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Ulrike Behlau and Bernhard Reitz (Eds.)

**Jewish Women's Writing  
of the 1990s and Beyond  
in Great Britain and the United States**

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E-Mail: [wvt@wvttrier.de](mailto:wvt@wvttrier.de)

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*Ulrike Behlau and Bernhard Reitz*

## Introduction: British- and American-Jewish Women's Writing of the 1990s and Beyond

The 1990s have marked a watershed in Jewish women's writing both in Great Britain and the United States. While traditionally Jewish writing was the domain of male writers (and in Britain not very visible at all), during the 1990s, a considerable number of younger British and American Jewish women writers started publishing successfully in all literary genres. Their topics, such as life as an Orthodox woman in a Hasidic community or the memory of the Holocaust in both Great Britain and the United States, caught the interest and imagination of a larger reading public, transcending ethnic boundaries and adding the perspective of Jewish women to the cultural and literary heritage of the two countries.

Both in Great Britain and the United States the 1990s were a period of political, cultural and social change. The end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union required a reorientation within newly formed political alliances that has influenced the way Great Britain and the United States see themselves and express these new images in their literatures. The early 1990s were also a time marked by alternating phases of escalation and appeasement in the Middle Eastern conflict. Israelis and Palestinians enjoyed somewhat more peaceful relations under Rabin, which, since his death in 1995, have deteriorated into an increasingly desperate spiral of violence. During the 1990s, the representation of Israel in American and British Jewish literature has become increasingly controversial. At the same time the Palestinians have received some attention.

Especially in Britain there has been a change in the way society perceives itself in the wake of the 1960s' and 1970s' large-scale immigration from Pakistan, India, the Caribbean and Hong Kong. By the 1990s the immigrants had firmly established themselves as part of British society. This development towards cultural diversity was supported by the policy of devolution, which was implemented by the Labour government in June 1997. As a consequence, the British have increasingly come to see themselves as a mix of different cultures rather than a monolithic "English" entity. Thus a space was created for minority contributions to British collective memory and literature, which has been filled by African, Asian, and also Jewish writers, taking their place in British culture and finding audiences for their works.

However, as Bryan Cheyette has observed in his introduction to his anthology of *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Britain and Ireland*, British Jewish writers have long written, in the context of a dominant and supposedly superior cultural concept of 'Englishness'. As a consequence of their struggle with this concept, in the context of which they have defined their own place and identity in British culture and literature, the term 'Anglo-Jewish' literature is generally used – also in this volume – to describe their works. As the social and cultural developments of the 1990s have started to change the British view of themselves and their society to that of an ethnically and culturally heterogeneous society, the concept of 'Englishness' is slowly being replaced

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Axel Stähler

## Mothers in Israel? Female Jewish Identities and *Eretz Yisrael* in the Works of Jewish Women Writers of the Anglo-American Diaspora: Anne Roiphe, Tova Reich and Linda Grant

According to the biblical and Zionist narratives, existence in exile has always been felt to be deficient by Jews dispersed all over the world and yearning for their return to the Promised Land. While the historical evidence seems to tell a different story, suggesting that most of the time there was a sizable Jewish population living quite happily and no less piously without the Land of Israel, relegating the return to eschatology,<sup>1</sup> certainly in our day *Eretz Yisrael* has acquired a new significance as one of the constituents of the old dichotomy. If only because with the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948 and its continuing self-assertion those narratives have obtained a notorious predominance in public discourses even to the almost total exclusion of any diverging narratives.

One such narrative is that of female representation which, insinuating itself in the religious and Zionist discourses, has become increasingly articulate in recent years, addressing the specific images of womanhood projected by both of them. Pointing out the need of Jewish feminists to reconcile their Judaism with their feminism, Andrew Furman stated in 1996 that "[w]e are in the midst of this precarious, but necessary, reconcilement today. Thankfully," he continued, "several men and women in the Jewish community are beginning to address and rectify the problems of Judaism's entrenched sexism" (126). Israel, recognised by Furman as "the most powerful contemporary Jewish symbol" (127), provides a focus on which converge, *inter alia*, the religious and Zionist discourses and a feminist (counter) discourse. Accordingly, Israel and the Jewish Other in Israel have become of ever growing concern to diaspora-Jewish women authors.

Published in the last decade and a half, the texts of three women writers from the Anglo-American diaspora with which I will concern myself here – Anne Roiphe's *Lovingkindness* (1987), Tova Reich's *Master of the Return* (1988), her *The Jewish War* (1995) and, although in a different way, Linda Grant's *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000) – bear witness to these developments. In this essay I propose to enquire into the ways in which varying notions of *Eretz Yisrael* as a place, both real and imagined, and as an ideological concept (political, cultural, and religious) inform the quest in these novels for female Jewish identities between the dichotomies not only of diaspora and Israel, but also of the secular and the religious, and, pervading both of these dichotomies, that of male and female.

<sup>1</sup> From among the numerous publications on the history of Jewish diaspora see, for instance, the entry in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 6, cols. 8-19 or, more recently and with a focus on the Hellenistic-Roman period, Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*.

