

Generic Dilemmas

The study of autobiography, a relatively recent field, has been bedeviled from the onset by the definitional problem.¹ While the last thirty or so have seen a remarkable upsurge in the study of the genre, the question of what exactly constitutes autobiography has not only not been resolved but, if anything, become exacerbated.² On the one hand, such unlikely works as Eliot's *Four Quartets*³ and Hawthorne's *The Letter*⁴ are now discussed as 'autobiographies'. On the other, critics seem to take a perverse delight in revealing the ineluctable 'fiction' of such ostensibly straightforward self-referential texts as Newt Gingrich's *Apologia*⁵ and Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.⁶

The confusion has, in the post-World War II period, become compounded by representative autobiographers of the twentieth century, such as Sartre, Nabokov, Roland Barthes and Michel Leiris, who, in playing elaborate literary games of hide-and-seek, call attention to the problematic generic status of their own works.⁷ Autobiography, as a literary category, was further destabilized, interrogated and complicated by being sucked into the vortex of structuralist and later deconstructive discourse. The latter discourse, whose most important intellectual precursor is probably Mallarmé, has, in fact, evinced a certain grim fascination with 'decentring', 'displacing', 'de-facing' the sovereign bourgeois 'subject'.⁸ Post-modernist discourse on this topic actually provides a kind of photographic negative to the more traditional Whiggish narrative as pursued by Dilthey, Georg Misch, Georges Gusdorf and Karl Vossler. According to which the emergence of autobiography is coextensive with the emergence of historical consciousness, discovery of self, validation of the individual, et cetera. The rhetoric adopted in

however, proven rather resilient.¹⁰ Laura Marcus, in a recent survey of critical responses to autobiography, notes a contemporary tendency for the critics of autobiography themselves to yield to the autobiographical impulse in their discussions of the texts at hand. Marcus relates this to a wider phenomenon of the 'return of the subject'.¹¹ A parallel phenomenon in other disciplines of the humanities — anthropology in particular — certainly substantiates her thesis, as does, beyond academia, the sheer quantity of autobiographical/confessional literature produced in the last decade. Within the narrower confines of literary criticism, Marcus points out, the revelation concerning Paul de Man's pro-Nazi articles written from 1940 to 1942 was of wide-ranging implications. These biographical data raised the issue of the autobiographical and, of, as Marcus puts it, de Man's 'very substantial reflections on the modes of autobiography, confession and apologia — reflections which assert their generic 'impossibility' or the bad faith they manifest'. The comments of Alain Robbe-Grillet — forever the enfant terrible — on the topic of the disappearance and reappearance of the self in twentieth-century intellectual discourse are quite germane in the present context. 'Ideology', he writes, 'always masked, changes its face with ease. It is a hydra-mirror whose severed head quickly reappears, presenting the adversary who thought himself victorious the image of his own face'.

In surveying the criticism of autobiography of the last several decades, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this branch of literary discourse has reached something of an impasse. Analogically to the impossible quest for self-knowledge, which is autobiography, the criticism of the genre appears to be locked in a pattern of chasing its own tail. This is in no small part due to the sheer weightiness and intractability of the literary, existential, psychological and metaphysical issues that the criticism of autobiography addresses: the ontology of the self; the dialectics of truth and fiction (*Dichtung und Wahrheit*); the problem of memory, considered philosophically, psycholog-

One consequence of the oceanic nature of the discourse surrounding autobiography has been that this discourse has slowly but surely lost its moorings in any generically recognizable category of writing. There has been a noticeable tendency to include within the rubric of 'autobiography' any text that reflects upon, and reflects upon itself, reflecting upon, the vicissitudes of the self in relation to time, memory, narration and/or gender, race, class. The intellectual trajectory of James Olney, the founding-father of autobiographical studies in America, is representative in this respect. In a recent book, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life Writing*—the title itself is telling—Olney writes as follows:

Although I have in the past written frequently about autobiography as a literary genre, I have never been very comfortable doing it . . . and I have never met a definition of autobiography that I could rely on like . . . In the course of *Memory and Narrative* I call the kind of writing I am looking at by various names—confessions, autobiography, memoirs, periautography . . . autography . . . and—the most frequently employed term—life-writing . . . What I like about the term 'periautography', which would mean 'writing about or around the self', is precisely its indefinability and lack of generic rigor, its comfortably local and generous adaptability, and the same for 'life-writing'.¹⁵

