhood in Jerusalem; at the same time it also signals the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the solution of which is still not foreseeable. Similarly, Shahar probes, with unique adroitness, the delicate Ashkenazi-Sephardi and religious-secular coexistence in the Jerusalem of his childhood, fully aware of the ramifications these explosive social and cultural issues have in contemporary Israel. For the younger novelists, 1948 functions as the critical event of childhood. It is natural for Amos Oz to organize his protagonists' experiences around the major conflict that split the *Yishuv* before the War of Independence: the opposition between pragmatism and romanticism, represented by the sharply diverging characters of the child's father and mother, as well as by the political division between Labor Zionism and Revisionist Zionism (cf. Shaked, 1985).

Most symptomatic of this characteristic is Hanoth Bartov's fictional autobiography, *Whose Little Boy Are You?* (1970), which is retrospectively guided by the convergence of the protagonist's *bar mitzvah*, the Jewish rite of passage, and the breakout of World War II:

—He was thinking of the report from Warsaw he had read, which said that the Jews no longer knew which to fear more, war or peace. A joke currently making the rounds there was that the Jews would be the first to know if there would be peace, because as soon as the danger of war had passed the Poles would start beating them again. It was with this joke, which his father had read in the newspaper, that Nachman's memory brought the great family banquet on the day of his *bar mitzvah* to an end. And yet, could it be that this too, like so many of the other things he was to carry forward into manhood (had not his childhood been sealed on this day?), was really the product of another hour, another time (only when? was it now already another time?) when everything was turned upside down? (1978:354).

Clearly, the common features shared by these fictional autobiographies demonstrate their authors' need to weave together the specific continuum of past and present that can define a self, an identity. What also emerges, however, is the degree to which the personal is inseparable from the collective and the ideological in the typical Israeli experience. This uneasy balance, perhaps even tug of war, between an individual psychological impulse and a collective ideology is not new to Jewish cultural history. Rather, it is one of its distinctive features (cf. Feldman, 1985a; 1987a; 1987b). Still, it is by no means unique. Theo-

retically, the moment the Platonic-idealist notion of the "self" is rejected and the "I" is anchored in the here and now of its lived experience, it runs the risk of sacrificing psychic reality to ideology. "The problem of autobiography lies in the threat of ideology," says Janet Gunn in her 1982 book on the genre:

The pull towards ideology is all the more difficult for autobiography to resist because the ideological impulse has so much in common with the autobiographical impulse. Both arise from . . . a need for acknowledging a meaningful orientation in a world; both are responses to the finitude and vulnerability that characterize the human condition; and both represent an effort to take hold of something in the process of vanishing or disintegrating (pp. 119-120).

What Gunn fails to observe is precisely *when* this "threat" does become paramount. Surprisingly, the answer is to be found in recent definitions of *women's autobiography*. (Rowbotham, 1973; Blackburn, 1980; Mason, 1980, to name a few). For feminist theories of autobiography, construction of the self within the text through language is fundamentally liberating, not alienating, precisely because they often redefine the self of women's texts as *collective and communal*, not purely individual (see Friedman, 1983, 1986).

Whether these features are viewed as an essential gender characterization or as a secondary, acquired condition is a question we have to bracket off for a while. For now I will only stress the phenomenal correspondence that seems to exist between certain aspects of women's autobiography and contemporary Israeli fictional autobiographies; and unless all Israeli autobiographers are women, this fact may cast grave doubts on the whole enterprise (including my own) of establishing gender distinctions within the genre. It would corroborate, on the other hand, the *culturalist* definition of gender, as it unambiguously demonstrates how gender boundaries may be crossed, given the pressure of similar socio-cultural conditions (see Cohen, 1973; Seidenberg, 1973). Yet this is not the whole picture. Paradoxically, none of the Israeli writers of fictional autobiographies mentioned above is a woman. This absence is doubly surprising in view of the fact that the earliest Hebrew prose written by women around the turn of the century was intimately autobiographical (recently collected and published by Berlowitz, 1984). In this they were no different from their sister autobiographers in the English-speaking world, and perhaps in the world over (see Jelinek, 1980, 1986). *Contemporary* Hebrew women writers, however, greatly differ from their English counterparts in the

literary tradition they have inherited. For unlike the English tradition, Hebrew has featured a long list of women-poets, but no women-novelists (see Glazer, 1981 vs. Showalter, 1977). Until the last decade Hebrew prose fiction was mainly the domain of male writers. The few women that excelled in fiction wrote mostly short stories and novellas, all of them in the impressionist-lyrical mode (e.g., Devorah Baron, 1887–1956). Does this mean that we have come back full circle to bedrock gender differences? I suspect not. At least a partial contextual explanation is provided by the following invitation, extended to women writers around 1897 by the first renewer and propagator of spoken Hebrew, Eliezer Ben Yehuda:

Only women are capable of reviving Hebrew, this old, forgotten, dry and hard language, by permeating it with [womanly] emotion, tenderness, suppleness and subtlety (Berlowitz, 1983:31–33; my translation).

I doubt whether this male good will as well as typical stereotyping would be lauded by us today, but it should be judged against its own historical context. Ben Yehuda was, indeed, the patron of women writers, and encouraged them (particularly his wife!) to contribute to his journal. Yet none of his proteges left her mark on the canon of Hebrew literature. It was left for the contemporary generation to break through the old barriers. And it was only in the last decade that a number of women writers made the shift from short stories to novels, some of which are almost of epic proportions. None of these narratives, however, comes close to the fictional autobiography, even in its aborted form, as found in the work of Israeli male writers. This does not mean that none of these novels is autobiographic in its materials; yet the mere use of such materials does not make them into fictional autobiographies by my definition.<sup>1</sup> I would nevertheless argue that at least *some of these novels are nothing less than “masked autobiographies”*.

My first suspicion that this is indeed the case was aroused by the use of the term “feminist” on the jacket of a “historical novel” the narrated time of which is the early 1880s. The transparent anachronism of the usage set me on the detective track. I soon realized that several women authors have chosen to speak through other female figures, thus creating a “vicarious” self. In these novels, which usually trace the development of a “liberated” predecessor, contemporary concerns are projected into heroines of earlier periods. In fact, one can point out a process of a *historical regression*, from Hareven’s Sephardi protagonist who outgrows the models of her ethnic tradition in Jerusalem of the 1930s and 40s (*A City of Many Days*, 1973), through Lapid’s

young pioneer in Palestine of the 1880s (*Gai Oni*, 1982), to Kahana-Carmon's young self-redeemed captive in the imagined Europe of the novel *Up In Montifer* (subtitled "a historical novella for adolescents," 1984). Curiously, but perhaps also predictably, this historical regression is diametrically opposite to the progression of these heroines, as a group, from traditional gender roles in a patriarchal society to a utopian new womanhood, paradoxically projected back into the "adolescently" imagined historical past.

If this analysis is correct, then contemporary Hebrew literature is still at the stage described by Carolyn Heilbrun almost a decade ago: "Women are only recently taking up autobiography in the attempt to show themselves . . . (*though the autobiographies are often in the form of novels*)" (1979:134; emphasis added). But why should this be so? Why should contemporary Israeli women be incapable of facing their personal selves directly? Why can't they, to quote Heilbrun again, "imagine women characters with even the autonomy they themselves have achieved" (1979:71)? Why isn't one of these *Bildungsromane* cast in the mold of the *Künstlerroman*? Why isn't there even one "portrait of an artist" among these novels of development? Is it because of the precariousness of their writers' self-image as "artists"? Or is it because this aspect of their recently achieved autonomy is subsumed by more basic—and more communal—concerns and achievements?

The answer is "yes," I am afraid, to both questions. The first "yes" would lead us back to the problematic Jewish-Israeli tradition in its attitude to women's artistic expression and creativity. It will also compel us to explore individual biographies and view them in the light of recent modifications of gender-determined developmental psychology (e.g., Chodorow, 1978; Person, 1980; Gilligan, 1982). Since the scope of this line of investigation is too broad for the present essay, it will have to wait for a fuller discussion elsewhere. Meanwhile, I here pursue only the second "yes," the one that clearly corresponds to the collective ideology that counterbalances the individual impulse in Israeli male autobiographies as well. For just like their male counterparts, the three novels of female development mentioned above are organized around events of national import which function as pivotal moments in their protagonists' "voyages in" (see Abel, Hirsch and Langland, 1983).