## 1 Of Bugs and Butterflies and the In-Between

In somewhat simplified terms, the spatial dichotomy of diaspora and Israel as land or as state respectively is equated in both the biblical and the Zionist narratives with the dichotomy of catastrophe and redemption. This implies on the one hand the 'devaluation', sometimes even the negation (*shlilat hagalat*), of the diaspora and Jewish existence in the diaspora; on the other hand it assumes a teleology, a (necessary) progression from one to the other. At the core of all four novels considered here is the narration of the transition from a state of existence in the diaspora to the existence in the State, or Land, of Israel. In all four novels there is, however, a certain ambivalence as to the value to be attached to either 'state'.

Approaching the Promised Land from the sea in April 1946, the narrator of Linda Grant's prize-winning novel *When I Lived in Modern Times* (2000; Orange Prize for Fiction), describes herself to be in the transitional state of "a chrysalis, neither bug nor butterfly, something in between, closed, secretive, and inside some great transformation under way" (2). Told from a distance of some fifty years, Evelyn Sert's story is the story of a young woman setting out from England not to recover but to create anew her Jewish identity in the Jewish land struggling for its independence. Reiterating the Zionist stereotype of the creation of "[t]he new Jew, but more than that – the new human being" (42), Evelyn also believes in the creation of a new kind of woman,

the kind who thought with her brains, not her womb; who took no notice of hair styles but wanted more than a life of rural servitude; who sized people up and recognised them for what they were; who knew what she wanted and how to get it; who did not live through men. (60)

Confronted with the claim that the ulterior motive for her 'return' to the land of Israel was not her idealism but rather some romantic notion of mending the fractures in her personality, Evelyn insists that all she wants is to be "a Jew in a Jewish land" (60). This, of course, raises the question of who and what a Jew is as well as where and what the Jewish land is. The territorial question seems to pose no problem. Palestine, for the young Evelyn, is the simple and unchallenged answer to the 'where', while the 'what' is determined by her ideological preconceptions. In contrast, the answer to the question of Jewish identity given by her friend Leah is rather unsettling and not, perhaps, really satisfactory: "It is always other people who define what a Jew is" (60).

The 'Jewishness' of the new kind of woman is, oddly, of no particular concern to either Leah or Evelyn. For Leah the impending foundation of the State of Israel in Palestine means that Jewish identity will henceforth be determined by citizenship of that state, making it a purely legal matter. In contrast, Evelyn's criteria for defining her own Jewishness are vague at best and, indeed, her juggling in the cause of independence with different identities – Jewish and English – leaves her unsure of her own, culminating in her recognition that "at the very moment when Palestine became a country of Jewish women . . . I had no identity at all" (225).

Even so, the initial stages of her metamorphosis had been promising enough. Having arrived on a kibbutz and having her first shower there Evelyn feels as if she were washing away her former self, "that confused, conflicted girl who was a mistress

of disguises and of duplicity" (34), as if she were "returned to the beginning of time, to where things started, not where they ended. I was no longer Evelyn," she continues, "I was Eve and that as it turned out was what they called me" (35). Her new name, of course, prefigures not only the Fall, the wrong that was done in building the new state, but also her expulsion from paradise.

'Paradise' is the Land of Israel, it is the land where modernity takes shape and, for Evelyn, it is a place in time rather than in space, and a place of ideas. About its material aspect she has only the haziest of notions – "I hardly knew the country I was in, nor did I want to," she says, "I had no curiosity" (188). It is the place where the future was about to happen. But in retrospect, it is the place of a past that cannot be recovered and the place of a future which did not happen. It is a place in a story narrated by a woman grown old and remembering with distant remorse choices wrong and right. "Our history was in our story, for the Arabs of Palestine, it was the land," she claims now, challenging both the religious and the Zionist conceptions of the significance of *Eretz Yisrael*. "Without a story we're not Jews. Without a land they're not just DPs, they're an abstract idea – a cause. That's not a human being. This is the great wrong we did them" (239).

Her own deportation from the Land of Israel cruelly disrupts Evelyn's 'metamorphosis' so that, in the end, the 'bug' takes shape again. For she does neither grow into the new Jew nor the new woman, much less a new Jewish woman. Instead, she reverts to the stereotype of the "eternal feminine that men love so much" (249), that eternal feminine which is silence and mystery and which her mother knew to make use of so well. Evelyn resurrects a past she had believed finally to have been put to rest during her all too brief spell of living in modern times. Having come to the place "where there was, mercifully, no past and in which it was the duty and destiny of everyone to make the future, each for himself and for his country" (74; see also 42), it had been possible for Evelyn to consign the liminal diaspora existence of her late mother – who "had belonged in the twilight, in a place where there is no temporal life at all, between the dead and the living, mute and without memory" (74; see also 42) – to the past entirely. But now, pregnant and "driven into exile on the very eve of the Return" (247), Evelyn sees no other way to survive than to reassemble her own femininity (247), to choose married life in the American diaspora and to live, after all, through a man. "We are blank canvases," she explains in retrospective,

on to which they [i.e. men] can project their fantasies and women who are successful in love understand this intuitively. The magazines tell you "be yourself" but nothing is further from the truth. Be the self *they* want you to be and yet always let them know you preserve something inside that they can never quite capture, that eludes them, because men are hunters and it is the thrill of the chase that excites them. (249)

Remembering and telling Evelyn's story from a distance of some fifty years, it is a different, maybe a wiser, woman who speaks to us, but a woman nevertheless who has a lot of sympathy for the girl she once was. But it is a woman whose heart, after having been "turned back on the brink of the great homecoming, . . . was a heart in exile, a heart that is thwarted" (255) – although in the final imaginary confrontation with her former self she emphatically repudiates the suggestion that her life has been wasted.