In this tinkering with the very term 'autobiography', in order to broaden the horizon of the word's possible applications, Olney is not alone. The terrifying-sounding 'autobiathanatography', 'otobigraphy', 'otobigraphy' and, less frightening, 'auto/biography' (the forward slash marking the innovation), 'otobiography', are amongst the neologisms that have been coined for this species of writing.¹⁶ The problem with all this, however, is that it becomes increasingly unclear what is actually being talked about. Take, for example, Olney's preferred term, true, they are 'indefinite'—indefinite to such an extent, however, that it is difficult to determine what types of literary discourse these t

tude of forms of literary discourse that reveal the specular/duplicate/fragment/displacement et cetera of the self in writing; the other school of thought views autobiography along a continuum of literary modes that depict, reflect upon and substantiate a self in writing. Given this, there is some sort of perverted logic to the phenomenon of recent critics of autobiography effectively jettisoning autobiography, without quotation marks, altogether. Thus Laura Marcus:

Attempting to open up the modes of autobiographical representation, recent critics have coined neologisms intended to redefine, extend, and, usually and intentionally, ‘autobiography’ away from the limits of its constituent parts, self-life-writing . . . Other critics have bypassed ‘autobiography’ altogether, overtaking it on the left, and focus instead on related ‘outlaw genres’—including testimonial literature, oral narratives and ethnographies. It could be argued that ‘autobiography’ is kept in play through this shift to its transgressive homologues.

We are thus left in very much the same situation, though considerably exacerbated, as that described by William Spengemann, writing in 1980: ‘The only arguable definition of autobiography would be a full account of all the ways in which the word has been used.’¹⁹ Sarah Pratt, writing in 1996, essentially reiterates Spengemann’s observation: ‘In addressing the basic problem of definition, the essential argument would be that almost anything counts as autobiography these days, for we live in the midst of a critical free-for-all about the nature of the self, the nature of reality, and hence the nature of autobiography.’²⁰ Pratt goes on to provide a lucid and concise thumbnail sketch of the contemporary critical state of affairs:

Yet there are still scholars who are most aptly termed traditionalists—those who define autobiography as an individual’s presumably truthful, rational exposition of her or his own life story written by her or himself . . . And there are those who might be called ‘literary lib-

an embodiment of patriarchal values and hence invalid in relation to women. Deconstructionists deny the very concept of the self.²¹

Rousseau's *Confessions* as Autobiographical Paradigm

The orientation in the present study definitely falls, for the most part, within the 'traditionalist' spectrum, as this is understood by Pratt. My approach is 'traditionalist' also in that generic considerations are given a central position in the present analysis; nor do I attempt, to return back to Marcus, to 'redefine' autobiography 'away from the limits of its component parts'—'self-life-writing', taken separately or as a composite entity, hardly, in my view, constitutes an over-circumscribed topic. My decision to steer away from the wilder shores of autobiographical discourse is also pragmatic; since there exists, to my knowledge, no synthetic study of Jewish autobiography on the scale attempted here, my intention is to provide a preliminary study—a first word, rather than *dernier cri*. Methodologically, I follow Philippe Lejeune, whose unwavering commitment to a generic approach to autobiography is unparalleled in the field.²² It is Lejeune's early and pioneering work, *L'autobiographie en France*, that provides the model for my study. Lejeune's later prolific writings on autobiography have informed my reading of discrete texts. But it is this constitutive, introductory work of his that poses 'elementary, but fundamental questions: what is an autobiography, in what does it differ from the memoir, from the personal diary, from memoirs? How long has it existed, and what is closest to the spirit and intent of the present work.