For the protagonist of *A City of Many Days* (Hareven, 1973) this moment is the breakdown of the Jewish-Arab equilibrium in the aftermath of World War II, and the prologue to the 1948 War of Independence. The consolidation of the "first person plural" of that genera-

tion (see above) is rationalized quite simply towards the end of the novel:

“All these men will return from wars,” says Prof. Barzel, “people who have learned to fight. The country will change again. Everything will be more professional, even the fighting. Single human beings will have no value—only stupid ‘plural numbers’ will. Plural numbers are always stupid.”

“What will happen later?” asks Hulda anxiously. “We,” says Elias, “for good or for worse, first person plural.”

(Hareven, 1973:182; my translation)

The impact of these socio-political constraints on the individual psychology of the heroine is clear enough:

“I live on the top floors,” she concluded in her heart, “and they consist of a variety of rooms: dens, children’s rooms, a kitchen, a living room, *perpetuum mobilé*. The cellar [underground] is locked, and I don’t even know where the key is anymore. Perhaps one should not know” (*Ibid*: 184).

Nor should *we* be surprised that with this attitude to the “underground room,” the cellar of the psychic apparatus, there was not much room, in the society described in the novel, for Freudian or other introspection and in-depth scrutiny. The question is only if the “present tense” through which the story is to a great extent narrated is intended as a stylistic/temporal marker, pointing to the time of narration/composition as well.

A more complex weaving of past and present is represented by the next novel on my list, *Gai-Oni* (Lapid, 1982). Written a decade later than *A City of Many Days*, it manifests a bolder feminist consciousness, as well as a more direct confrontation with the Zionist roots of the current Israeli conflict between collective ideology and female individuality. This is a typical first settlers’ epic, realistically depicting the tenuous existence and the struggling against all odds of a small Galilean settlement in the early 1880s. The chief antagonist of this struggle is nature itself, more particularly, *mother earth*. In this story she is no welcoming bride; as we join the narrative she has been holding back her gifts for two consecutive years. Severe drought has chased away most of the pioneers, leaving behind just a few tenacious, idealistic and strong willed families, including the male protagonist of the plot. This is a known scenario, familiar to later generations of settlers in Israel and to other pioneer cultures as well.

What revitalizes this settlement novel, however, is its fusion with another genre, the romantic novel—the typical euphoric “heroine’s text” (Miller, 1980). On one level this novel can be read as a predictable female love story modelled on Jane Austen (who is, by the way, the protagonist’s favorite author!; p. 161). The female protagonist, Fania, is the self-conscious budding young woman, struggling to preserve her independent spirit while falling in love with her enigmatic “dark prince” who is “handsome like the Prince of Wales,” (pp. 34, 69, 85), “wise like King Solomon” (p. 117), and is the envy of all women, but who is also, predictably, proud, reticent and distant. Which means, of course, that although he falls in love with Fania’s *looks* at the moment he sees her, this is a secret neither she nor the reader gets to know before half of the story is over, and not before a whole chain of romantic misunderstandings and jealousies have taken place. All of which naturally makes the denouement that much sweeter. But uncharacteristically, this denouement does not coincide with the closure of the novel. Nor does it lead to a proposal or an engagement. For all this typical “heroine’s text” takes place *within* the boundaries of a marriage. And our two protagonists are atypical as well: Fania is a 16-year-old survivor of a Russian pogrom, who finds refuge in the Promised Land, accompanied by an old uncle, a deranged brother, and a baby—the initially unwanted fruit of her rape in that pogrom. Yehiel, who happens to meet her on her arrival in Jaffa, is a 26-year-old widower and a father of two, one of the few courageous souls left in the nearly desolate Gai-Oni. He brings Fania to a home in which his first wife’s picture is still visible, and where her two sisters conjure up her beauty and her presence almost in the style of Daphne de Maurier’s *Rebecca*.

