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Narrative Ventriloquism and Muted Feminine Voice: Agnon's *In the Prime of Her Life*[1]

THROUGHOUT NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE, the last fifteen years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in feminist critical thought and literary interpretation. Considering the promise and vitality of the field, as well as its ascending influence and prestige, few attempts have been made to explore such approaches in connection with modern Hebrew texts. Among modern literatures, this one warrants special examination because of the exceptional history of the Hebrew language. As holy tongue for many centuries it excluded study by women. Subsequently, the Hebrew linguistic and literary renaissance came about through major cultural upheavals and transformations (primarily, the Enlightenment and Zionism in their various guises) which wrought significant changes in women's social roles. This combination of circumstances has resulted in a heavy preponderance of male voices in the Hebrew corpus, even as it has fostered a singular set of obstacles and stimuli in the creation of a female literary tradition, and it has generated a series of prominent thematic concerns impinging on matters of gender.[2]

Agnon's *Bidmi yameha* (*In the Prime of Her Life*, 1923) invites rereading in light of these considerations, because it is centrally concerned with the silencing and sounding of female voice. Much of the feminist critical agenda has aimed at documenting ways in which female figures have been spoken by men (that is, represented within male dominated cultural codes), as well as ways in which women have spoken back, representing themselves through their own vocal self-assertion.[3] Fea-

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turing a woman narrator, Agnon's novella raises questions of interest for both modes of reading; the protagonist, a young woman who marries her mother's former suitor, recounts her life story in the form of a written memoir. Consequently, even as *Bidmi yameha* represents women through the filter of male perceptions, the text poses as a woman's account of her own experience and so calls attention directly to women's expression and language.

In this fiction such issues develop explicitly through insistent treatment of tensions between suppressed and emergent voices. Though critical appraisals have been curiously silent on this matter, Agnon in effect structures the entire novella around a series of verbal exchanges and keen thematic attention to talk. Virtually every paragraph centers on obtrusive reference to or citation of conversations, interior monologue, and varieties of written messages. In this way the text endorses the primacy of linguistic acts as plot actions that regulate matters of will, power, and social relations. It is noteworthy, too, that the representations of language, like the social conflicts they imply or convey, are marked by sexual difference. Just as men and women behave differently, so they express themselves differently and their uses of words illuminate contrasting privileges and predicaments. The novella in this way highlights the protagonist's attempt to make herself heard by stating her convictions and expressing her own desires. This is not to say that the text necessarily applauds her efforts. At times it clearly decries them. Agnon himself was by no means a feminist nor an advocate of women's liberation, and he sometimes casts his character in distinctly unflattering light. The narrative nevertheless maintains an intense scrutiny of women's voices, and for this reason feminist theory may provide a productive critical framework for examining *In The Prime of Her Life.* In the process it illuminates aspects of the text that have been overlooked, underestimated, or marginalized by critics.

Attention to female voice in this text commands special interest, too, for it is directly linked with problems attendant on representations of speech. Primarily a written, liturgical language for centuries, Hebrew reborn as a modern vernacular in the last one hundred years has raised a host of artistic challenges for literary depictions of spoken language. In *Bidmi yameha* these difficulties are consonant with and so enhance the forefronting of speech and silence as theme. The text creates a disquieting balance by both forefronting dialogue (directly or indirectly reported) and also muting it through the use of prose informed by biblical nuance and locution (i.e., essentially non-spoken language). The male author's adoption of a female narrator amplifies the significance of these matters, for this act of ventriloquism on Agnon's part combines with a further "othering" of narratorial voice. The biblicized prose contrasts with the mishnaic Hebrew favored in

most of Agnon's fiction, and it is crucial to ask how this artistic idiom contributes to the portrayal of the protagonist.[4] Commentators have explained away the stylistic features of this narrative as an index of historical setting; the archaic quality, according to this line of reasoning, gestures toward the kind of maskilic language the character, Tirza Mintz, would have been taught during an Eastern European shtetl girlhood at the turn of the century.[5] However, *In the Prime of Her Life* does not simply make a stylistic choice motivated by considerations of dramatic verisimilitude; the text also directs attention explicitly to the problem of genderized language. Remarking on the process of linguistic revival, it notes that Tirza's Hebrew education is an unusual one for a girl, and this focus is intimately linked with her efforts to assert her voice. Woman struggling for a context in which to make her own discourse heard parallels the struggle of the Hebrew language to achieve renaissance in its search for a new audience and new vitality. All these factors, interconnected, form an integral part of the story.

The first portion of this essay examines a selection of verbal exchanges from *Bidmi yameha* as they present Tirza's quest for her own voice and as they put into relief a division of male and female expression.The second segment of the essay then brings evidence of the emotional, historical, and stylistic contexts that complicate Tirza's efforts and so grant the text extraordinary artistic resonance and psychological depth.

From the start, *Bidmi yameha* concentrates on the silence of a female character, Tirza's ailing mother Leah. In the process the text associates subdued voice with death and confinement. Describing the period of Leah's declining health, the opening paragraph relates: "Our house stood hushed in its sorrow and its doors did not open to a stranger" (p. 167; "*dumam* amad betenu bi(y)gono," p. 5).[6] The next paragraph reiterates and augments this introductory announcement: "The winter my mother died our home fell silent seven times over" ("baḥoref bishnat mot imi *damam* betenu shiv'atayim"). Both passages play on the root *d-m-m,* recalling the sounds of the title and the first sentence of the novella: "bi*dmi* yameha metah imi" (emphasis added); *demi,* meaning silence, functions in this last phrase to signify "in the midst" of her days. Submerged within it, too, heightening its ironic nuances, is reference to blood (*dam*). These lines thereby connect silence with the snuffing out of vitality in a young woman who died too soon. Subsequently the narrative illustrates the cruelty of Leah's fate by relating another image of suppressed language; letters Mother received from her true love, Akaviah Mazal, have been kept under lock and key for years. She opens them, it is recounted, only to destroy them,

burning them in a room whose windows are locked tight. In this stifling setting of enclosure and repression, smoke rises in a certain allusion to sacrifice—Leah's forfeiting of desire. Later, when the end comes, Mother dies silently at the very moment when her husband Mintz has broken his bedside vigil and gone to sleep. The narrative records that her passing went unnoticed and states "*nishmat apah lo nishma'ah,*" her breath was no longer heard. The final word *nishma'ah* reinforces the motif of silence and hearing as it echoes and then subdues the syllables of the preceding *nishmat;* replacing the hard [*t*] with the softer ['*h*], the end of the phrase suggests a dissipation or dying away of sound.