Thus, following Lejeune, it is here posited that 'autobiography' as a mode of both reading and writing, is a strictly post-Rousseauian phenomenon. Rousseau's *Confessions*, Lejeune argues in this work, not only gave rise to the conception and the term 'autobiography',²⁴ but

terms such reading as ‘an illusion of perspective’: ‘This illusion is natural: it corresponds to the most spontaneous historical operation which makes us constantly redistribute the elements of the past independent upon our present categories.’²⁷ It is this ‘retrospective illusion’ in its back-projection of Rousseauian categories of confession to the history of classical and mediaeval provenance that enables the contemporary critic to read the *Confessions* of Augustine, Abelard’s *Histoire de mes malheurs et cetera* as ‘autobiography’. Such reading, Lejeune argues, runs quite contrary to the hermeneutic codes prevailing at the time of the initial production and consumption of these texts.²⁸

The claim that Rousseau is the founding-father of modern autobiography has, of course, been made repeatedly.²⁹ It is Lejeune, however, to my mind, who makes, in *L'autobiographie en France*, the most compelling and systematic argument for the primacy of Rousseau in the history of the genre.³⁰ He thus corroborates Rousseau’s claim, as trumpeted in the opening lines of the *Confessions*, to have solved on an enterprise which has no precedent.³¹ Following Lejeune and drawing upon the works of other scholars, I present a summary of the principal innovations of the *Confessions* that exercised a formative influence upon subsequent autobiographical writing. Each of these elements may assume a greater or lesser degree of prominence within a given work. The manner in which these elements express themselves is not uniform, the modalities that they assume being dependent upon the system of literary discourse within which they occur.

Of primary significance, as has frequently been noted, is Rousseau’s desacralisation of the religious confessional. While availing himself of the model—he cannot have been unaware of the coincidence of the title of his work with that of Augustine—he effects a fundamental and far-reaching alteration in the discourse of the religious confessional. Augustine, for whom “confession” means primarily *confessio laudis* and not *confessio peccati*,³² addresses himself throughout his *Confessi-*

man. The veracity of Augustine's narrative is guaranteed by the conscience of his addressee. Here, as Jean Starobinski notes, 'is a contract guaranteed by the highest bail.'³³ For Rousseau, the ultimate criterion of sincerity is not that he be true to the 'Eternal Being', but rather 'the succession of feelings which have marked the development of the being', this being the one 'faithful guide upon which I can count'. For Rousseau and for autobiographers who follow him, even Christian, ³⁵ it is the 'self' that assumes many of the functions traditionally assigned to God in Christian confessional literature.

Rousseau was the first to incorporate techniques of verisimilitude and psychological penetration deriving from the eighteenth-century novel within the non-fictional, extra-referential context of autobiography. In particular, he was indebted to what Lejeune refers to as the 'new biographical model' of eighteenth-century providence—the model that purports to be an authentic first-person account of the life of the protagonist.³⁶ The acknowledged pioneer of this genre is Daniel Defoe, whose *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1721) each purport to be the genuine autobiography of the respective hero and heroine. 'Autobiography', Lejeune writes, 'could not come into its own without imitating people imitating people who were imagining what it was to be an autobiographer. A singular game of mirrors that demonstrates that sincerity is learned, originality imitative.'³⁸ Rousseau himself was both as reader and as writer, well versed in the discourse of the eighteenth-century novel. His *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), an epistolary novel modeled on Richardson's *Clarissa* (1741)³⁹, contains strong autobiographical elements as does his semi-novelistic 'educational treatise' *Émile* (1762).⁴⁰

Autobiography, in distinction to biography and the memoir, functions primarily as an introspective, self-reflective mode of literary discourse. Perceptions and emotional responses of the self assume, in autobiography, the roles assigned for deeds and events in the life of

