

Rachel Feldhay Brenner

The Freedom to Write:

The Woman Artist and the World in Ruth Almog's Fiction

Tel-Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2008. 215 pp. In Hebrew.

reviewed by Yael Dekel

“A while ago they were giving away stipends for writers. They could have bought a cannon with this money. Bread is enough for us,” comments the female protagonist in a short story by Ruth Almog, published as part of her first collection, *Hasdei halaila shel Margerita* (Margerita's night graces, Tarmil, 1969). This ironic, powerful remark seems to determine the tone of *The Freedom to Write: The Woman Artist and the World in Ruth Almog's Fiction*, Rachel Feldhay Brenner's important contribution to research on Almog's oeuvre specifically, and to the study of Israeli literature and culture more generally. Feldhay Brenner's innovative research looks at subversive, ethical and political aspects of Almog's writing, all of which are explicitly present in the above quote. Curiously, despite this and many comparable motifs appearing in Almog's work, previous critics have presented her work mainly as lyrical and romantic, focusing mostly on unresolved Oedipal conflicts and on the female protagonists' yearning to be loved. By contrast, Feldhay Brenner reveals its intellectual component, which challenges the Israeli reality with political, anti-institutional ideas. Almog's fiction, she argues, is written as *littérature engagée* in the spirit of Jean-Paul Sartre; her literary work is engaged in the political world and obligated to an ethical commitment.

In taking this approach, Feldhay Brenner is herself engaging in subversive writing, destabilizing common scholarly opinion about Almog and undertaking some broader feminist tasks—those of evaluating literature written by women within its socio-historical and political context; of redeeming it by challenging the patriarchal approach that regards literature written by women as minor and confined to intimate personal accounts; and of making that literature reverberate in the social and political spheres, viewed as belonging primarily to men. Yael Feldman's *No Room of Their Own* (1999, Hebrew 2002), with its innovative observation of the mothers of feminism in Hebrew literature in the context of gender and nation (analyzing, *inter alia*, a novel by Almog), shares a similar scholarly-ideological stance. These efforts are especially important within Israeli society, where debates over politics and security issues often

neglect to take culture in general, and specifically the social-political contributions of women artists, into account.

*The Freedom to Write* is divided into four parts: Portrait of the Growing Artist; Art and the Post-Holocaust World; Determinism and Freedom in the World of Ideologies; and *Artistic Emendation: the Young Artist in Search of Redemption*. Feldhay Brenner portrays Almog's typical protagonist as an artist struggling for the freedom to write, for the autonomy to create. The literary motif running through Almog's writings is a combination of art and social commitment. Thus, according to Feldhay Brenner, Almog consistently portrays the artist's attempts, by executing a work of art, to change a world drowning in violence, militarism and suffering. The incentive for art is, therefore, an attempt to repair the violent, painful reality shaped by Israeli history. The protagonist-artist portrayed in Almog's literature is consistently a woman acting in the margins of society and culture. She confronts men who represent violent ideologies in Israeli society, both in their professions and in their behavior towards women. Thus, argues Feldhay Brenner, Almog's literature only pretends to tell stories of unfulfilled love. In effect, the struggle for love only obscures Almog's real focus on *ars poetica*: The woman artist—regardless of the content of her art—is engaged in the ethical struggle of artistic survival. Accordingly, even as the artist attempts to influence the world, and even as she explores art's potential to change reality, in patriarchal society—represented by brutal lovers—her art itself is an ethical deed.

Almog's focus on art is also explicated through her extensive intertextual references, as her protagonists find inspiration in great works from many cultures. This strategy of poetics, compellingly analyzed in *The Freedom to Write*, has been overlooked by previous critics. According to Feldhay Brenner, the intellectual complexity of Almog's writing may explain the neglect of its subversive elements by previous critics. In her analysis, however, the protagonist's use of intertextuality reinforces the struggle to create, her own struggle to write. It foregrounds her wish to be recognized in an intellectual-creative tradition, regardless of the gender of the canonical artist who is the source of her inspiration. Feldhay Brenner points out that Almog does not share what feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have identified as an "anxiety of authorship" characterizing women who venture to write. Rather, Almog's protagonists, mostly women but also men, are influenced by different artists (writers, mythical figures, film directors), men and women alike. While still being aware of the limits patriarchal society poses to women artists, art is seen in Almog's fiction as surmounting gender.

Placing Almog's protagonist-artist above and beyond the patriarchal logos, Feldhay Brenner skillfully synthesizes the psychoanalytical theories of Julia Kristeva and Otto Rank, both of whom revisited the Freudian Oedipus complex, arguing that it is rooted not in sexual or biological drives, but rather in the wish for autonomy. Kristeva and Rank reflect similarly on creativity: Kristeva, in her theory of the semiotic, argues that entering into the symbolic order is necessary for generating meaningful expression in the world of the logos, while Rank explains that the child's wish for autonomy is followed by the fear of death, thereby arousing a wish for immortality accomplished

through artistic creativity. These theoretical ideas, along with other related ideas put forward by Kristeva and Rank, support Feldhay Brenner's insightful reading of Almog's writings, focusing on the process of the artist's maturation and on her struggle against patriarchal hegemony.

As is common in the discipline of Hebrew literature, *The Freedom to Write* focuses on literature for adults, neither analyzing nor mentioning the children's books that might be relevant to the topic of research. Almog wrote numerous books for children, imbued by ideas along the same lines as those illuminated by Feldhay Brenner in this volume. For example, Almog's 1998 children's books *Gilgil* and *Gilgil rotzah kelev* (Gilgil wants a dog) recount a girl's coming of age, focusing on Gilgil's subversive wish to read (rather than participate) in class, the anxiety aroused by her father leaving home for war; and her mother's feeling of loneliness as she faces oppressive household duties. In general, there is an interpretive potential in exploring the ways in which different conflicts and ideas (e.g., maturation, separation and creative individuation) are shaped in Almog's books for children: What does this literature assert about the external world, adults, society? What subversive elements exist in children's literature? How is the reading process different in children (who do not belong, yet, to interpretive communities) and adults? Delving into Almog's literature for children and comparing the ideas and ideologies expressed there and in her literature for adults could be a fruitful topic for future study.

Surprisingly, *The Freedom to Write* lacks an index, which could have been helpful in the attempt to navigate among the different literary works, critics and ideas presented in this study.

Feldhay Brenner's *The Freedom to Write* is certainly an important contribution to the field of Hebrew literature and to the study of Israeli society and culture. Moreover, although this review is written in English for English-speaking readers, Feldhay Brenner's eloquent Hebrew is worthy of note. In addition to being insightful, *The Freedom to Write* is a pleasure to read.