After her death, Father's arrangements for the inscription on Leah's tombstone reconfirm the entire pattern of her life as silencing and suppressed desire. To understand this episode we should remember the feminist claim that patriarchal culture has often defined woman according to its needs rather than hers; it has also frequently represented females as passive beings unable to produce their own meanings. In this way, as Susan Gubar argues, men have attempted to create woman through masculine discourse and women, serving as secondary objects reified into an artifact in someone else's scheme of things, have been perceived as blank pages on which to write and be written.[7] In Agnon's story, these descriptions are apt; men have been writing the script for Leah all her life. Not allowed to sound her wishes, she has been denied intentionality. Most importantly, her father marries her to the wrong man, one who is better off financially and considered more socially desirable than the suitor she herself prefers. As a result she dies at an early age, her heart physically and metaphorically weakened because deprived of love. Through the incident of the tombstone Agnon creates a startling, culminating illustration of this phenomenon. The woman, her spirit extinguished, has been transformed into a reified object, her identity reduced to a name carved in stone. It is pointed out, moreover, that her husband thinks more about her epitaph than about her. Though he is genuinely and deeply aggrieved at the loss of his wife, in choosing the lettering for the grave he "all but forgot" (p.172) the woman. The writing, his defining of her, eases his pain. To Mintz's credit he does reject a highly formulaic epitaph, one which Mr. Gottlieb has prepared, in favor of one more meaningful. The first inscription is very clever; it is based on an acrostic of Leah's name which also incorporates the year of her death into every line of the poem, but there is nothing personal in it. Recognizing this shortcoming, the husband opts for something more authentic. He goes to Mazal, the former beau and author of those now burnt love letters, to commission a second inscription. Though it is finally too late, and though he acts only through an intermediary who is a man, Mintz makes at least some

concession toward acknowledging his wife's suppressed desires and inner life: her ardent feelings for Mazal.[8]

The daughter, who is at once the narrator and the primary focus of the narrative, establishes her own significance in opposition to these actions on the part of the men. Her initial introduction of herself, for example, in the first paragraphs of the story, serves as a celebration of her mother's voice:

על מטתה שכבה אמי ודבריה היו מעטים. ובדברה כמו נפרשו כנפים זכות ויובילוני אל היכל הברכה. מה אהבתי את קולה. פעמים הרבה פתחתי את הדלת למען תשאל מי בא. (ע.ו)

Lying on her bed my mother's words were few. But when she spoke it was as though limpid wings spread forth and led me to the Hall of Blessing. How I loved her voice. Often I opened her door to have her ask, who is there? (p. 167)

While the rest of the paragraph insists on suffocation and enclosure, rendering the mother's thoughts inaudible, Tirza here emphasizes aperture (the outspread wings and the open door) along with sound, self-assertion, listening, and response. These emphases evolve into question about Tirza's identity ("who is there?") and so constitute an affirmation of her own presence.

Tensions between the suppression and emergence of female voice develop further as the plot unfolds into a story of the daughter's search for independence. Tirza sets her heart on Akaviah Mazal, falls ill in a kind of duplication or reenactment of her mother's final illness, and, surviving this, convinces her father that she and Mazal should be married. The assertion of her desires, as a recuperation of her mother's lost life, progresses through any number of verbal encounters which disclose identifiably distinctive masculine and feminine aspects. When, for example, Mrs. Gottlieb invites Tirza to spend the summer at her home, the narrator recounts:

ויאמר אבי לכי. ואומר איכה אלך לבדי? ויאמר לי אבי גם אני אבוא אליך וראיתיך. וקילא עמדה לפני המראה ותמח את האבק. ויהי כשמעה את דברי אבי ותקרץ בעיניה. ויהי כראותי את פיה ואת עוויותיה במראה ואצחק בקרבי. וירא אבי את פני והנם שמחים ויאמר ידעתי כי תשמעי בקולי. וילך. (ע. יג)

My father readily agreed, saying "Go now." But I answered, "How will I go alone?" and he said, "I will come and visit." Kaila stood dusting by the mirror and she winked at me as she overheard my father's words. I saw her move her lips and grimace in the mirror, and I laughed to myself. Noticing how my face lit up with cheer my father said, "I knew you would heed my words," and he left the room. (p. 175)

This passage could be taken as a textbook illustration of sociolinguistic observations on female verbal behavior. Women, because of the more vulnerable status they occupy in many societies, often tend to avoid language which threatens or endangers the stability of relationships.

Consequently, they rely heavily on a range of politeness strategies meant to deflect attack and help maintain interpersonal equilibrium. These include attentiveness, approval, flattery or indirectness, the use of honorifics, appeals to a higher law, generalizations, and excuses of exigence.[9] In the passage cited Tirza, too, is deferential because of her subordinate position. Accordingly, she restricts her comments to a question. Despite her unhappiness about the plans for the summer, she leaves the father's decision open and does not impose her own mind or views on him. The housekeeper likewise avoids straightforward declaratives. Trying to convince Tirza to agree with her father and respect his desires, Kaila expresses herself only by indirections and distortions. (The word *'ivut*, grimace or contortion, is introduced here to signal the servile position which restricts Kaila's freedom to speak her mind. Later, associated several times with Mintshi Gottlieb and her dog, Bender—"Meuvat," this word becomes freighted with additional meaning and hints at what has gone wrong in this circle of family and friends: a dangerously repressive denial of desire has yielded lives that, once crooked, cannot be made straight.[10]) Tirza, aware of the preposterous incongruity of her servant's actions, laughs with amusement at the linguistic inequity prevailing in this exchange. Only fourteen, she does not yet take her own powerlessness quite seriously. She remarks innocently in the next paragraph: "Kaila, God be with you, speak up, don't remain silent, please stop torturing me with all your hints and riddles." For this she is reprimanded and reminded of the gravity of the situation: this trip is for the father's well-being, not hers, and would she but look at him closely she would realize that he is lonely and needs the opportunity to visit the Gottliebs in the country. In short, Kaila first acts on the conviction that she mustn't express herself directly, and then, when pressed, conveys this same message more overtly to Tirza. The girl's personal desires must remain unspoken. As a result of all the indirectness, Mintz for his part misreads Tirza entirely. "I knew you would heed my words," he says, thus reinscribing her back into his code of understanding. Using an expression typical of biblical discussions on obedience to God (*lishmoa' bekoli*), he reinforces his patriarchal authority and reconfirms his failure to appreciate the inner thoughts of the women in his life.[11]

Other incidents as well contrast the discourse of men and women, demonstrating an imbalance of power between them. For instance, the matchmaker who comes to visit talks at great length, making tiresome chit chat and keeping Tirza a courteous but captive audience. Finally she remarks on his tedious verbosity: "I grew weary, but Gotteskind went on" (p. 193). On another occasion at the Gottlieb's house, the husband enjoys holding center stage in the conversation: "Gottlieb rubbed the tip of his nose and chuckled like a man intending to amuse

his listeners. He then told us of his affairs and of what had occurred at his brother's home" (p. 187). This comment follows directly after the wife has guardedly and self-consciously regulated her own disclosures. Mrs. Gottlieb had begun to tell about her husband's dealings with his brother. However, Tirza notes, "Mintshi told me more than she wished. All of a sudden she realized what she had done and she then seemed to ask me to forget all that she had just recounted" (p. 186). Tirza's father, for his part, unself-consciously exercises strategies to dominate conversations. Not only does he direct talk to his own preferred topics (generally, his personal misfortune due to Leah's death); he also extends his own words to encompass everyone: "We are the miserable widowers," he laments, and Tirza comments, "How strange were his words. It was as though all womankind had died and every man was a widower" (p. 186).