‘Neuchâtel’ variant of the preamble to the *Confessions*: ‘The relationships I have had with several people compel me to speak as freely of them as of myself. I can only succeed in making myself known by making them known also.’⁴¹ Many of the more decisive encounters with the other in the shaping of the autobiographer’s self occur in the years of childhood and adolescence. Parents, teachers, schoolmates and domestic staff may thus achieve a prominence in the autobiography that would, in the memoir, be reserved for generals and prime ministers, renowned men of letters and so on. This is not to say that the formative encounters with the other in an autobiography are restricted to the historically obscure. But when the great do drift in and out of the pages of an autobiography, it is often not on account of the qualities that granted them this status that they are recalled. The most powerful and lasting impression left upon Amos Oz of the brew poet Shaul Tchernikhovsky, the memory of which eclipses any subsequent acquaintance with his poems, derives from an intimate memory of the man’s mane of hair, his ‘felt [as in the material, Matisse’s cheek], the feel of his moustache on Oz’s cheek, his laughing, his furry hands, but above all the man’s *smell*, and the mysteries this evoked: ‘I summon this smell and the smell returns to me, a somewhat coarse smell, a dusty smell, but strong and pleasant, a smell that reminds me of thick sack-cloth . . . his compassionate, comforting smell.’⁴² The great poet—all but deified in the Revisionist Zionist literary circle Oz grew up in—is thus leveled in the eyes of the child. A bundle of visual, tactile and, above all, olfactory sensations, experienced, Oz writes, ‘two to three years before I succeeded in pronouncing the name “Tchernikhovsky”’.⁴³

Autobiography is contingent upon a degree of historical awareness. The autobiographer does not portray a pre-determined self or life but rather tracks an open-ended process of becoming. It is this sense of historicism that the crucial distinction between autobiog-

period of origins, childhood, as recalled and reflected upon from a retrospective vantage point of the adult. 'There is a certain sequence of impressions', writes Rousseau, 'which modify those that follow them and it is necessary to know the original set before passing judgments. I endeavor in all cases to explain the prime causes, in order to convey the interrelation of results'.⁴⁵ There is thus an imbrication of meaning to temporal passage and a hermeneutic investment in chronological narrative. Wilhelm Dilthey indeed, turning the tables, views autobiography as the paradigm par excellence for historical enquiry: 'The power and breadth of our own life, and the effort and reflection upon it is the foundation of historical vision. It alone enables us to give a second life to the bloodless shades of the past'.⁴⁶ As it is in particular to the resurrection/reliving of childhood that autobiography devotes especial 'energy and reflection'. Of all the 'ages of childhood holds the privileged place in the autobiography; the implicit ideology of the genre even bestows upon the childhood an ontologically privileged status in the life-cycle; the childhood/garden of Eden analogy so common as to constitute a trope of subsequent autobiographical writing has its origins in the first book of the *Confessions*. In quantitative terms alone, no writer prior to Rousseau would have dreamt of devoting so many pages to the depiction of his childhood as does Rousseau in the early books of the *Confessions*; that Rousseau himself was aware of this lack of precedence, and somewhat anxious about it, so, is attested to by the numerous asides that punctuate this account, apologising to the reader/justifying his close scrutiny of these years. In the subsequent development of the genre, it is, indeed, not at all surprising for an autobiographer to devote him/herself predominantly, or even exclusively, to an exploration of the childhood years; while an autobiographer may well exclude from his narrative an account of the years of maturity, it is hard to imagine an autobiography that would exclude the years of childhood. Rousseau, as autobiographer, writes 'les

tobiographer than do the deeds and events of the adult years, a system of relations that obtains in biography, not to say the memoir, thus reversed. Edwin Muir, who as an autobiographer stands firmly against the Rousseauian line of tradition, contrasts the unsullied, 'original' of the child, 'in which there is a more complete harmony of things with each other than he will ever know again',⁴⁸ with the 'world' which 'is a dry legend consisting of names and figures', 'up in collusion with mankind and known only 'in an external and receptive way'.⁴⁹ Anthony Cockshut writes of the 'commonplace' of the early chapters of autobiography which describes childhood as 'the best',⁵⁰ and Roy Pascal goes so far as to define those autobiographies that confine themselves to the years of childhood as the 'purest' of the genre.⁵¹

For Rousseau, and for autobiographers after him—and psychologists—childhood is viewed along an ontological continuum with adult identity, not, as in Rousseau's own *Émile*, a self-contained, autonomous period of life. Thus Rousseau, in the lengthy 'apology' he supplies to the reader for the account of his youthful experiences that he is in the course of narrating in Book IV of the *Confessions*, aside may fairly be called a manifesto for all future autobiographers:

These long details of my early youth may well seem extremely childish, and I am sorry for it. Although in certain respects I have been a man since birth, I was for a long time and still am, a child in many others. I never promised to present the public with a great personage. I promised to depict myself as I am; and to know me in my later years it is necessary to have known me well in my youth. As objects generally make less impression on me than does the memory of them, as all my ideas take pictorial form, the first features to engrave themselves on my mind have remained there, and such as have subsequently imprinted themselves have combined with these rather than obliterated them . . . I endeavour in all cases to explain the prime cause

phrase, 'distance and relation'⁵⁴ between the two planes of temporal existence elicits an autobiographical fascination with memory as the locus of the encounter between child and adult self. Since memory reaches back toward the self as child, but the act of memory occurs within the self as adult, an irresolvable temporal dilemma lies at the heart of the autobiographical enterprise. In face of this dilemma, autobiographical discourse evinces a marked tendency to collapse into the present. This collapse into the present moment of recall and narration, as is well illustrated in the above citation from the *Confessions*, lends a meta-discursive aspect to autobiography, which becomes a hallmark of the genre.⁵⁵ Thus Rousseau's formulation of the problem, as found in the 'Neuchâtel' variant of the preamble to the *Confessions*, is astonishing in its prescience and sophistication, especially in view of the fact that neither autobiography as a genre nor the criticism of it had, at the time these lines were written (1764), become established: 'In giving myself over both to my remembrance of the past and to my present feeling, I will depict doubly (*Je peindrai doublement*) the state of my mind, that is both at the moment the event happened to me and at the moment I describe it; my style, which is even yet natural—now energetic and now leisurely, now subdued and now extravagant, now grave and now gay—will itself form a part of the story.'⁵⁶ In high-modernist autobiographical experimentation, this aspect of Rousseau's project is subject to hypertrophy to the extent of various degrees of dissolution of autobiographical narrative. Thus Nabokov's autobiography is, as the title *Invitation to a Beheading* suggests, a book about remembering, and Roland Barthes, writing *On Roland Barthes* writes about writing about Roland Barthes et cetera as a continuous process of self-creation.⁵⁷ It is Samuel Beckett, as James Olney has so richly demonstrated, who takes this autobiographical meta-vertiginousness as far as or perhaps even further than, it can be taken.⁵⁸

turned for his successors.⁵⁹ In a more recent, profound study of the totality of Rousseau's autobiographical writings—the *Confessions*, *Journal de Jean Jacques—Dialogues* and *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire*—James Olney argues that Rousseau actually prefigured the modern and postmodernist fragmentation of self. Olney's observation is corroborated by the paradigmatic post-modern autobiographer, Michel Leiris, who saw Rousseau's *Confessions* 'as exemplary of the heterogeneous writing needed to "grasp the human", which he himself pursued in his ethnopoetic combination of anthropology and autobiography'.⁶⁰ Rousseau then, the harbinger of the romantic self, modern individualism et cetera, was also he who sowed the seeds of disjunction into these constructs. 'In how many ways', asks Olney, 'was Jacques not the crucial, pivotal, transitional figure between the continuity of St. Augustine and what we have come to call the modern and postmodernism of Samuel Beckett? . . . Rousseau it was . . . who fragmented the I and dispersed it among various hes . . . He cut himself loose, leaving it without ties, anchor, or direction, and to his descendants he left as starting-point what for him was the endpoint: a free-floating self, uncentered except in itself, and quite unreal . . .'. Olney's thesis, admirably documented with a wealth of examples from Rousseau's entire oeuvre, demonstrates, I believe, that to adopt a paradigm based upon Rousseau for a literary/historical study of a particular autobiographical tradition, is not to adopt an overly rigid, descriptive and restrictive heuristic model.

