

The Woman Facing Us On Ronit Matalon's Oeuvre

Editors: Yaron Peleg, Michal Ben-Naftali and Yigal Schwartz

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Preface

Michal Ben-Naftali

a.

It's a little sad but also funny that like my bride in the novella, I am locked in a room and won't be attending the wedding. But I hope that, somewhat like in the novella, there is the suggestion that absence sometimes carries no less weight than presence. And that some sort of a wedding — one way or another, semi-proper or demi-proper — is nevertheless taking place.

Ronit Matalon*

Ronit Matalon's novella *And the Bride Closed the Door* (2016) came to earn, in retrospect, the status of the last text whose publication she sought, a text narrated in the third person and in the face of which the author herself, too, remained speechless. In the novella, the bride's first person constitutes a great mystery. Matalon crossed the infinite distance between author and bride in her speech on receiving the Brenner Prize, read by her daughter on behalf of the mother. The third person, in this speech, turned first person, restoring her body, as it were, to the bride whose ghostly existence is so disturbing. As we know however, that body too, did not turn up for the ceremony: "...like my bride in the novella, I am locked

* Ronit Matalon, on receiving the Brenner Prize, 26 December, 2017.

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in a room and won't be attending the wedding." In these last words, Ronit Matalon suddenly and fleetingly took hold of this bride, creating an intertextuality with her own prose text, rather than with Leah Goldberg and her poems on the "Lost Son". "[Me too] like my bride": Like the bride I invented, the bride whom I join, or am married to; the bride who is not his — whoever is not to be her husband — but her author's. Because that is the bride's closest bond, the bond with the one who gave her life. The bride I created, the bride I locked up at home, in her room, she looks after me — as I ask to be excused, always in her name — for failing to turn up, again, at the wedding they prepared for her, which she doesn't attend, which she no longer attends, can no longer attend. However, these last words add something that could not have been said before, certainly not in the first person, while also staying alive: "But I hope that, somewhat like in the novella, there is the suggestion that absence sometimes carries no less weight than presence."

A novella with many possible meanings, as three of the articles in this collection illustrate, *And the Bride Closed the Door* in a sense is a text about reading. From the moment we open the book, we read about what is happening on the other side of the door, as we join all those who assemble before it. In fact, however, much like the bride, we too close the door, when we read. If we wish to read we will have to close doors. And for all we know, the bride too might be reading a book — because the question arises: With whom or with what does she make a bond while seemingly undoing the bond awaiting her outside; what is the object of desire of someone who appears to know that undoing a link is just as crucial as forging it? One might assume the author, who wrote *Strangers at Home* (1992) early on in her career, was somewhat tempted to enter the room and speak the bride's refusal in the latter's voice. She did not. She

chose to stay outside, the bride's secret remaining locked in there. Or to be more precise: She chose to write from within and to stay outside in a manner so baffling and at the same time convincing that some readers felt she had swallowed the manic chatter of her setting, its clichés; that the writer was completely outside, all of the book extraneous — forgetting that Matalon's outside was as rigorous as her inside, that the outside was written from inside, a little like the illusion produced by Daliah Ravikovitch's posthumous collection *Many Waters* (would she have sought for its publication?). In the book Ronit Matalon sketches a room's interior, but she leaves it shrouded in darkness, its door unopened. We don't know how the room, inside, is illuminated. Those outside the door cannot switch the light on or off. They cannot tell the bride how much light she needs. It's her business, where the light comes from. As it addresses an audience whose doors have been breached open, wide, it is difficult to read the novella without background noise interfering, it is difficult not to be sucked into the plot's concrete time, within which it would seem possible to try and persuade and even to regret. It is the realist dimension, which does not exhaust the entire range of meanings tapped in Ronit Matalon's prose, that leaves us yearning to know what happens in the end, whether it will open or close again, just possibly presenting a starting point for what is to follow.

If I allow for a melancholic inflection to take the upper hand in this corridor to *The Woman Facing Us*, it is by no means to diminish the joy with which Ronit Matalon's prose was written, its wild freedom. This vertiginous pleasure can also be heard in the Brenner Prize speech, a spontaneous joy of resistance, before the body's gravitational pull.