In addition to these scenes in which Agnon neatly contrasts masculine communicative prerogatives with the women characters' cautions and insecurities about speaking, on other occasions male characters explicitly impute negative qualities to or give misogynistic interpretations of female speech. In an embedded tale recounting Mazal's past, Leah's father is quoted as chiding his wife for engaging in "woman's talk"—that is, talk he deems to be idle and impious (*kedavar aḥat hanashim tedabri*, p. 19). A comparably condemnatory comment surfaces when the doctor comes to visit the Mintz family after Mother's death. Remarking that the daughter has grown and that she has on a new dress, he asks if she knows how to sew. Tirza responds with a maxim, "Let another man praise thee, and not thine own mouth" (p. 174). Restricting herself to a non-assertive stance, this character offers a formulaic reassurance of the male interlocutor's initiative in conversation. All the same he responds by saying, "A bold girl and looking for compliments." What the man takes as an act of boldness is more properly an evasion of confrontation and a highly reticent hint at a topic the daughter is actually eager for others to acknowledge: her budding sexuality, her own growing up which has been overlooked because everyone is preoccupied with mourning. This incident, like the scolding Leah's father gives his wife, underscores attention in the text to the characters' stereotypic notions of women's speech and to a conviction that female expression should remain sharply circumscribed.

In a pivotal scene concerned with these issues Tirza at first submits to the discourse of men characters. Quelling her own impulses, she molds her expression to conform to their expectations. However, the episode quickly becomes a turning point, a moment of rupture in which she attempts to emancipate herself from male-dominated patterns of verbal interaction. This happens when Mintshi discloses that Akaviah and Leah were once in love. Tirza, struck by melancholy and confusion,

is then approached by Mintshi's husband and the following exchange ensues: "'Look our friend is boring a hole through the heavens,' Mr. Gottlieb said laughing as he saw me staring up at the sky. And I laughed along with him with a pained heart" (p. 77). Afterwards, though having humored him, Tirza remains deeply troubled by Mrs. Gottlieb's revelations about the past and she cannot let the matter rest.

על משכבי בלילות שאלתי בלבי, לו נשאה אמי למזל כי עתה מה היה? ומה הייתי אני? ידעתי כי מחשבות שוא הן, ובכל זאת לא עזבתי אותן ובהאלם הרטט אשר בא עם הרהורי אמרתי, עול נעשה למזל. ויהי מזל בעיני כאיש אשר מתה עליו אשתו והיא איננה אשתו.

Night after night I lay on my bed, asking myself, "What would now be if my mother had married Mazal?" And what would have become of me? I knew such speculations to be fruitless, yet I did not abandon them. When the shudders which accompanied my musings finally ceased, I said: Mazal has been wronged. He seemed to me to be like a man bereft of his wife yet she is not his wife. (177)

Shortly after that her ruminations resume:

כתועבה הייתי לנפשי. בושתי ולא ידעתי מה, יש אשר רחמתי על אבי ויש אשר כעסתי עליו בלבבי. גם במזל חרה אפי. [. . .] יש אשר אמרתי בלבי מדוע הרגיזתני מרת מינטשי גוטליב בזכרונות ימי קדם? אב ואם איש ואישה המה, איש ואישה בשר אחד. ולמה אהגה בצפונותיהם מטרם ילדתי. ובכל זאת צמאה נפשי לדעת עוד. לא שלותי ולא שקטתי ולא נחתי. אכן, אמרתי בלבי, אכן מינטשי יודעת את כל המוצאות אותם והיא תגיד לי את משפט הדבר. אבל איכה אפצה פה ואשאל. הן גם כי אחשוב בזה יאדימו פני, אף כי בדברי. ואני אמרתי נואש, לא אדע עוד. (ע. טז)

How I loathed myself. I burned with shame and did not know why. Now I pitied my father and now I secretly grew angry at him. And I turned my wrath upon Mazal also. [. . .] Sometimes I told myself: why did Mintshi Gottlieb upset me by telling me of bygone memories? A father and mother, are they not man and woman and of one flesh? Why then should I brood over secrets which occurred before my time? Yet I thirsted to know more. I could not calm down, nor could I sit still for a moment's quiet. And so I told myself, if Mintshi knows what happened surely she will tell me the truth. How though will I open my mouth to ask? For if I but let the thoughts come to mind my face turns crimson let alone when I speak out my thoughts aloud. I then gave up all hope. More I could not know. (p. 178)

Tirza's lengthy internal monologue offers an explicit meditation on her fears of speaking up. In its very length the passage itself is an act of verbal self-assertion—a muffled voicing of her anxieties, to be sure, but at least a way of formulating and sounding her preoccupations in her own mind. Here once more the character's remarks consist of questions rather than declaratives or imperatives, but, in contrast to her earlier silences and deferential reserve, these questions are angry and searching. Language, moreover, serves specifically as a way of constituting a

self. Probing her origins, Tirza asks overtly, who am I? and ponders what she might have been had her mother married somebody else.

This character's progress toward self-expression is subsequently impeded but then also spurred on by her engagement, engineered by the matchmaker Gotteskind, with a young man in whom she takes no interest. Recoiling at the prospects of an arranged match, Tirza dreams that her father has married her off to an Indian chief and that her body is "impressed with tattoos of kissing lips" (p. 193). If, as feminist criticism has argued, the female predicament entails the imposition of a cultural script onto woman, a writing of her which determines her sexual life and social status, in this passage we find a graphic image of a woman whose destiny is being inscribed directly onto her body.[12] The verbal and sexual power so prominently featured in *Bidmi yameha* as part of the male domain converge in this scene.They are presented through a single dramatic symbol of female disempowerment; the mouth, locus of both kisses and speech, appears here as tattoo, sealing the young woman's dreaded fate of being married off by force to someone entirely foreign and alien to her. This episode makes Tirza all the more determined to have Mazal, whom she perceives as the true object of her desire.

As she pursues Akaviah and so expresses her own will, Tirza again resorts to speech characterized by indirection and generalization. She does so, though, with a new flare. According to accepted protocol, she cannot easily speak with her beloved. Mazal is not only older than she; he is also now her teacher. (Turning sixteen, Tirza begins attending a teacher's seminary.) With increasing daring she devises pretexts for making conversation with Akaviah. To reach him she pretends that a dog has bitten her hand and so, under the guise of soliciting compassion and protective care, she dupes him into allowing her to reveal her erotic intent. (As many readers have noted, the dog in Agnon's texts is frequently an indicator of uncontrolled sexuality and also of madness, that is, of impulses threatening to the accepted limits of society.[13]) Tirza later exceeds the bounds of conversational propriety when she declares her love to Mazal in the frame shop; she has taken a *mizraḥ* there to have the glass repaired. Simultaneously both guarding and abandoning discretion, she uses a pious citation to further her own message. Pointing to the Easterly she forces him to read: "Blessed be he who shall not forsake thee" (p. 195).