To speak of 'autobiography' before Rousseau, without conceding that this term is used as a heuristic device, is to fall prey to what we name the 'retrospective illusion', or 'the illusion of eternity', the illusion, writes Lejeune, that 'corresponds to the most spontaneous historical operation, which makes us constantly redistribute the elements of the past depending upon our present categories'.⁶² By equating to speak of autobiography after Rousseau without acknowledging

We, who were related by spiritual consanguinity with Brenner-Berdichevsky, recognized almost exclusively only one type of sincerity, that extending in world literature from Rousseau and the Young Werther: that of revelation of the self and confession of the self.⁶³

In modern Jewish history Eastern Europe provided the soil, quantitatively and qualitatively, from which an autonomous, modern Jewish autobiographical discourse, written in Jewish languages, arose. Eastern European Jews, writing autobiographically in Hebrew and Yiddish, would, at first blush, appear wayward and exotic ‘children of Jean Jacques’ indeed. Yet one cardinal aspect of Rousseau’s intellectual and autobiographical legacy is its omnipresence.⁶⁴ Rousseauian thought, however, variously mediated, exercised a pervasive influence upon the Hebrew Haskalah (Enlightenment) movement,⁶⁵ the intellectual movement of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature in Eastern Europe. More than one of the earliest autobiographies clearly fashioned after the example of Rousseau’s *Confessions* was written by an Eastern European Jew: Solomon Maimon. And, as shall be seen, Maimon’s autobiography provided the cornerstone for the Hebrew and Yiddish development of the genre. Eastern European Jewish autobiography, it is here argued, is a specifically modern, specifically post-Rousseauian phenomenon, essentially analogous to the history of the genre in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western Europe. Rousseauian autobiography marks its mark on Jewish literary and intellectual history not only as a mode of writing but also as one of reading. As with wider European autobiography, so with Jewish, the notion of a pre-Rousseauian, indigenous autobiographical tradition is itself a *post facto*, post-Rousseauian intellectual construct arising from a modern mode of reading that projects autobiographical categories onto pre-modern texts. The origins and history

ern Europe, of which autobiography is both cause and symptom, not effected smoothly; the phenomenon with its attendant aesthetic, sociological and intellectual ramifications is of central importance to the secularization of Jewish life and letters in Eastern Europe, and its reverberations are to be felt to this day. The problematic nature of the reception/absorption of the autobiographical into Eastern European Jewish literary and intellectual discourse is attested to by the limited historical data. On the one hand, Jewish autobiography takes its place as does every other major European branch of the genre, from Rousseau and that, as noted, hot on the heels of the publication of Rousseau's *Confessions*. On the other, at least one hundred years were to elapse before autobiography, understood both as a mode of reading and a mode of writing, showed any signs of becoming established within a Jewish sphere of literary discourse in Eastern Europe. Why should Jewish autobiography have entered into so lengthy a period of latency at precisely the time in which the 'classic' autobiographies of France, Germany, England, and Russia were written?⁶⁷ The 'theoretical model' outlined below seeks to provide some framework for the understanding of this curious phenomenon of literary and intellectual history.

This theoretical model, combined with a substantive definition of autobiography based upon the paradigm of Rousseau's *Confession*, determined the choice of texts in this study. For reasons advanced below the main focus in this study is upon texts written in Hebrew or Yiddish. A survey of Eastern European Jewish autobiography written in Russian⁶⁸ or of autobiography reflecting the Eastern European Jewish experience written in English, French or German would require a very different methodological model from the one here adopted.

This having been said, in writing this book I became increasingly aware that the Yiddish autobiographical voice, as it emerged from a synthetic appraisal of a number of representative texts—inevitably in translations notwithstanding—differed markedly from that of Hebrew

to present this material than within the present book. Thus, while I do not engage at some length on one Yiddish autobiography (that of Avrom Viner) in this book, provide an overview of the YIVO interwar autobiography competitions in Poland, the majority of submissions to which were written in Yiddish, and have occasion to cite various Yiddish autobiographies as supportive material, I have not here attempted a synthetic overview of the topic. By way of meagre compensation for this omission, I shall confine myself here to some general observations concerning this vital, massive and quintessentially Eastern European branch of Jewish autobiography.