Writing is to learn how to die, wrote H el ene Cixous. It is not to be

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afraid, but to live on the edge of life. Ronit Matalon did not fear death. Her entire oeuvre speaks to her overcoming of this fear.

b.

This collection of articles has its origins at a conference in honour of Ronit Matalon, held at Cambridge University, UK in May 2017. When, in the autumn of 2017 we began, Yaron Peleg, Yigal Schwartz and I, to edit the volume, we had a different scene in mind — one of life and gift — and we rushed at it with an appetite. It is hard to describe the moment when the volume turned out to be “in honour of the late Ronit Matalon”.

Much has been said about untimely death. I myself looked for support in constructing a family tree made up of those who did not reach age 60: Leah Goldberg, Virginia Woolf, Clarice Lispector, and many more. Those who died at around the same age. Mourning's imaginary impetus is not to be found in monumental glorification. It is an attempt to render meaningful a life which somehow always gave itself to the extreme.

What is it that death releases? From those who are close to us, and those who are more remote. What does it make visible? It is a moment when all are touched by “at least an eighth of death”, as Leah Goldberg wrote, a terrible moment in a republic of letters which cannot live it forever, a moment allowing gratitude and reflection, acknowledgement, as well as perhaps, a change of mind. General shock which cruelly unfetters thinking and for some time constitutes the community as polis. Such a moment occurs — or is likely to occur — in the case of a political assassination. But it may also come

to pass at the death of a writer, and even more so when this death is premature. It is a radical moment, a paradoxical motion out of time, a moment subverting the very perception of time, enabling different criteria. This is the moment when books, all those strangers in the home gracing our shelves, are read differently. Ronit knew a great deal about this, exactly because she was impatient. It is a rare moment when you are loved for what you say: no need for lies to gain love.

C.

Moran Benit, in “How Will I Be? Women's Cultural Formation in Ronit Matalon's Early Work”, offers a close reading of two early short stories, “Wedding at a Hair Salon” and “Girl in a Café”, by way of considering the question how Matalon anchors her heroines in material life, following their low-key but determined search for freedom and autonomy “of a kind” rather than a “big revolution”. Contrary to common perception, Matalon, describing the characters' gaze, foregrounding flashes of their fantasizing or dreaming mind, diverges from the realism with which she is usually associated. This is how she amplifies the tension to which the girls are subject: a tension between a concrete historical consciousness and a sense of estrangement at home, together with a refusal to collaborate and pretend. Applying an existential hermeneutics, situated, just like the girls, at the very edge of the world and unsure of “how to be”, Benit's reading is an attempt to bring into view what she calls the “Mizrahi difference”, as well as Matalon's interest in femininity. These two key components were erased in the early reception of the collection *Strangers at Home* (1992), even as that universalist reading, relying on a double negation, paved Matalon's way into the local canon.

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In “I Will Hide My Face: Ronit Matalon's Encounter with the Mizrahi Stereotype”, **Naama Tsal** examines Ronit Matalon's narrating voice as it emerges from the story “Wedding at a Hair Salon”, which in its own way questions the very possibility of the story and its poetic and existential conditions. With one text's point of closure constituting another's point of departure, from this point onward, Matalon again and again struggles with the difficulty, if not the inherent failure, of examining one's closest relations and telling the story of the nuclear family. This early story testifies to the failure of narrative, a failure tied to the nature of language, as well as the limits of perspective. Not only does the language of the father-of-the-bride's speech stifle the ability of Margalit — the protagonist — to escape discursivity and overcome her silence, her field of vision, too, shrinks and turns inward. Tsal, however, marks Margalit's “clearing of her throat” and her distracted gaze in “Wedding at a Hair Salon” as the inauguration of an “entire poetics of side glances”. This is the poetics that will accompany the novel *The One Facing Us* (1995), in which Esther, the narrator, is sent far away in order to consider what is near; a poetics that is fully realized in “the determined action of joining the possible with the actual” when the narrator returns, in *The Sound of Our Steps* (2008), to the shack of her childhood.