Returned once again to the Land of Israel close to the end of the century, her disillusionment with the State of Israel is palpable. But the material decay she notices and the erosion of its moral integrity had already set in during her own brief encounter with modern times, even before the foundation of the state. Indeed, one of the things her brief sojourn in Palestine has taught her is that suffering rarely ennobles. "I know that now" (211), she affirms wistfully:

The suffering that was to come would not make *me* any better than I might have been, either. It didn't give me a big soul. It hardened my heart. A callous grows around a damaged place. Forgive us. The evil we were making was in our circumstances. (212)

From afar – suffering the death of her son, born with Israeli independence in 1948, and a "life" of accommodation in the American diaspora (255) – Evelyn watches Israel fight its many wars, struggling for survival but shedding its ideals of the new human being and a model society in the process and reverting, like herself, from chrysalis to bug. Totally missing from Evelyn's mental setup is religion. Only at the very fringes of her consciousness does she perceive religion as a marker of difference and of identity, as which it is explored in both Roiphe's and Reich's novels. Tel Aviv, the city without a past in which nothing is sacred, the very opposite of Jerusalem (77), is where she feels at home. It is the city of modern times and when, in those early days after the war, she encounters a Hassid walking its streets, she considers him to be a mere curiosity. "It is a pity you don't have a camera to record his image," her neighbour tells her, "for people of that type will be extinct within the decade" (176). Hassidism is not, of course, extinct. To the contrary, there has been a marked increase in religiousness – orthodox and ultra-orthodox – in recent years in Israeli society. In diaspora-Jewish literature the confrontation with Judaism has also gained more and more prominence, as it had been foreseen by Alvin H. Rosenfeld already in 1973. Writing in 1991, Miriyam Glazer confirms Rosenfeld's suggestion that there was emerging a new Jewish "literature of the theological imagination" (81) and refers to Anne Roiphe's *Lovingkindness*, published in 1987, as "the most problematic and controversial" of its kind (82).

\*\*\*

Without reverting to the metaphor of the metamorphosis of the lepidoptera, Roiphe's novel explores in much detail the transitional state of the returnee, to Israel and to the Jewish faith. In view of the biography of its author perhaps the most intimately personal of the texts considered here, *Lovingkindness* records the process of metamorphosis from the perspective of the anguished 'other' whom the transformation affects profoundly even to the degree that she experiences a momentous metamorphosis of her own.<sup>2</sup> A twofold metamorphosis is thus at the core of Roiphe's novel. For it is not only the narrator's daughter whose transformation from American dropout girl into orthodox Jewish woman the reader witnesses through the narrator's story. Confronted with the emerging 'other' in her daughter and against her innermost resistance, the narrator finally comes not only to accept her daughter's decision but, having re-

2 Roiphe's eldest daughter, the writer Emily Carter, became an alcoholic and drug addict and tested HIV positive; for an account of her illness see Roiphe, *Fruitful* 224-28.

learned 'cultural relativism' (see *Lovingkindness* 20) and having been made aware of her own spiritual dearth by recurrent dreams of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav,<sup>3</sup> she finds herself compelled to reconsider her own existence as a secular and feminist Jewish-American intellectual.

"I am different from when you last saw me" (2), Annie's daughter tells her on the phone, unexpectedly calling from Israel. A difficult child, Andrea suffered from eating disorder, indulged in self-mutilation and had three abortions. "Please call me Sarai," she now writes in a letter to her mother, "I have changed my name to one in keeping with my new life" (7). The act of renaming is in itself an outward expression of Andrea/Sarai's metamorphosis. More importantly, like Evelyn's, her choice of name implies a new beginning. In her case, however, this is not a beginning with the expulsion from paradise already looming on the horizon but a beginning that envisions perpetual growth and redemption in fulfilment of the covenant. For her's is the transformation from barren Andrea, in both the spiritual and physical senses of the word, into Sarah, who after her initial barrenness became "the mother of us all" (67).

Suzy Durruty argues that Roiphe's novel is organised around the dichotomy of catastrophe and redemption and suggests that the territories of the U.S. and of Israel respectively embody that very dichotomy. America she interprets as an "espace du péché," Israel as an "espace possible de la rédemption" and as a mirror highlighting the vices of American society (43). It certainly is true that Annie is very self-critical and that she acknowledges the hollowness of the American way of life and even of her own feminism. Moreover, an earlier text of Roiphe's, her first memoir, *Generation Without Memory* (1981), expounds on the same spatial not, however, in her text morally conceived dichotomy:

[Israel] means more than a refuge from catastrophe – although that in itself might be validation enough. The State of Israel signifies redemption, the fulfillment of God's covenant to Abraham. It offers a religious confirmation of the worth and the truth of the long line of struggle from past to present. (55)

Still, as indicated by the "possible" in the quote from Durruty, Israel is not made out to be all good in *Lovingkindness*. Rather, as Andrew Furman has shown in detail, "Roiphe uses Annie's visit to Israel, in large part, to expose and criticize several manifestations of Israel's gender discrimination" (133), she "suggests in her fiction and non-fiction that American Jews need both Judaism and Israel. But what kind of Judaism and what kind of Israel? Certainly not the precise kinds that are inextricably connected today" (Furman 137-38).