Chronologically speaking, autobiographical writing in Yiddish considerably postdates that in Hebrew, the origins of the latter tracing to the mid-nineteenth century. This is absolutely consistent with the more general Yiddish literary belatedness, by comparison with Hebrew, in the assimilation of modern European literary genres—notably the novel. Thus, the great majority of nineteenth-century Yiddish writers, including the three *Klassikers*—Mendele, Peretz and Sholem Aleichem—made their literary debuts in Hebrew. More than the two most prolific Yiddish writers of the nineteenth century, Avrom Meir Dik and N. M. Shaykevitch (*Shoymer*), elected Hebrew as the language of autobiographical expression.⁷⁰ Some members of the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia, notably Shimon Frug, had reverted to Yiddish after the 1881 pogroms,⁷¹ but Yiddish did not become an accepted linguistic medium for serious literary discourse until the decade of the twentieth century.⁷² ‘We have no tradition’, we read in the dissident modernist Yiddish New York journal *In zikh*: of May 1923: ‘We have found very little that could serve as tradition for us. The tradition begins precisely with us, strange as it may sound.’⁷³

This relative chronological belatedness of Yiddish autobiography also entails—though it does not fully account for—some marked nomenclological and stylistic distinctions to be drawn between He

dominant in shaping Hebrew literary and intellectual discourse. The effects of this paradigm-shift are definitely to be discerned in Yiddish autobiographical discourse. Many Yiddish autobiographical works make much more sense when viewed within the specifically Russian variant of Rousseauian autobiography. Russian autobiography, in general, markedly less introspective than its Western European counterpart. Less solipsistic and solitary in orientation, the natural, social, and wider socio-historical environment—the ‘other’, in short—accorded a far greater role in accounts of the becoming and being of the self; compare, for example, Tolstoy’s account of his childhood pointedly entitled *Childhood*, not *My Childhood*—with that of his spiritual mentor, Rousseau.⁷⁵ Russian autobiographical writings are characterized—as is the Russian novel—by their exceptional generic fluidity and amorphousness, their frequently composite status as memoir, diary, and autobiography at one and the same time.⁷⁶ For all this amorphousness, shift of emphasis and coloration these works do retain, like their Yiddish counterparts, unmistakable traces of their ultimate progenitor—Rousseau—in particular the Rousseau of the *Confessions*. There is an essential correspondence between this very general differentiation between Russian autobiography and Western European autobiography that between Yiddish autobiographical writing and Hebrew autobiography. The allocentric, other-directed tendency, here contextualized within the Russian literary environment, dovetails with specifically Yiddish literary dynamics according to which this language was construed as the archetypal language of the other, the non-self, or even anti-self. To cite the chapter headings of Dan Miron’s classic study of the rise of Yiddish literature in the nineteenth century speak for themselves in this regard: ‘A Language as Caliban’; ‘The Mimic Writer and his “little Jew”’.

The Yiddish autobiographical self—in prose at least—is, by comparison with that of the Hebrew, markedly more contextualized in space and place, socio-historical setting, family—I speak here of texts v

the naming of the protagonists of these autobiographies—respectively, ‘Shloyme the son of Khaim’ and ‘Sholem the son of Noh the son of Vevik’. In what is probably the most widely acclaimed Yiddish autobiography, Daniel Charney’s *Barg aruf*,⁷⁸ Charney enters the first section—previously published as a separate book—‘Family Chronicle’. Again, there are clear Russian literary parallels here. Andrew Baruch Wachtel: ‘Rather than beginning their autobiographies with their own memories . . . Russian autobiographers usually started with a discussion of their entire family history. In the course of the nineteenth century, there were at least five autobiographies that bore the subtitle ‘A Family Chronicle’ and many more in which the phrase was used in the text.’⁷⁹ This ‘being for/with the other’ rather than ‘for myself alone’, a self-conception further fostered by the socialist dimension of a significant number of Yiddish autobiographies, clearly swerves from the carefully constructed paradigm based upon Rousseau’s *Confessions* that informs the present study of the origins of Jewish autobiography. If, indeed, some of the representative Yiddish autobiographers are ‘children of Rousseau’—and I would argue they are—it would be more of the fragmented, doubled-up ‘Rousseau’ of the *Rousseau juge de Jean Jacques—Dialogues* than of the Rousseau of the *Confessions*. In grappling with this shift in perspective, I have been much informed by recent studies of Russian autobiography, which, until very recently, perhaps precisely because of its departure from classic models, has been the least studied of the European national autobiographical traditions.⁸⁰

In and Around the Self: The Critical Discourse

Just as autobiography itself made a belated appearance in Jewish Eastern Europe, so the critical discourse surrounding autobiography.