Omri Ben Yehuda's “Faceless: On Anonymity in *The One Facing Us*” suggests that this novel is distinctly based on a novelistic poetics of visual description. Much like the photographic composition invokes relations between center and margins, and light and darkness — which refers here literally to the “dark continent” — the novel engages two forces: on the one hand, “what is given to the gaze and to historical or genealogical investigation”, and “what is given to repudiation and anonymity” on the other. Ben

Yehuda addresses the innovative nature of Matalon's writing, which takes two simultaneous perspectives on the post-colonial condition: a look at Africa which enfoldes a look at the Arab world and the Mizrahi population of Israel, as well as a look at Israel-Palestine, from Africa. Rather than a stable identity, Mizrahi identity is perceived as a permanent horizon that negates the very question into the nature of identity — a position that will come to characterize Matalon's politics throughout her work. Matalon, in this novel, achieves an effect of radical difference through the importance of anonymity, the unidentified and undefined domain, permeating the heroine-narrator's patriarchal political induction by the masculine trio of father, grandfather, and uncle.

In his “Trojan Horse: Ronit Matalon's Subtle Entry into the Heart of the Israeli Literary Scene”, **Yigal Schwartz** assumes the position of Ronit Matalon's “ideal reader” — who surrenders to the complex and subversive scenario she stages time and again, accepting the dominant mode of narration and presenting the singular family narrative in universal thematic contexts. Using an ambiguous and radical strategy, grounded in a clear position regarding the writing and reading of political fiction, Matalon, he argues, slipped in “under the hegemonic censor's radar”, to be embraced by the literary establishment. Schwartz investigates what he calls Matalon's “quiet revolution” by means of his own active response to the chronotopic structure of *Sarah, Sarah* (2000) in an effort to construe links between two seemingly disparate domains in the novel's plot. The book — narrated by an unreliable narrator-witness — can be infiltrated if one fosters a responsiveness to the communicational activity between the characters, which is intensely present right from the novel's performative title. Gradually, the “ideal reader” lays bare the common denominator of the plot's two loci — Israeli

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and French — as their raging sacrificial passion. Matalon weaves a network of parasitic relations, in both these foci — the one describing the vicissitudes of Sarah's and Ofra's friendship and the one following the funeral of Ofra's gay relative — between multi-cultural figures caught up in relations of dependency, betrayal, faithfulness and substitution.

In my essay "*Sarah, Sarah: On the Story of a Friendship*" I narrow my focus to the novel's Tel Aviv location, its elegy for a living friend and the demise of Sarah's and Ofra's friendship. Like Elena Ferrante years later, but finding a contrasting form, Ronit Matalon invents a language for a literature centered on friendship. In the absence of a philosophical canon dedicated to female friendship, Matalon chooses to refrain from a language never aimed at it in the first place, offering rather than Ferrante's epic realism, a fragmentary non-causal composition, occasionally tending to abstraction, to give trenchant account of the psychic syntax of friendship. The narrator describes years of symbiotic, mimetic partnership, with Sarah and Ofra fused in an imaginary and physical incorporation, which takes them to a loss of boundaries and tact, an act of absorption whereby the one is erased in order to become the other, and in order for the other to be. In time however this seemingly solid bond turns into the scene of a crime in which Sarah, having become a homo sacer, threatens the boundaries of Ofra's existence. The radical image of the exposed friend brings change, in every sense of the word, to the poetic of friendship. From being the melancholic text of an omniscient narrator, it turns into one that gives up on knowing.

Nancy Berg in "*Second Look: Re-visioning The Portrait*" concentrates on motifs relating to photography, spectatorship, visibility, the unreliability of the gaze, and blindness in Ronit Matalon's work.

These motifs are enlisted to yield a revision of the literary genre of the portrait. Already intertextually implying Roland Barthes in her early stories, these motifs become prominent in *The One Facing Us*. In *The Sounds of Our Steps*, however, Matalon plays with the genre's conventions to the point of its absolute "democratization". Spectators no less than the photographer have a formative impact on the image. Replacing the many concrete photographs in the first novel, the late novel includes a family snapshot of the father, mother and baby-girl on the Piazza San Marco, but only its fictional description. Berg juxtaposes the girl's repeated attempts at describing the photograph — in order to examine the landscape of her grief and distress — to her frequent looks, from different angles, at the elusive reproduction of Manet's "The Balcony", gracing the wall of the shack, and to her understanding of the isolation between the three figures — the man and the woman standing, and the girl seated by their side. "El bint pours her own hopes into the painting, thereby also confirming them as regards the photograph and her family." The novel's fragmentary narrative and the seepage between the various media accentuate the fluctuating and reciprocal nature of the act of observation.