Tirza's most extreme declaration of desire occurs when societal constraints are further removed. During her illness, at the height of feverish delirium, she etches the name "Akaviah Mazal" many times into her mirror. She also writes Akaviah a letter, noting, "you shall dwell in my thoughts all day" (p. 209). In both instances the young woman is trying to write him, to inscribe him into her inner self or

subsume his signature into the image of herself which she receives from the mirror. In this way Tirza attempts to turn about that early pattern, epitomized by the episode with the tombstone, in which the men inscribed Leah's name in their discourse. It is significant that she does this at a time when she is sick and suffering delusions. Literary equations of woman's rebellion with madness have been noted recurrently in feminist criticism. At times, too, feminist interpretations have considered this identification of aggression or self-assertion with insanity as an attempt to discredit female protest.[14] Tirza's temporary derangement conforms in part to such a pattern; her daring is a function of illness and irrationality. Agnon's text, however, is subtle in its judgment of her. The scene serves less as an attempt to trivialize Tirza's situation than as a sensitive acknowledgment of how profound are the disorders which plague the entire family and culminate in the events of the daughter's life. Yet, by contrast with those gravely disturbing matters, her efforts at self-expression do come to seem of diminished seriousness. What remains certain is that, opening a pandora's box of emotional troubles, this character courts disaster. Something has gone fundamentally wrong in this home, and Tirza's sickness is highly overdetermined. Not only the occasion for speaking out, the fever is an expression of psychic dis-ease. Tirza invited a chill by wearing inappropriate attire (a summer dress in winter), and her illness then is instrumental in manipulating her father's (and perhaps Mazal's) sympathy. That this partially unwitting ploy is effective results from the susceptibility of the older generation to emotional blackmail as well as from their complicity, their willingness to arrange a new marriage to settle old scores. Each for his own reasons agrees to the match. Therefore, because of the complicated interpersonal context in which Tirza's development takes place, *In the Prime of Her Life* is only in part the story of a young woman's rebellion against social mores; beneath the surface there is another agenda, one in large measure inimical to the attempt of a young woman to free herself of patriarchal imperatives.

Tirza's name has been understood as both "will" and "pretext" (from *ratson, r-ts-h* or *teruts, t-r-ts*). A range of meanings delimited by these concepts underlies the events of her life and complicates the rather straightforward examples of incipient self-assertion brought forward in the first half of this essay. At issue, most crucially, is the protagonist's dangerous psychic involvement in the events of the past and in the unresolved tensions of her parents' youth. Her reliving of Mother's life turns out to be less a renewal than a repetition of mistakes and in this light determination becomes a pretext for passivity and determinism. Agnon explores these matters by combining atten-

tion to mother/daughter relations—a privileged topic in current feminist criticism—with one of his own major thematic preoccupations: struggles between individual will and forces beyond the control of the individual, be those explained as destiny, divine intervention, or the workings of the unconscious.[15]

To highlight this convergence of interests is to revise the emphasis of much previous critical commentary on *bidmi yameha.* Acknowledging that the text is centrally concerned with obstacles in Tirza's path to independence, any number of Agnon's readers have discussed those difficulties in terms of doubles and substitutions, with special attention to Tirza's quasi-incestuous marriage.[16] Akaviah is her father's age and her mother's first love; in addition he is seen explicitly as a double of her father (especially at the end of the narrative, p. 215). Consequently, the critics claim, Tirza's recreating of her mother's life enacts a variation on the familiar Agnon theme of the love triangle. The young woman marries a father figure and continues to yearn for her father's company, even as Mazal marries the daughter instead of the mother he loved. Leah similarly married Mintz instead of her beloved, and Mintshi, enamored of Mazal, married Gottlieb and buried herself in ceaseless activity. Each case creates a threesome that interferes with the attainment of intimacy or displaces love from one object of passion to a dissatisfying substitute. Resembling like incidents in many another Agnon text, these triangles most pointedly recall the tangled relations between Hirshl, Bluma, and Mina in *A Simple Story.* Now, this understanding of Tirza is astute as far as it goes. What has not been sufficiently recognized and stated, though, is the degree to which Tirza's problems are those of an adolescent, specifically a female who must deal with the death of her mother, and the connection between these issues and that of emergent voice.

Adolescence is a time of gradually letting go, of loosening bonds with parents in preparation for making choices of all sorts, but, most importantly, erotic. As Katherine Dalsimer notes in her study *Female Adolescence,* this withdrawal from parents accounts for the unique place this stage of life occupies in psychoanalytic writing.[17] Deemed at once to be a time of possibility and aperture, it is also an age of pain. Because tensions present since earliest childhood are reactivated in adolescence, this is a moment of awakening which permits new resolution to old conflicts. At the same time, pulling away from parents is felt subjectively by youngsters as a profound loss or emptiness not unlike mourning. The actual death of a parent, occurring at this juncture, inevitably heightens that inner loss experienced in the normal course of growing up. It can also influence the reworking of psychic conflicts essential for the young person to attain new maturity. If all deaths are greeted by the living with some degree of denial, the impulse to

disbelieve the finality of the loss proves that much more intractable for children or teenagers. "While the task of the adolescent is to relinquish idealization of the parent in order to become free for other attachments and to develop more autonomy, the need of this child is to idealize the dead," to enshrine the deceased person in memory and so preserve the past.[18] Unchallenged, unmodified by day-to-day experience, such wishful fantasy may prove even more difficult to abandon and may result in further magnified esteem for the lost figure.

Tirza's life is decisively affected by just such a turn of events. Matters are complicated further, because she is female. The field of psychoanalysis has increasingly recognized the enduring nature of a daughter's relation to her mother. Feminist revisions of psychoanalytic theory have contested the classic Freudian claim that girls essentially detach from their mothers early on in life. The new view maintains, to the contrary, that the pre-oedipal feelings of merger and joinedness with the mother are never broken definitively. Because her first love is a member of the same sex, the girl does not achieve female identity by severing ties and asserting herself over against the mother's femininity, as would be expected for a boy striving to achieve manliness. A different process, balancing her impulses toward separateness and toward union with another, must be negotiated on the girl's path to womanhood.[19] In adolescence there is heightened need for mother as the individual who provided such important primary intimacy. Much as was true in the earliest days of childhood, the daughter often looks once more to her as a mirror. It is through this figure's approval and disapproval that the young girl can recognize, define, validate, delimit, and forge herself. Tirza Mintz moves toward maturity with difficulty, for in her case the pull to identify with the mother is at once unhealthily strong and also exacerbated by Leah's death. Tirza's father, for his part, cannot compensate for the mother's absence. He is singularly unable to provide his daughter the mirroring she needs because he is deeply self-absorbed, preoccupied always with his mourning and his business dealings. Not only does he misread his daughter, as in the passage examined earlier; in addition he overlooks her awareness of her own emerging womanliness. When, for instance, concerned with her appearance, she puts on festive new clothes, his reaction of surprise leads her to feel deeply guilty; though the *yortsayt* has passed, she comes to perceive her attentions to herself as a failure of devotion to Leah. As she moves one step toward embracing life, he encourages her to prolong mourning for her mother. Tirza notes explicitly: "In my grief I said, my father has forgotten me, he has forgotten my existence" (p.170). This passage alludes neatly to the two kinds of grief the reader can identify in Tirza's adolescent experience: she suffers a natural loss of intimacy, a withdrawal between parents and children, but this is a

blow intensified many times over by the physical death of the mother. Both are made worse by the father's self-centered reactions. Anticipating psychoanalytic insights of a much later era, Agnon also documents Tirza's need for her mother in terms of mirroring. Clearly linking early childhood with adolescence, the narrative records that Tirza found relief from her mourning by perusing her mother's old books: "I read on and the stories were familiar to me. Reading my mother's books I felt like the child who in hearing his mother's tremulous voice suddenly recognizes his own name" (p. 174). Through these texts, which figure clearly as a substitute for Leah's own thoughts and opinions, Tirza feels that she can now explain herself. What she perceives as *déjà vu* is in effect a kind of modeling of herself after her mother.