Annie, gone to Israel to see her daughter, feels "a stranger among strangers in an alien land" (*Lovingkindness* 260) and finally returns – not to the faith, at least not yet<sup>4</sup> – but to the U.S. Anticipating a granddaughter she proposes to be agreeable for the next eighteen years, so that the girl may be allowed to visit her and then be enticed to stage her own return – to that other 'promised land', Annie's own native U.S.

3 For Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav and the use of his tales in Roiphe's *Lovingkindness*, see, for instance, Glazer, "Male and Female" and Weaver, "Tasting Stars."

4 A change in Annie's attitude is intimated when she throws away a prayer book given to her by Sarai's rabbi which she then, however, recovers: "I couldn't leave it there" (253).



Like the young Evelyn, Annie is wary of the past and warns Sarai of its fetters which may force the individual into established historical patterns and which she sees embodied in the Land: "I am uncertain that you can maintain your center, your Andraeness, in a place that joins you not only to other Jews of like faith but to the entire history of the nation as it moved from Abraham's time on" (47). Sarai, however, is being taught to connect to the past in both actions and location. She is now living at the Yeshiva Rachel, a religious school dedicated to gathering women "who will become the mothers of a new generation, who will repeople the earth with the righteous instead of the condemned" (192). There, Sarai is instructed in living according to Jewish law, the *halacha*, which can only be fully observed in the Land of Israel – a map of ancient Israel in the study of her Rabbi projects the correlation of Land, law and history of the Jewish people (41). The extent of Sarai's acceptance of the yeshiva's tenets becomes obvious when she affirms: "And when I get married I will have many children, too, and each one will be like a tree in the forest replenishing our land, replacing those who were stolen from us" (194).<sup>5</sup>

For Annie this means a renunciation of everything she believes in. It means the re-establishment of the Jewish particular as opposed to the universal, a retribalisation and the re-institution of some "totem" to die and, in effect, to kill for (48); it also means the subjection of women to the patriarchal mode. Israel, to her, is only a political entity and one, at that, which is neither very old nor safe; its spiritual charge she cannot understand nor relate to, although she acknowledges a need in Andrea/Sarai which seems to be answered by her 'return' to the Land of Israel:

Is it just possible that across the globe, in a country that didn't exist when I learned geography, my daughter could have found valid shelter? I accept, not easily, but I accept the fact that she obviously needs more than I can provide. This admission of failure is a negation of all I imagined, invented, aspired. (70)

The return to the Land of Israel and to the Jewish faith, the *teshuvah*, is also the motive for the metamorphoses described in Tova Reich's *Master of the Return* (1988) and her *The Jewish War* (1995). In both novels, even more than in Roiphe's, the issues of Judaism and especially of Jewish statehood in the Land of Israel are closely intertwined with issues of feminism.

The earlier novel is set among the followers of another Hassidic sect whose objective is the restitution of the Temple Mount and the erection of the Third Temple. Like Andrea/Sarai, the Rebbetzin Bruriah Lurie, wife of the spiritual leader of the group, was born in the U.S. Having named herself quite inaptly after the learned Jewish woman of antiquity who (allegedly) for her learning lost her children, her husband and her home, Bruriah has already undergone her metamorphosis, although, to her chagrin, in the externals it was never really completed:

Poor Bruriah, no matter how deeply she immersed herself in the mission of her husband, Reb Lev Lurie, no matter how totally she sacrificed herself for the ideals of Uman House, she could never completely shake off the bland shadow of the American girl she had been, which lingered in her voice and her gestures, trivializing the personage she had become, rendering her slightly synthetic. Oh, what were those cynical forces that prevented a person from changing, changing utterly? (53)

<sup>5</sup> See also *Lovingkindness* 126 and 192.

In both of Reich's novels the hybridity of the 'metamorphosee' is emphasised time and again and the feasibility of her metamorphosis challenged as well as its sincerity. A special case, and of special interest, is that of Sora Katz, for

[i]f the leap from Barbara Horowitz of Brooklyn, New York, to the Rebbetzin Bruriah Lurie of Uman House was of such breathless magnitude, how much more difficult, perhaps even impossible, was the leap from Pam Buck of Macon, Georgia, to Sora Katz of Mea Shearim, Jerusalem? (*Master* 107)