Without going into a detailed analysis of the mythical deep structure of this novel (cf. Feldman 1985b, 1986c), I would like to emphasize two points only: (1) From the intersection of two frustrated plots—the unsuccessful conquest of mother-earth and the initially failed romance between the two human protagonists—a third mythical model emerges: the *Growth and Development of Psyche, the Female Consciousness* (Neumann, 1952). As in the old myth, the main psychological thrust of our story is the liberation of the protagonist’s consciousness from the yoke of social norms, imposed on her by chorus-like representatives of the community. That these norms are both patriarchal and matriarchal should come as no surprise. This is a society in transition, whose polyphony of voices reflects the tension between myth and reality, vision and practice. Equally predictable is the fact

that Fania transcends both of these imperatives. Her *"bildungs"* process is achieved by an act of differentiation: the heroine's personal code is defined as a freedom to choose the best of two worlds, to move freely from one to the other. Consequently, we find Fania breaking into the male-dominated world of commerce, of political discussion, even of self-defense (when attacked by robbers on the road at night). At the same time she doesn't deny her femininity, this extra "playfulness" unavailable to the "other" sex—the fun of light-hearted chat, of good romantic novels, of some childlike pranks (pp. 104, 144, 175). The result is the transformation of Fania from a child-woman (or a virgin-wife) to a mature wife-companion, fully aware of her choices, sexual as well as social (cf. Ferguson, 1983). (2) In this historical novel, ostensibly narrated by an omniscient narrator, the heroine is not only the protagonist of her "text," but also its point of focalization (Genette, 1980). As a result, it is hardly possible to distinguish between the heroine's and the narrator's voices or consciousnesses. This lack of (ironic?) distance, as well as the narrator's narrow point of view, are atypical of a *historical* novel. It is precisely these features that in fact generate the impression of a personal spiritual autobiography masqueraded as another, more "acceptable" genre (cf. the "hidden" private self of Golda Meir's autobiography in Spacks, 1980).<sup>2</sup>

In our last novella, *Up in Montifer* (1984), the need for displacement is much less urgent. Unlike our earlier samples, this is *not* an author's first novel. It was written by the most outspoken of Israeli women novelists, who also ranks among the best Hebrew prose writers of the last two decades. (Nevertheless, Kahana-Carmon's work is not available in English—not because of any gender bias, I believe, but because of her almost unsurmountably difficult prose.) In this novella, gender antagonism is metaphorized by Jewish history:

"Gentiles and Jews, they are like men and women," my father used to say. "Why," I once asked. "Only because of preconceived judgements of each side: about itself, as well as about the other," my father smiled. "Each side has its own picture" my father used to say, "his image of the other. Therefore, when addressing someone from the other side, to the image and not to the person he would speak."

(Kahana-Carmon, *Up in Montifer*,  
1984:116; my translation.)

This metaphor naturally leads to the embedding of female existential captivity in the circumstances of Jewish life in exile. The young heroine is almost a figure of *Judea Capta*, one immersed in a love-hate

relationship with her captor. Her liberation cannot therefore stop with her physical release from captivity. The closure of the novella may well demonstrate the restrained lyricism of this crisp prose—as well as the ostensibly juvenile vision it encodes:

Upon crossing the threshold, I stopped. Again, the crisp air outside. Circulating new blood, invigorating. As if opening options. And I turned back.

“Give me the key to the crate, Eved-the-Kushite,” I came and told him.

“Or if you want, go on. Take out your onions first. But you don’t need to take care of the crate, the baskets,” I said. “You’re free. I’ll see to it. On second thought, I’m staying here tonight.”

Eved-the-Kushite, who has taken the key out of my father’s coat pocket, was putting it now on the table.

I took it. And throughout it all I am surprised: by the satisfaction unexpectedly engendered, as if you suddenly see the other side of a coin, as if, to replace the birds’ wings on my feet, all of a sudden—shoes were growing. All of a sudden shoes were growing.<sup>3</sup>

“I am staying. To find out. Here, at this place, tomorrow. Concerning trading in dried fruit at our place. Also to buy goods for myself. For this purpose I’ve come here,” I said, “after all, this was the plan.”

Eved-the-Kushite shrugged his shoulders. But when I turned away he stopped me, laughing:

“How do you plan,” he said, “a woman alone, to find a place for the night in this city by yourself?”

“We’ll see.”

“And how do you plan, tell me, one woman alone, to confront all this city’s great dried fruit merchants?”

“We’ll see.”

“You have no idea what you are talking about.”

“We’ll see.”

“And how do you plan to engage a carrier tomorrow, tell me.”

“We’ll see.”

“We’ll see” he repeated after me, with jeering eyes.

(pp. 191–192; my translation.)