It is in this context that Tirza tries to realize the highly overdetermined fantasy of reenacting and revising her mother's life; she wishes to redress the (perceived) wrong done Mazal, even as she would like to reverse her mother's romantic disappointment, and so she tries to make the crooked straight (that is, "letaretz"—to straighten—a word that again recuperates the sound of the protagonist's name). She attempts, too, to preserve a memory, to deny Leah's absence, and to find validation of herself, to define herself as a woman. (This happens in part because there are no suitable mother substitutes for her; the older women, Mintshi and Kaila, influence her but fail her in various ways.) The implication raised by this set of circumstances is that, though Tirza believes she is pining away for love of Mazal, in effect and at a deeper level she attempts to hold onto childhood. That highly important psychic business of adolescence, the need to develop autonomy, is retarded and distorted by confusion of her identity with that of her mother. The tragedy of her excessive attachment to the pre-oedipal union is then compounded by the incestuous quality inherent in the solution Tirza seeks out: her marriage to Mazal. Altogether, Tirza's adolescence, far from an emancipation, has become a subjugation to the parents' past and to her own earliness. Her immaturity can be detected, too, in her continuing need to imitate her mother. In a chilling scene Tirza, now pregnant, foresees for herself an early death parallel to Leah's. Part of this fantasy, moreover, is that she prays for a daughter to take care of Mazal. This eventuality would result yet again in a displacement onto another of the maternal role; her wish hints that Tirza wants less to be a mother than to implore someone else to do some mothering.

The full extent of the protagonist's tragedy becomes apparent, like many other developments in the narrative, through the treatment of dialogue, talk, and matters of voice. For example, one of the first signs that Tirza has made a serious mistake in pursuing Mazal occurs early on in their courtship. She feels attracted to him precisely because she

expects she can confide in him. Overcome with ennui at the seminary she notes, "I saw there wasn't a person to whom I could pour out my heart; and I then said, I will speak to Mazal." Her projected scenario does not materialize. Welcoming her into his house, Akaviah latches onto her as a listener and, telling her his life story, doesn't allow her to get a word in edgewise. Tirza, instead of speaking up, is instead drawn into his discourse. The story he tells, moreover, concerns the past, Mazal's mother, her family's apostasy, and their later return to Judaism. It is the long-ago that remains dominant here, and not Tirza's newly emergent young life. An explanation of the stigma that prevented Akaviah's marriage to Leah, this tale serves, too, as a kind of invitation to the daughter to become increasingly attentive to and embroiled in lives, needs, and desires from before her time.[20] It is significant that Mazal's monologue is presented as a long interpolated sequence in the novella; the very status of his speech as embedded narrative indicates that it is essentially extrinsic to Tirza's story, yet absorbs her attention and displaces the novella's focus from her present onto the past. Subsequently, in another scene that relies on pointed reference to voice, Tirza's description of her illness testifies to the increasing intensity of her problems. She has come more and more to resemble her mother. The text observes, "My heart beat feebly and my voice was like my mother's voice at the time of her illness" (p. 211). A similar remark appears, too, when her marriage fails to bring her the happiness she had expected. Pregnancy precipitates a crisis of depression which confirms and clarifies the nature of Tirza's discontent. She has not progressed to a mature autonomy, and when father brings presents for the new baby, the mother-to-be speaks as if she were herself the child: "Thank you grandfather I said in a child's piping voice."

This scene also makes strikingly clear that forces operating in Tirza's life invalidate, alter, or bring additional layers of meaning to her vocal self-assertions. Noting, "The child within me grows from day to day" (p. 215; *vehayeled asher beqirbi yigdal meyom leyom*, p. 53), the text here recalls the first description of Tirza listening to her mother's voice, which stated: *yaldut haytah bi*, "I was still a child." Though the young woman is not aware of it, the reference to the child within may include Tirza as much as her offspring. Here, as throughout the narrative, what is said aloud is quite different from what the characters mean. If at first woman's speech is indirect, a kind of deferential duplicity determined by relations of power and powerlessness, later on words also function in another way to both conceal and reveal. They contain hidden significations, and Tirza at times unknowingly discloses deep motivations she herself would not recognize.[21] For such reasons voice cannot in any simple sense be synonymous with will. While Tirza's

early attempts to make herself heard were intended to help her wield some power, it becomes clear in the course of the text that her unconscious desires, deeply powerful ones, exceed and elude the goals she has defined and willed for herself. These hidden motives are, furthermore, a function of the social, interpersonal circumstances into which she has been born. The inner fragmentation of self into conflicting impulses combines with the coopting of Tirza into a preexisting context, and together these factors account for the non-coincidence of the individual with herself. It is this kind of phenomenon that has gained so much attention in post-structuralist debate and which brings the followers of Derrida, Foucault, Kristeva *et al.* to insist on speaking of "subjects" and not "individuals." Agnon's sensitivity to the unspoken and to hidden motives makes him a particularly apt candidate for analysis in those terms, and it also explains the ironic light into which he casts Tirza's emancipatory strivings to free herself of indirect or ineffectual talk. Indeed, Agnon's preoccupations here coincide with issues that have led to a major schism in feminist criticism; a European-based skepticism toward the idea of voice has challenged, criticized, and deconstructed much of the North American brand of feminism concerned with women's speech and silence, women's writing, and efforts to win representation of that writing within the canon. Proponents of the latter approach have been keenly troubled by the prospect of political dispossession implicit in much of the post-structuralist stance, particularly in the penchant for radical decentering and dismantling which marks that camp's conceptions of otherness and sexual difference.[22]

At the end of *Bidmi yameha* the question of voice reasserts itself, complicated by such matters. Tirza seeks out a new kind of expression by composing a memoir. This fact has several implications. On a simple dramatic level, the effort to chronicle is plausibly motivated by Tirza's adolescence. Given the enlarged self-preoccupations typical of teenagers, keeping a diary is a natural activity for this time of life. Indeed, during adolescence "poetry is often written, journals kept, music composed by individuals who will never again in their lives be creative in these ways."[23] In Tirza's case such writing is a more formal attempt at the task begun earlier in the story: to constitute a self through language, to puzzle over her life and ask, who am I? (For Tirza this self-definition is crucial if she is not to subsume her identity totally within that of someone else.) That she is a female brings additional meaning to this act. She is, after all, a figure who has sought and is still seeking to assert her own voice in a society which discourages outspokenness by women. She turns, significantly, to the form of writing often favored by women: the diary or memoir not intended for publication but meant to provide an outlet for emotion and a forum for self-expression. Her purposes of self-definition and self-expression are stymied, though,

because she finds herself unhappily trapped in a discourse much larger than her own imagined script of events. Since other forces are at play than she had dreamed, and since even her public speaking up has led her to an all-encompassing, seemingly pre-ordained pattern of relations, writing serves as a last resort, a way for her to seek solace and not as a way for her to arrive at unambiguous enunciation of identity. Tirza does not fully understand her psychological quandaries, nor is she aware of feminist discourse that, from a later date, makes her isolated act of writing seem prototypical rather than anomalous and that might have encouraged her to sound her voice this way. As her persistent unhappiness and continuing restlessness lead her to one last act of speaking out, she brings the uncertainties of her stance to the fore in her closing comments. "Sometimes I would ask myself to what purpose have I written my memories, what new things have I seen and what do I wish to leave behind? Then I would say, it is to find rest in my writing, so did I write all that is written in this book" (p. 216). Caught between the new and the old, she is left still searching for a context for her own voice, establishing it—only ambiguously—in a private realm of writing.