Deborah Starr, in "Reading, Writing, and Remembrance: Ronit Matalon and the Jewish-Egyptian Memorial Literature", points out the existence of another "we" in *The Sounds of Our Steps* which rather than being staked out by the family, implies the Jewish-Egyptian collective, by way of literary insertions into the novel. She argues that these quotations along with the emphatic presence of family members' emotional response to books and reading, amount to a synchronic, fragmentary female memorial discourse, rejecting the causal, diachronic history represented by the father. This is how Starr approaches the role of the melodramatic novel, *The Lady of*

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the Camellias for the grandmother, the mother and the daughter in *The Sounds of Our Steps*. The cited passages provide the narrator with an additional voice, which hints that she herself may be the author of the French novel. The existence of a female line of readers or of female narrators, blurs the distinct identities of writers and readers, who mix in the novel's passages concerning "that book". Moreover, Matalon's rendering of her characters' act of reading suggests how implied readers are to conduct their hermeneutic activity. Even though she is not explicitly mentioned in this novel (unlike in *The One Facing Us*), Jacqueline Kahanoff is a hidden companion to a Levantine female sensibility, something which, for Starr, is also reflected in the importance in Kahanoff's writing of French literature in its relation to both mother and daughter.

Yiftach Ashkenazi's "The 'Prettiest Girl' — The Aesthetic Choice of *The Sound of Our Steps* as an Expression of the Encounter between Israel's Literary Establishment in 2008, and the Author's Perspective", discusses the relationship between the general literary establishment at the time of the novel's publication, and the novel and its author's poetics. Referring to Bourdieu's model of cultural production, which includes a close consideration of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* and its poetic choices based on a relation of congruence and adherence to the political, economic, and social state of affairs, Ashkenazi maps the coordinates relevant for the year 2008 to consider how Matalon's novel resonates the constraints and conditions in which it was written. At the root of Matalon's imaginary autobiography are the dominant features of the period in general and of its literature specifically — the rule of the realist novel and the rise of the autobiographical story. Through the rhetoric of the figures of the mother and the father, and their respective turns to literature, Matalon's narrative renders polar

patterns of socio-political behaviour, “a state of emergency” on the one hand, and an “acquired lack of trust” on the other. Introducing a hybrid poetic strategy blending cultures and power relations, Matalon sets up a kind of poetic escape from the political, one that brings together opposites in the aesthetic domain. Ashkenazi views this as a turning point in Matalon's literary approach. Beauty comes to be perceived as “a possible solution to the impossible maze of demands with which Hebrew literature faces its readers in the year 2008.”

The conversation between **Dana Amir** and **Ronit Matalon** on Matalon's play *The Sleepwalking Girls* took place during a 2015 symposium at Haifa University, before an audience of psychotherapists. Ronit Matalon says that this text “couldn't have found a home in any genre I know”; “It happens in the course of one's work, there are texts one starts to work on and which don't find their form,” she continues, “They come to me, and they go. [...] Between one prose work and another, I make an involuntary attempt to forget everything I knew. I profoundly believe that forgetfulness is no less important for work than recollection.” Dana Amir raises the possibility that like Freud's “screen memories”, there may also be “screen texts”, which function to conceal and reveal “other texts that hide behind them.” “I think that it's not literature that should be appropriate to us — we must be appropriate to it in some sense,” says Matalon. “For truth one has to wait,” says Amir, “we have to present ourselves before it, with proper modesty, it seems, for it to grant us an appearance, to present itself facing us.”