The metamorphosis of Sora Katz, born a gentile and converted to Judaism, is indeed remarkable. For one, it poses the question why she would want to become a Jew – a question that is answered meaningfully, if not, perhaps, exhaustively, by Bruriah: "You'd have to be crazy, or a masochist, or something" (107). Second, what kind of Jew does she metamorphose into? The answer to this question is not confined to *Master of the Return* but extends to Reich's *The Jewish War*, where she reappears as "the new rebbetzin, the convert divorcée Sora Freud" who is, "if anything, even more fiery and zealous in the name of the cause" (*Jewish War* 67) than her ancient husband, Rabbi Yom Tov Freud, the leader of an ultra-orthodox and anti-Zionist movement called the Messiah-Waiters. "She was extremely rigid in upholding the externals," Sora had been characterised in *Master of the Return*, "the externals would seep inward, she believed, be absorbed, so to speak, and raise the level of inner holiness" (*Master* 140). The "breathless magnitude" of her metamorphosis, which makes her – in the externals – more 'authentically' Jewish even than Bruriah Lurie, is still enhanced in *The Jewish War* and the externals she adheres to appear to be more strident. This is demonstrated by the physical transformation she has undergone which is quite irreversibly commented on by her brother, the fundamentalist preacher Rev. Chuck Buck:

But then she comes into focus, my baby sister Pammy, with a shaved skull like a nun and a tight kerchief wrapped around it – no nice teased hair like she used to have in a fetching platinum color, no makeup, no fluttering eyelashes, the shapely female figure completely hidden, no attempt to make herself attractive for the opposite sex and fulfill the God-given role of her gender on this earth – it was a fetus face . . . and a body like a washboard, not my type at all. (157)

Reich's *The Jewish War* chronicles the rise and fall of a fictitious group of secessionist Jewish settlers who create the Kingdom of Judea and Samaria, claiming those territories which are otherwise known as the West Bank and which constitute the core of the Palestinian Authority. The process of transcending the "caterpillar stages" (90) of the American diaspora existence is also at the heart of this novel. Born Jerry Goldberg and raised in New York, the protagonist calls himself Yehudi HaGoel. "Changing your name will not change who you are or where you come from. It is a superficial gesture, . . . but you must by now be learning that changing the surface has very little effect on the substance," Annie had protested early on in Roiphe's *Lovingkindness* when Andrea had told her of her change of name (17). Her essentialist notion that the 'caterpillar-stage' corresponds to Andrea's authentic substance, any deviation of which disturbs her equilibrium, is inverted in *The Jewish War* where Yehudi HaGoel's new name, which means 'the Redeemer', is supposed to indicate that the 'butterfly'-stage is really his true and essential nature, for:

The true Goldberg was the emerging Yehudi HaGoel, . . . was a self-created entity who would soon tear himself from the roots that anchored and constrained him, would shed his sullied, middle-class skin, and would appear for all the world to see, complete and fully formed. (31)

The allusion to Yehudi's metamorphosis is taken up again later. For, travelling, as it were, 'by coffin' to Israel during the war of 1967 to circumvent the official travelling prohibition and enclosed in his narrow box, Yehudi was "in a holding stage, as in a cocoon;" in fact, "[i]t was as if he had died in America and would be resurrected in Israel. . . . It was resonant with metaphor and symbol" (52). In Hebron, his destiny is to become the 'annointed' king of the Kingdom of Judea and Samaria and then to lead his followers, including his three wives and his children, to their sacrificial suicides in the cave of Machpelah.

Most of the women in *The Jewish War* – with the notable exception of Israeli-born Carmela, Yehudi's formidable second wife, former officer of the Zahal and accomplished trickster – hail from the American diaspora, like Yehudi himself. Their metamorphosis consists in becoming women "whose full-time career was being pregnant" (76), and in subordinating themselves to the biblically approved patriarchal mode, for

[f]rom the practical standpoint, the impending demographic crisis due to the explosive Arab population boom mandated that emergency measures be taken to maximize the widest possible distribution and the most effective cultivation of Jewish male seed; polygamy, obviously, would be the cheapest and most efficient method to accomplish this end. (80)

However, cracks and fissures appear in the veneer of some of the 'metamorphosee' women when Yehudi and some of his followers are imprisoned for the perpetration of terrorist acts. While they are away their wives organize a study group they call Bible as Therapy. In its final session, discussing the sexism of the Bible where women, with a precious few exceptions, are defined merely as "daughters, sisters, wives, mothers of men" (205) some of them voice their discontent with the role of the female living subject to the patriarchal mode. However, their mutiny is only short-lived, for when during the same session Yehudi's impending release is announced and the return of the 'patriarch' imminent, they all submit more or less willingly to Carmela, whom Yehudi had made his deputy before he went to prison and whom he had apostrophied then as "Mother in Israel" (176).

The communal metamorphosis envisioned by Yehudi HaGoel and his followers culminates in their communal suicide and its last stage is described when, after their suicide, in the dark sky above the cave of Machpelah a ghostly procession seems to pass:

a tall, slender, bridelike figure in a white robe at its head, trailed by a long column of smaller, nearly transparent figures, like children, also clothed in white. It was as if they were all dancing toward some heavenly being, yet never quite reaching him. (269)

The allusion is to the *Shechinah*, in the Kabbalah the bride of God and His feminine principle. According to different traditions in the Talmud and Midrash, the *Shechinah* either withdrew from earth after the destruction of the First Temple to return in the time of redemption or went into exile with Israel to return to the Land with the Chosen

People.<sup>6</sup> The reunion of the male and female aspects of divinity – the final metamorphosis, aspired to but not yet achieved – betokens the beginning of redemption.<sup>7</sup>