Two major thematic concerns thus coincide and enrich one another in *Bidmi yameha:* the return of the repressed and the repression of female voice. The past of the mother resurfaces even as the daughter's early pre-oedipal inclinations reemerge in adolescence with destructive force. Agnon's use of the woman's struggle for emancipatory language, together with the portrayal of the female adolescent as partially emergent voice, effectively symbolizes and conveys the drives at once present and absent in these lives. Possible other impulses for the male author's selection of a woman narrator also suggest themselves. This narrative strategy of othering may reflect Agnon's sensitivities regarding the death of his mother, about which he could not bring himself to write directly.[24] By severing authorial identification with a character, the writer can confront a painful topic more easily. However, the assigning of different gender to his protagonist is most felicitous, precisely because it draws on normative collective assumptions: the association of women with subordinate social position. Evocation of broad cultural codes, the subduing of female voice as sociological phenomenon, enhances attention to the individual psychology of repression in the novella. This point does not contradict the fact that Agnon often attributes strength to his female characters. In many of his stories women are the more active and men the more passive figures. No doubt this is a contrast which was psychologically true for Agnon, who perceived some of the women in his life as dominant personalities. His female characters, though, especially those who live in nineteenth-century milieus, must deal with patriarchal societal structures regardless of their own personality traits. In *Bidmi yameha*

Tirza takes remarkable initiatives, but finds that these are enmeshed in a cultural circumstance of opposition to her willfulness.

That this novella focuses on a female adolescent character makes another noteworthy contribution to tensions between the spoken and the unspoken. All teenagers experience a wide range of bewildering new bodily sensations. As a result, adolescence carries an "enormous burden of the unexpressed."[25] The problem becomes that much more acute if the process of sexual development is met with silence or deemed an unspeakable phenomenon. *In the Prime of Her Life* alludes to such matters only very tangentially—in, for instance, Tirza's concern about her attire, in the episode when the doctor notices how she has grown and what she is wearing, in the girl's complaints that her father hasn't noticed her appearance. Given, however, that Tirza's psychosexual development is the main focus of the story, and given that Leah dies when her daughter is 12 or 13 (the usual age of menarche), the very silence about the protagonist's sexuality suggests that which has remained unexpressed. Passed over without comment, neglected in favor of mourning, it is Tirza's adolescent development in all its psychic and physical aspects which demands attention and which, ignored, insists on expressing itself eventually. The result is the precarious emotional stance and the oscillation between cries and whispers that constitute the text.

The impact of these psychological issues is reinforced by the biblicisms of the prose. Because this language as speech is unnatural—that is, removed from conversational diction—it at once allows the woman to speak up and also muffles her voice; the reader cannot find citations of Tirza Mintz, as she spoke, even though her verbal behavior remains of central importance to the narrative. Like the biblical narrative after which *In the Prime of Her Life* is fashioned, this text offers highly stylized and laconic prose even while it privileges dialogue over exposition. Similarly, as is consistent with Agnon's biblical antecedents, voice here is the primary form for revelation of character.[26] To judge the effects of this writing it is significant to remember that the text is obtrusively distanced from the author's usual voice, not only in terms of gender but in terms of the temporal and cultural associations of the artistic idiom deployed in this fiction. To be sure, Agnon's more familiar style, as it relies on rabbinic rather than biblical sources, is also distant from spoken vernacular. Consequently it fulfills much the same purpose of creating an intermediary world between hushed and vocal lives. Agnon's contemporary characters often inhabit a spiritual realm of dislocation, caught between past and present, tradition and modernity. The difference in *Bidmi yameha* lies in the special nuances this novella cultivates. By recalling the most ancient of sources, the narrative resonates with earliness. It evokes primordial times of humanity and

the beginnings of the Jewish people, even as its allusions echo and amplify Tirza's own preoccupation with origins. For example, when she at first recoils against the idea of her mother and Mazal as lovers, she notes that husband and wife are "one flesh" (see the passage quoted above from p. 16). The reference to Adam and Eve implies that something has gone wrong at the very beginnings of Tirza's life, even before her birth. The knowledge she acquires—that love between Akaviah and Leah preceded her mother's marriage—sunders the unity which Genesis postulates and which Tirza presumed had obtained in her own family. Frequent references to the prophets in this narrative (including constant mentions of the expression *yemey kedem* as in the quote from p. 16, above) likewise suggest tensions between what was and what will be, a foreseeing of later events together with an awareness of earlier ones. Among the numerous allusions in the text, of special note is the title as it recalls Hezekiah's illness and so comments on speech and silence. In Isaiah 38:10 the king beseeches God not to let him die in the prime of his life, and he notes that only the living can praise God. Leah's death and silence present a reversal of these terms. Renouncing life and remaining dumb, she refuses to assent to the order of things. Tirza's case is then a variation on both preceding figures. Her commitment to her marriage and her writing of her memoirs suggests a simultaneous sustaining and containing of her voice. Neither speechless withdrawal nor a heartily vocal endorsement of and engagement with life, hers is a troubled and not wholly self-aware acquiescence to her fate.

Here, as elsewhere, the biblicisms of Agnon's style dignify Tirza's problems, raising them to an almost mythological status while also contrasting them with ancient texts. The effect, frequently, is to provide the author a useful tool with which to indicate layers of meaning and unconscious desire unnoticed by Tirza. A particularly telling instance of discrepancy between the modern text and the biblical source occurs when Kaila makes faces into the mirror; Tirza laughs,and the text reads, *va'etsḥak beqirbi* (p. 13). Clearly recalling the story of Sarah, this phrase makes *sotto voce* commentary on Tirza's lack of self-awareness as well as her blindness to understanding about the past and the future, emotional depths and surface motivations in human relations. The Bible recounts that Sarah laughed in mockery and disbelief when told that God had promised her a child in her old age. Later, however, she names her son "Yitsḥak" to express a laugh of delight at her blessing. The matriarch rejoices at having been proved wrong and acknowledges a divine plan that exceeds her own comprehension. Tirza's laughter, too, undergoes a transformation of meaning—unlike Sarah's, though, not for the better. Her initial amusement at Kaila's foolishness can only be understood, on a second reading, as a mistaken

view of her own power or control and ignorance of her vulnerability. Greater forces, impervious to individual wants, shape her life, and she falls into a trap precisely by trying to escape it. The birth of her child signals no joy; her final melancholy is one more manifestation of the crooked that cannot be made straight.[27]

Tirza's studies add another, historical dimension to the story of her personal dilemmas and add to the resonances of the biblicized prose. Description of her Hebrew lessons provides an occasion for Agnon to contrast the traditional *melamed* with the enlightened teacher, and to sketch ongoing squabbles between the two. Tirza's education therefore calls attention to the secondary theme of Haskalah, recuperations of tradition, and return to the old ways which are brought out at various junctures in the novel. Just as the reader must ask whether Tirza submits to a repetition of fate or frees herself from the constraints and unhappinesses which marked her mother's life, so it becomes imperative to inquire: will modern Hebrew rebirth be a weak, artificial reproduction of biblical language and a diminished reflection of the old religious order, or will it possess an individual vitality and offer viable ideas of its own?[28] Beyond this, it is possible to ask, will cultural revival allow for creativity and provide individuals within this renaissance the tools for self-expression? Tirza's own reactions to her lessons are significant in this regard; taught grammar and *ḥumash*, she is at turns intrigued and bored by her schooling. Rote repetition and the routine of studying are seen by her as onerous bondage to empty words. Nonetheless, her chief delight in life is reading—including Bible—and her chief comfort is in keeping a chronicle. Her Hebrew education, a broad one for a girl in those times (p. 173), plays an important role in allowing her to forge her own voice.