In his article “Renewed National Sentiment in the Novella *And the Bride Closed the Door*”, **Yaron Peleg** seeks to associate the book with the genre of the romantic love story, a genre which, with some

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exceptions, is not prevalent in the new Hebrew literature and is better known in its variants relating to failed love, potential love, or love transferred to some symbolic entity like the country. With a recalcitrant bride at its center, Matalon's novella ties into this literary heritage, by raising in its unique way, and given the very logic of weddings, the question of the relationship between the personal love story and the general national narrative. Matalon creates a community of women, including the bride, her mother, the grandmother who sings a song by Fairuz to her granddaughter, and Leah Goldberg — who put the mother at the center of the Christian parable of the prodigal son, as it were encouraging the bride to produce a gendered rewrite of the poem — in view of the story of her own lost sister. The rewritten poem, according to Peleg, is an attempt at the groom's sentimental education, and that of the family and society via him. This is how Matalon copes with the alienation inherent in marriage without stumbling into a fantasy of imaginary unity. National fault lines featuring in her earlier work make place for a clear-headed “neo-national” option. Just as the wedding is to begin, writes Peleg, “Matalon halts the 'film', bringing into view the conflict-ridden, deeply contradictory Israeli reality, which the wedding, had it occurred, would have covered with a thin glittery surface.”

In “Ronit Matalon: On Silence and Multiplicity” **Nissim Calderon** examines the silence of Margi, the bride in *And the Bride Closed the Door*, looking at the leitmotif of silences throughout Matalon's writings. Often, silent characters contrast with loud, hectic ones, like in *Sarah, Sarah*. Wondering about the “reason” for the bride's silence, Calderon proposes to think of the entire text as being situated on the room's threshold, threading together a multiplicity of options and motives related to sexuality, the family, to the bride's

relations with her sister or her grandmother, about all of which the writer remains silent. The inability to reduce or unify this multiplicity constitutes the “Chekhovian” moment in the writings of Matalon, who displays a similar suspicion of totality and totalization.

The theme of weddings is the point of departure of **Michael Gluzman's** “Letter to a Mother: When Ronit Matalon Opened the Door to Leah Goldberg”. The iconic bride, grief-stricken at the announced marriage which will expose the couple to patriarchy and its tensions, preoccupies Matalon time and again, in both her fiction and her essays. As early as in “Wedding at a Hair Salon”, followed by *The Sound of Our Steps*, and in the surrealist novella *Uncover Her Face* (2006), Matalon shows an interest in what she calls the “anti-wedding”, its dark side and implied mourning. Gluzman discusses an “explanation” of the bride's refusal, one which appears in the shape of a rewriting of a poem by Leah Goldberg. The intertextual link hosting Leah Goldberg proves also to be an intersubjective link — part overt and part encoded. Gluzman argues that Matalon has in mind the uncited parts of Goldberg's cycle which introduces three female characters into the family drama of the prodigal son — sister, bride, and mother. In Matalon's transformation of Goldberg's group of poems, the bride, from being an abandoned, forgiving figure, becomes one who declines the state of expectancy. While, like Goldberg, Matalon considers unmet expectation and the figure of the expectant woman, as a morbid condition that fires the imagination, unlike Goldberg, she does not solely associate the wish to love with the wish for the father, and instead she turns her gaze to the domain of the mourning mother or the “dead” one in André Green's terms. Matalon's bride, then, is the daughter of an abandoned mother, and her refusal echoes “the mother's closing of doors”; she writes her own “letter to the

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mother”, until the grandmother offers her an escape.

Ronit Matalon was an exceptional essayist. Like in the case of Leah Goldberg, her essayistic output is closely linked with her literary prose — feeding it, announcing it, casting a reflective light in retrospect. The essay “Only Fleetingly” concludes this collection, *The Woman Facing Us*, in which Ronit Matalon's qualities and voices stand out especially: her clear-eyed memory; the intimacy of reading; the first person of the essay which, always, is an experiential essay; the conceptual analysis which sticks to the concrete experience of body and space; the rare combination of seriousness and humor (she would always laugh when listening to people who had been reading her texts, as if on first hearing a joke), the dizzying pace, the harmony. “One thing is clear” she commented, “When Gaston Bachelard, the philosopher, writing about the poetics of domestic spaces, assigned the attic as the home's site of 'lofty', enlightened rationality (as opposed to the obscure, demonic unconscious of the basement), he didn't know mother — neither her indifference to the symbolic geometry of consciousness, nor her human eagerness to see the domestic space as the stage of infinite reversals and a wealth of boundless possibilities.”

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