The beginning of redemption, another metamorphosis of cosmic proportions, had been signified for Yehudi with the foundation of the State of Israel and had been confirmed by the miracle of the Six Day War in 1967 which 'restored' to Israel the biblical lands of Judea and Samaria and, most importantly, Jerusalem. To cede even the tiniest fraction of this 'God-given' holy soil Yehudi considers to be a breach of the covenant and "a fatal capitulation to the evil powers" (139). Instead it is enjoined "to settle, to wage war, to conquer, to intervene actively to further the redemption and bring about the fullness of the messianic era" (139) – this, to Yehudi, "is the loftiest, the most sublime, the most exalted, the holiest form of worship" (139). Conversely, he deems the existence and especially the reconciliatory policy of the secular State of Israel (the Camp David Accords of 1978-79, for instance) a sin which excites the wrath of the Lord and forestalls redemption.

## 2 Faith and Counterfeit

Given the magnitude and complexity of the metamorphosis of the Return, it is, perhaps, no surprise that in all four novels its motives as well as its sincerity are questioned. In *When I Lived in Modern Times*, Evelyn, having proved unsuitable for life on a kibbutz and altogether rather vague in her self-definition as a Jew in a Jewish land to whose realities she cannot adapt, is accused of fostering some romantic notion of mending the fractures in her personality (60) which, in fact, are multiplied during her brief sojourn in the country without a past. Indeed, in view of Israel's (re-)lapse into the state of the 'bug', one may wonder about the direction Evelyn's metamorphosis would have taken had she been allowed to stay in the land.

Annie, too, had suggested the superficiality of Andrea/Sarai's metamorphosis; after all, it was not the first whim of this sort her daughter had indulged in. Her suspicion seems to be confirmed close to the end of the novel, when she recounts how Sarai tells her of a visit to an eminent rabbi:

"He said I was like Ruth and that he would take me as his own daughter and stand at my wedding like my father because of the joy I brought to him and to all the people of Israel. Can you just imagine that." I was silent. "Do you understand?" she said, and I heard a whine, a cranking up of irritation. It was a familiar sound.

The growing irritation of the insecure and spoiled 'child' is an indication that there still is a substantial residue of Andreanness in Sarai. "I'm proud of you too," Annie says finally, trying to appease her and treading familiar but dangerous ground: "Really proud" (259-60).

In Reich's *Master of the Return*, the returnee members of the Hassidic sect of Uman House – not dissimilar to that with which Sarai is involved, but with strong

6 For the concept of the Shechinah, see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, s.v. "Shekhinah," vol. 14, cols. 1349-54.

7 See, for instance, Glazer, "Male and Female" 87, and Scholem, *On the Kabbalah* 106-08.

pretensions to the rebuilding of the Temple on Mount Moriah – are also accused of assuming a pose. Frantic with the loss of her little boy, abducted by the ultra-Orthodox for his spiritual potential, Ivriyah Himmelhoch finds a measure of relief in crying out aloud in public places. This provokes her emphatically secular mother to berate her and her friends for being insincere in the utterance of their grief as well as of their faith:

You people aspire to becoming tragic figures, and you're even willing to incur the most hideous suffering to earn the right to assume that pose. Or ecstatic figures, or mystic figures – whatever the role, it's nothing more than aesthetics. What does it have to do with faith? Not that you wouldn't like to believe. You wish for it ardently, you long for it, you strain for it, but for the most part you just don't have it in you. So you settle for the counterfeit of faith, for the style, the externals, the costume, which appeal to you so much aesthetically. (*Master* 226)

She concludes: "And what aesthetics boils down to in the end . . . is nothing less than *avodah zarah*, idol worship" (226). Idol worship is, of course, not only a violation of the first and second commandments; it is also the most prominent among the reasons for the expulsion from the Promised Land, it is the ultimate breach of the covenant. Indeed, the sect's hopes of the rebuilding of the Temple are dashed when their own headquarters in the Muslim quarter of Jerusalem adjacent to the Temple Mount is razed to the ground and redemption is once more deferred.

Much more difficult is the case in Reich's *The Jewish War*. Here, the pose, if pose it is, is maintained even to the physical extinction of close to one thousand human beings, and it is the futility of this gesture as well as its grandness (reminiscent of Masada) and its callousness which provoke the reader's thoughts. It would, however, be difficult to question Yehudi's faith, although one might perhaps prefer to call it misguided. He and his followers are, after all, prepared to sacrifice themselves and their loved ones for their faith. In fact, Yehudi's views echo those of the radical Zionist group of the *Gush Emunim*, the Bloc of the Faithful, and to a certain degree he seems to be modelled after Rabbi Moshe Levinger, the leader of this movement, who commenced Jewish settlement in Hebron after the Six Day War.<sup>8</sup> Still, however faithful, Yehudi, the redeemer, does not achieve redemption as the ascending *Shechinah*-like figure, leaving the earth, never quite reaches God.