These points are important because they pose the problem, to what extent is Tirza's a story of female predicaments, and to what extent is she used for symbolic purposes as an embodiment of collective issues?[29] Throughout the history of Hebrew writing female figures have often served to symbolize an entire reality or the Jewish people as a whole—from the desolate widow of Lamentations to the personification of Zion as beloved in medieval poetry, to A. B. Yehoshua's contemporary psychohistories of Zionism. While Agnon uses Tirza to clue readers in to a series of historical questions, he also deals in depth with her personal tale specifically as a woman's experience. In western literature writing concerned with women has commonly been dismissed as overly narrow or thematically trivial, reflecting the social reality that women have so often been left out of public activity and restricted to domestic life. In *Bidmi yameha* private experience is not subordinated to Tirza's symbolic function; it is accorded lengthy and serious consideration while national renaissance remains the secondary interest. However,

the psychological dilemmas the protagonist faces do reinforce and are reinforced by the depiction of cultural rebirth in two ways: first there is a parallel between the individual effort and the collective effort to revive the past, and second there is a dramatic situation in a specific socio-historical milieu that makes question about this woman's social roles an integral part of the collective issues treated here. It is a novelty for a woman to have the opportunities Tirza has—to study and to insist on her own wishes in rebellion against her father's plans for her marriage. Her audacity becomes possible in a climate that has begun to encourage human beings to shape their own future. Within that context, where the question of individual freedom looms so large, Agnon examines very specifically the possibility of freedom for a woman whose expected lot in life is very different from that of the men around her.

What, then, might a feminist critique conclude about Agnon's treatment of Tirza Mintz Mazal? Though he does not champion her cause (at least, not the way she perceives it as one of vocal self-assertion), the author does pay serious attention to female predicaments and grants them credence as a legitimate topic for literary art. And, if he presents Tirza's expressions of desire as mistaken effort dwarfed by greater forces, this attitude is skeptical of her but not entirely different from the one taken elsewhere toward male protagonists—for instance, Yakob Rechnitz in *Betrothed.* In that tale, as in *Bidmi yameha,* it is the past both personal and mythic which overshadows the future, and not a humanly wrought future that masters and appropriates the past for its own purposes.[30] Finally, Agnon was no feminist, but he unquestionably brought remarkable insight and what can only be described as a brilliant synthesis of themes, narrative strategies, and stylistic sensitivities to his representation of a woman's voice. While designed to serve his own artistic aims, the treatment of women's speech and silence in this narrative renders *In the Prime of Her Life* exceptionally responsive to feminist readings, and suggests ways in which feminist criticism may help illuminate the particular linguistic circumstances and literary conventions of the Hebrew tradition.

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NOTES

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2. Two book-length studies adopting a feminist perspective have been published recently in English: *Eve's Journey: Feminine Images in Hebraic Literary Tradition* by Nehama Aschkenasy (Philadelphia, 1986), and *Israeli Mythogynies: Women in Contemporary Hebrew Fiction* by Esther Fuchs (New York, 1987). See also my essay reviewing this work, "Feminist Criticism and Hebrew Literature," *Prooftexts* 8 (1988): 143–56. Other notable contributions to the field include Yael Feldman, "Inadvertent Feminism: The Image of the Frontier Woman in Contemporary Israeli Fiction," *Modern Hebrew Literature* 10, 3–4 (1985): 34–37 and "Gender In/Difference in Hebrew Fictional Autobiographies," *Biography* 11:3 (1988): 189–209; Lily Ratok, "Portrait of a Woman As an Israeli Poet" [Hebrew] *Moznayim* (May, 1988): 56–62; Nurit Govrin, *Hamaḥtsit harishona: Dvora Baron ḥayeha vitsirata* [The First Half: Dvora Baron's Life and Work] (Jerusalem, 1988); and Sonia Grober, "First Axioms: A Writer's Attempt at Self-Definition," *Modern Hebrew Literature* 13:3–4 (1988): 10–14. This last piece, on fiction by Amalia Kahana-Carmon, concerns the contemporary Hebrew writer who has been the most outspoken on the subject of women's writing and who has been a prominent advocate of women writers in Israel.

Altogether, only a small amount of work has been done compared to the veritable industry of feminist criticism which has established itself in American universities and publishing. There are indications that feminist thought is attracting more attention: the organizing of a conference on "Women in American and Israeli Literature and the Arts" (Tel Aviv University, March, 1989) and a proposed conference called "Perspectives on Gender and Text: Feminist Criticism and the Study of Modern Hebrew and Yiddish Literature" (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, June 1990) testify to increasing interest in this area of inquiry in both Israel and the United States.

3. Women's silences and the suppression of female voice, both as literary theme and as political dynamic in matters of canon formation, have been primary concerns of contemporary feminist theory. For an overview of such issues see, for example, Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York, 1978), Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York, 1979), and Elaine Showalter, "Toward a Feminist Poetics" plus "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness." Both are reprinted in the anthology Showalter edited, *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York, 1985): 125–43 and 243–76. Other critics, elaborating on and challenging these lines of thought, have investigated ways in which women in their writing attempt to liberate themselves from silence. See Patricia Yaeger's *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* (New York, 1988) and Margaret Homans' "Eliot, Wordsworth, and the Scene of the Sisters' Instruction," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*, ed. Elizabeth Abel (Chicago, 1982), pp. 53–72.

4. For an outline of major features in Agnon's language see Benjamin DeVries, "Vav Consecutive" [Hebrew], in *Le'Agnon shay* [S. Y. Agnon: Essays on the Writer and His Works], 2nd. ed. (Jerusalem, 1966), pp. 77–82.

5. S. Y. Penueli, *Yetsirato shel shay agnon* [The Writings of S. Y. Agnon] (Tel Aviv, 1960), and Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley, CA, 1968).

6. Hebrew citations are drawn from *'Al kapot haman'ul* in *Kol sipurav shel Shmuel Yosef Agnon* (Jerusalem, 1975). Quotations in English come from the translation by Gabriel Levin in *Eight Great Hebrew Short Novels*, ed. Alan Lelchuk and Gershon Shaked (New York, 1983), pp. 165–216.

7. "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York, 1985), pp. 292–313.

8. In an article called "The Craft of Engraving and the Craft of Creating," in *Yediot aḥronot*, Sept. 4, 1976, Yizhak Akaviahu discusses Mintz's reaction to the tombstone as an illustration of the artistic personality, i.e., the individual who casts feelings into material expression, taking away the soul of things but granting them eternal life and in the process distancing himself from warm personal interactions. This reading is problematic in that Mintz is not an artist, though he may share interpersonal difficulties associated

with the figure of the writer elsewhere in Agnon's fiction. More importantly, Akaviahu overlooks the specificity of this episode as a comment on relations between the sexes.