Unwittingly, the figurative code of this “declaration of independence” is a mirror-image of the one used by Hareven’s heroine (see above). The “key” that was of necessity thrown away only a decade earlier, is now enlisted to signify a new option of freedom and self-reliance. That this move is inspired by the example of another ex-captive, whose first name, Eved, literally means “slave” and whose last name is “the black” (The Kushite), is obviously more innovative in a Hebrew



text than it would be in an American context. What therefore seems to me more convincing is the unexpected reversal of a common romantic trope—the substitution of shoes for wings rather than vice versa. (Unfortunately, the comic effect of this reversal is “drowned” by the “juvenile earnestness” underlining this concluding scene.) Most significant, however, are other differences between this protagonist and her predecessors. This is a *first-person* narrative—one step in the direction of a female fictional autobiography. Nevertheless, the historical projection still functions as a disguise, one that deflects the story from its author’s own “bios” as well as from the specific socio-ideological constraints of her time. It is precisely this “deflection” that enables Kahana-Carmon to imagine her heroine both retrospectively and introspectively, thereby endowing her with specific psychological dimensions. One such prominent dimension is the fact that unlike her predecessors, this protagonist’s growth is wholly determined by her object-relations with *male* models—her father, her captor-lover and her friend, the black ex-captive (Eved the Kushite). Clearly, the ideal presupposed by this narrative is the one generally attributed to an accomplished male identity—complete autonomy. This is diametrically opposite to the author’s earlier heroines—who seem to slowly emerge from the shackles of their familial captivity. Whether or not this recently gained independence is to be followed by the capacity for integration is a question the text does not explore. “We’ll see,” as our last protagonist repeatedly says, perhaps in the next novel.

In the meantime, the following conclusions do present themselves: the recent resurgence of the autobiographic impulse in Israeli fiction is clearly interwoven with an ideological impulse, the result of the politico-cultural crossroads at which Israel has found itself since 1967, and more acutely since 1973. Despite the impatient strivings for cultural westernization that took place shortly after the establishment of the state, the cult of individualism has not taken deep roots in Israeli society. Not unlike women and minorities in the West, Israelis are still struggling—both ideologically and existentially, both internally and externally—to define their collective identity. Under such circumstances there is not much room for the fostering of the individual, and even less so for the liberation of woman qua individual. Little wonder that the “self” currently constructed in Israeli fictional or disguised autobiographies is far from being “alienated”—it is communal and collective rather than purely individual. Moreover, since this search for group identity is shared by both genders, there is room to argue for a *culturalist* definition of gender, at least as it manifests itself in contem-

porary Israeli society. I would furthermore claim that even the *generic divergence* between the genders supports the same contention: the distancing techniques used by Israeli women, their need to create “vicarious” selves, reflect a society that would accept a “feminist” identity as a historico-mythical projection, but would find it difficult to digest as a realistic proposition for the here and now.

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#### NOTES

Portions of this essay were presented at the AJS annual meetings in Boston (December, 1985, 1986) and at a CROW conference on Biography and Autobiography at Stanford University in April, 1986.

1. Most prominent in this category is Naomi Fraenkel's three-volume novel, *Shaul and Yohanna* (1956–1967), and Netiva Ben Yehuda's memoiristic novel, *1948: Between the Calendars* (1981). The former was the first novel of epic proportions to be written by a woman; despite its clearly autobiographic materials it reads more like a historical novel than a fictional autobiography, for reasons that are made clear below. In contrast, the latter is almost confessional in tone, despite its claim for fictionality (the label “A Novel” is part of the title!). However, the plot embraces only one year in the life of its author, a year she spent as a volunteer soldier before and after the formal establishment of the State of Israel and the IDA. This limiting of the autobiographic scope, and particularly the avoidance of authentic childhood experiences, seems to be one of the characteristics of Israeli female autobiographies (with the exception of Fraenkel's novel). Thus, for example, *And the Moon in the Valley of Ayalon*, Amalya Kahana-Carmon's ostensibly autobiographic first novel (1971), also limits the psychological regression of its protagonist to her college days—disrupted as they were by the breakout of the War of Independence (1948!). Childhood experiences as such appear only in some of the author's short stories and—in a disguised form—in her later novel, as explained below.
2. It is in this respect that the novel *Shaul and Yohanna*, mentioned above, stands in stark contrast to *Gai-Oni*: the former is a “true” historical novel, an epic told from an omniscient perspective, despite its autobiographical source.
3. The “inconsistency” of the tenses follows the original.

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