It is, in Reich's novel, rather the brother of Sora Freud, divorced Katz, née Buck, the Rev. Chuck Buck, who with his showbiz-mentality and his residual anti-Semitism fairly exudes the reek of insincerity and, perhaps, of idol worship. Like his sister, the Rev. Buck appropriates Jewish beliefs. He perceives Yehudi's extreme Zionist views as instrumental to the fulfilment of his own fundamentalist eschatological conceptions according to which Jewish possession of the Holy Land is a necessary prerequisite for the (second) coming of the Messiah which he expects to make the Jews see the error of their ways and thus to cast off their very Jewishness. To make his point, the Rev. Buck even vows to have himself circumcised. It is this self-interested appropriation of Jewish beliefs, externals and history by both Bucks, as well as their exaggerated display of religious fervour, which throw into relief in Reich's novels the struggle of the 'real' Jews to find an 'authentic' Jewish identity.

8 Cf. Gilbert, *Israel* 404, 469-70 and 494-95.

The question of 'authenticity', of faith or the counterfeit of faith or, more particularly, whether Sarai, Annie and Evelyn or Yehudi and his followers act in good faith seems central to me, because it admits a moral dimension which is debated in all four novels and which relates to the value of human life.

### 3 (Male) Possession and (Female) Disposition / Making Sacrifices

In Reich's and, to a certain degree, also in Roiphe's novels the possession of the land appears to be a predominantly male obsession which is derived from, and, indeed, a continuation of, the narrative of the covenant. It is a narrative of male blind faith (of being possessed almost) and of the patriarchal instrumentalisation of the female disposition of bearing children as the natural prerequisite of multiplying the male seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is upon the sea shore (Gen 22:17). Any story of possession is, from another perspective, also a story of dispossession and, indeed, even before dispossessing its inhabitants, to achieve Abraham's possession of the land it appears to be necessary to 'dispossess' Sarah of her only son who is going to be made a sacrifice to Abraham's God and his faith in this God. The archetypal quality of this pattern of gendered 'give and take' is addressed in Roiphe's as well as in both of Reich's novels and is, at least, hinted at in Grant's text.

Sarah, when she learned that she was going to be pregnant, though well stricken in age, laughed within herself (Gen 19:11-12). In her earlier novel, *Master of the Return*, Reich suggests that Sarah's laughter "was not from intellectual arrogance or common scepticism," but that "riding the keen edge of prophecy, she had seen that the child she would bear would not be hers at all; no, as soon as this child was weaned, the moment she released the child, he would be claimed by his father, by his faith-driven father, Abraham" (239).

The attempted sacrifice of Isaac is the ultimate proof of Abraham's blind faith in his God and the final confirmation of the covenant which promises Abraham not only the multiplication of his seed but "the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession" (Gen 17:8).

If God had come to Sarah and asked her to take her daughter to the mountaintop and tie her to a rock and slit her throat because God demanded it, there would have been no chosen people. (*Lovingkindness* 111)

Part of an extended reflexion on the difference between mother-daughter and father-son relationships in Roiphe's *Lovingkindness*, this statement emphasises the inherent dilemma of women living under the covenant that defines the chosen people, and the laws attendant to it; at the same time, it questions its validity and the significance of its objects, the Promised Land and the Chosen People, and exposes it as a gendered, male narrative. But although Annie understands this she finally lets go of Sarai and acquiesces in the sacrifice, hoping for the ram in the bushes, so that Sarai will not be lost to her forever as are Bruria's children, whose story she recounts early on in the novel and which is another story of children sacrificed, though unintentionally. "Was the mother's sharp mind an offense to a deity who preferred his women ordinary, modest, without unusual brains or fervor?" Annie wonders, and: "Was the death of the children

a test she had passed or failed?" (*Lovingkindness* 5). The same question in a way applies to intellectual and secular Annie herself, for is not her loss of Andrea a sacrifice to her own aspirations? "Who are you? How can you be another person and still be my daughter: has the gulf between us grown so large that you are dead to me? Have I lost you?" (48) she writes in a letter to Sarai. Earlier, she had asserted: "Bruria's tale is plausible Jewish history. The dead children," in contrast to the story of Job, "are lost forever" (5). But although Andrea may be lost to her forever, Sarai lives. However, Sarai's attachment to the religious Jews in Israel evokes another scenario. Envisaging the "military collapse" and subsequent destruction of Israel, Annie sees "the vulnerable form of [her] daughter Andrea bound on the same altar as Isaac" and concludes: "I would have felt better had there been more rams in the thicket and less blood on the stone" (231). Given the bloody history of the State of Israel, will another sacrifice be necessary to renew the Jewish claim to the Promised Land that to Annie feels entirely alien?

It is in Reich's *Master of the Return* that the sacrifice of Isaac is literally re-enacted. Abba Nissim, the abductor of Ivriyah's son Akiva, leads the boy secretly in the dawn of the second day of the year to Mount Moriah where he prepares to perform the sacrifice. He is already wielding the blank steel when Israeli soldiers capture him. "God sees!" he cries ecstatically, referring to the name given to the site of the attempted sacrifice by Abraham,<sup>9</sup> and: "Now I see that God sees!" (*Master* 237). For Abba Nissim the once more rejected sacrifice signifies the renewal of the covenant and when Shofar blasts pierce the morning air he believes redemption to be at hand. It is typical of Reich's ironic stance that those Shofar blasts are produced by another rapturous soul seeing the commotion around Abba Nissim and Akiva and that the religious import of the whole episode is thus revealed to be ambivalent to say the least. But however ambivalent in a religious sense, as regards the individuals the sacrifice has quite a strong impact, for "[t]he child that was returned to Ivriyah Himmelhoch was not the same as the one she had lost, nor was she the same woman who had lost the child. That child had been sacrificed, and that woman's soul had burst out of her and surrendered" (239).