9. See, for example, Robin Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (New York, 1975), Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* (London, 1980), and *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, eds. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York, 1980). Of special interest in this last collection are the essays by Penelope Brown ("How and Why Are Women More Polite: Some Evidence from a Mayan Community," pp. 111–36) and William M. O'Barr and Bowman K. Atkins ("'Women's Language' or 'Powerless Languages'?," pp. 93–110), which emphasize that the speech behaviors in question are a function of power relations between the sexes. They are not to be understood as definitions of certain qualities inherently or necessarily feminine.

10. In an essay called "Lambs in Their Mother's Pasture: Latent Content in Agnon's *In the Prime of Her Life*," *Hebrew Studies* 29 (1988): 67–80, Nitza Ben-Dov interprets Mintshi's indirections as a manipulative engineering of Tirza's desires. Because of her own jealousy and thwarted love for Mazal, Mintshi in this view takes revenge on Akaviah and Leah by maneuvering Tirza into marital mismatch and attendant unhappy consequences. There is a persuasive argument that this character's intentions are evil; her distortion is one of the several manifestations of irreparable psychic damage in this fictional world.

11. Yosef Ewen discusses at length how dialogue throughout Agnon's work functions to indicate failed communication: "The Dialogue in the Stories of S. Y. Agnon" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* (1971): 281–94. In *Bidmi yameha* that communicative breakdown does exist between male characters, but crucial aspects of it are clearly genderized. For insight into how speech acts serve as central structuring devices in other fiction by Agnon, see Edna Coffin's essay, "Do Words Reveal or Conceal? Verbal Expression, Thought Process and Written Symbol in 'Yedidut'," in *Agnon: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Leon Yudkin (New York, 1988).

12. This scene of physical inscription on Tirza's body recalls Maxine Hong Kingston's tale of a Chinese woman warrior, who goes into battle scarred by the fine lines of writing carved into her flesh. For discussion, see Gubar, "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity," and "Don't Tell: Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*," by King-kok Cheung, *PMLA* 103:2 (1988): 162–74.

13. Especially Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot 'al sipurei agnon* [Essays on Agnon's Stories] (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 104–15, and, in response, Avraham Kariv, "And the Straight Shall Be Made Crooked" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* (January, 1978): 83–95.

14. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar offers lengthy exploration of connections between madness and rebellion in literary images of women. According to this account, the woman who refuses to be selfless, takes initiatives, or has a story to tell is perceived to be monstrous or insane.

15. On mother/daughter relations see *The Lost Tradition: Mothers and Daughters in Literature*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and E. M. Broner (New York, 1980). On the role of individual will in Agnon's writing see Dan Miron, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre," *Prooftexts* 7 (1987): 1–28.

16. For discussion see Eli Shweid, "In Way of Return" [Hebrew], *Gazit* 3 (1960): 17–20; Yair Mazor, *Hadinamika shel motivim* [The Dynamics of Motives in Some Works by S. Y. Agnon] (Tel Aviv, 1979); and David Aberbach, *At the Handles of the Lock: Themes in the Fiction of S. J. Agnon* (London, 1984).

17. *Female Adolescence: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Literature* (New Haven and London, 1986).

18. Dalsimer, p. 124. Of special interest in connection with *Bidmi yameha* are Dalsimer's comments on Jane Austen's *Persuasion*, another narrative about a woman who as a young teenager lost her mother. In that novel the protagonist, Ann, is tempted to marry the master of an estate which once belonged to her family. An older woman to

whom Ann looks up advises her to marry him and so become what the mother had once been: mistress of the estate. The protagonist is both enticed and disturbed at the possibility of symbolically reviving her mother by acting as a substitute for her. Ultimately, however, she rejects the marriage proposal. As a result, she steers clear to a much healthier passage from adolescence to adulthood than does Tirza Mintz.

19. In this view penis envy serves as the mechanism by which a daughter becomes disenchanted with women, causing her to break the primary bonds with the mother, favor attachments to the father, and develop an eagerness to bear his baby. Feminist psychoanalytic thinking has aimed to modify or discredit such notions. See Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, 1978), and Dorothy Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur: Sexual Arrangements and Human Malaise* (New York, 1976).

20. On apostasy and return to the fold, along with discussion of why this issue may render Akaviah unfit as a husband, see Meir Bosak, "Some Notes to *bidmi yameha*" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 42 (1981): 103–6.

21. On gaps in Tirza's consciousness about her own motives and about those of Mintshi and Mintz, see Gideon Shunami, "Gap in Consciousness As a Key to the Story" [Hebrew], *'Al hamishmar* (September 22, 1972), and Arnold Band, "The Unreliable Narrator in *My Michael* and *In the Prime of Her Life*" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 3 (1971): 30–47. Agnon's uses of irony and his methods of characterization which reveal what remains concealed to the characters themselves have been the topic of much critical discussion. See for instance Harai Golomb, "Combined Speech: A Major Technique in the Prose of S. Y. Agnon" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 1 (1968): 251–62; Gershon Shaked, *Omanut hasippur shel 'agnon* [S. Y. Agnon's Narrative Art] (Merhavia and Tel Aviv, 1976), especially 151–70; Baruch Hochman, *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Ithaca and London, 1971); and Esther Fuchs, *Omanut hahitommut: 'al ha'ironia shel shai agnon* [Cunning Innocence: On S.Y. Agnon's Irony] (Tel Aviv, 1985), especially 103–26.

22. For overviews of the feminist angle on these issues see, for instance, Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London and New York, 1985); Alice Jardine, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca and London, 1985); and Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York and London, 1983).

23. Dalsimer (1986), p. 20.

24. I am indebted to comments on this point from Emunah Yaron and Arnold Band.

25. Dalsimer, p. 14.

26. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), especially pages 63–88.

27. For discussion of other such biblical allusion in *Bidmi Yameha* see Mazor (1979); Nitza Ben-Dov, "Biblical Allusions in Agnon's 'Dance of Death': A Study in Intertextual Dissonance," *Modern Judaism* 7 (1987): especially pages 272–74; and Yizhak Akaviahu, "Bridges of Meaning: Some Notes to the Story *bidmi yameha*" [Hebrew], *Maariv*, July 22, 1988.

28. On Haskalah as a poor substitute for Scripture and tradition see Schweid (1960) and Aschkenasy (1986), pp. 193–201. My arguments on Agnon's language disagree with those of Penueli (1960). He sees the use of biblicisms as an indication of universal, as opposed to Jewish, themes. My understanding of the prose in this novella is that it augments the treatment of Hebrew cultural rebirth.

29. This is a central and knotty problem for much feminist criticism: to what extent has the particularity of women's experience been recognized as a valid literary topic? In different ways Fuchs, Aschkenasy, Ratok, and Feldman all grapple with this issue in connection with Hebrew literature.

30. See, for instance, Gershon Shaked, "Portrait of the Artist As a Young Neurotic," *Prooftexts* 7 (1987): 41–52, and Robert Alter, "Agnon's Mediterranean Fable," in *Defenses of the Imagination: Jewish Writers and Modern Historical Crisis* (Philadelphia, 1977), pp. 187–98.