Reich's novel ends with an image of Ivriyah feeding her son, so recently restored to her, milk with honey:

This was mother food. Each time the child drew the mother food away from his face, the down above his upper lip was filmed in white, and his breath dripped sweetness. Flowing with milk and with honey. For the sake of this milk and this honey, you must speak no ill of the land, and of its inhabitants say no unkind word. (240)

Motherhood is, at the end of *Master of the Return*, extolled as an everyday wonder of the human condition, an everyday myth, with redemptive and exculpatory qualities and it virtually becomes a substitute for the concept of the Land whose biblical attributes it acquires.

9 See Gen 22:14: "And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the LORD it shall be seen;" Jehovah-jireh means literally 'God sees'.

To Yehudi, as to Abba Nissim, the necessity of a sacrifice to gain or to confirm possession of the Land is obvious. But while God's acceptance of the sacrifice lies in its rejection and Abba Nissim is thus able to rejoice, Yehudi's sacrifice of close to one thousand human beings in the cave of Machpelah in alleged fulfilment of the covenant proves to be futile because God does not provide a substitute and it may seem rather like some cruel form of idol worship. It may seem as pointless as the mass suicide of the followers of James Warren Jones in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 or the death of Yehudi's daughter Golana during a defiant march through Arab territory. "Faith – blind faith – would be a disastrous mistake on our part," Yehudi's first wife, Shelly, had exclaimed during the Bible as Therapy session just before her daughter Golana was killed, "[w]e are mothers, after all, with children to protect" (*Jewish War* 213). But still she acquiesces in the sacrificial mass suicide, as do the other men and women of Yehudi's following. Ironically only Emunah – formerly Faith Fleischman from Flatbush, her Hebrew name a translation of that meaningful first name – has misgivings: "[T]he day we hand the children over to their fathers, on that day we become accomplices" (247), she writes to a friend who witnessed the tragedy of Jonestown.

The only one of the four novels not to refer at one point or other explicitly to the sacrifice of Isaac is Grant's *When I Lived in Modern Times*. This may be due to its obviously non-religious bias. However, here too it is the single-minded male, intent on the possession of the Land, who persuades Evelyn to take part in the terrorist activities of the Irgun and who thus sets in motion a train of events which results in Evelyn's deportation and, eventually, the death of her son. Moreover, although once removed from the master narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac, the motif of the sacrifice pervades Grant's novel too and I wonder, whether it is too much of an unwarranted mystification to suggest that the death of her child – conceived in the one country without a past where the future was to be shaped – is a sacrifice to Evelyn's diaspora existence which symbolises the death of her hopes for the future not only for her own person but also for the Land of Israel.

#### 4 Conclusion

In all four novels *Eretz Yisrael* is perceived as an agent of change working on the individual or some collective(s) to which different properties are ascribed, according to its varying, mostly stereotypical conceptions. These range from the conception of Israel as a safe haven to the Zionist notion of the remedial effects of the Land of Israel on the Jewish physique and psyche and, by extrapolation also its beneficial influence on the creation of a new humanity, to the religious conviction of the inalienable right, even the duty, to take possession of, and live in holiness in the Land of Israel, and to the continuous, and growing, alienation Annie experiences even while she is compelled to question her own diaspora existence and Judaism. But there is another feature common to all four novels which in some respects provides a counterpoint to these stereotypes. Although dealt with very differently, mother-daughter relationships and conceptions of motherhood are prominent in all four texts, challenging either the religious or the Zionist narratives or both.

As Julia Kristeva has remarked in another context, referring to the Virgin Mary, "that prodigious structure of maternity that the West has erected" (113), it is imperative for "those responsible for maintaining the social and symbolic order" (113-14) to manipulate the image of the mother to serve their own interests. In all four novels, if not, perhaps, to the same degree, a reappropriation of "maternity" to woman is effected. Male conceptions of motherhood and, concomitant, of the Land are confronted by alternative, female constructions. The 'Land' is a term ripe with ambivalence in all four novels where it appears to be the prize and the bane of the covenant or of Zionist activism; male possession is challenged by female disposition.

In Roiphe's *Lovingkindness* Annie maintains: "Precisely because Sarah could not, even for the Deity, even for the welfare of all humanity, sacrifice her daughter . . . , our mythology about mothers and daughters is thin and low on plot" (111). I think that in a way the four novels considered here are attempts at addressing this dearth. Confronted with the particular dilemma of the *conditio Judaica* – between *Eretz Yisrael* and the diaspora and between the religious and the secular – and the more universal dilemma of gender relations, they show mothers and daughters dealing with their parameters, being sacrificed and acceding to, and struggling against, their children's sacrifice. None of the texts does really offer a solution but all foster an awareness of the problem and insist that to be a mother in Israel means to take on a special responsibility.

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