



PROJECT MUSE®

Editor's Introduction

David N. Myers

Jewish Quarterly Review, Volume 95, Number 1, Winter 2005, pp. v-vi
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2005.0014>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/177705>

THE LONG AND PASSIONATE romance of Jews with the written word did not frequently reach, we are told, into the realm of the autobiographical. Prior to those well-known seventeenth-century exemplars, Glikl's memoirs and Leon Modena's *Haye Yehudah*, Jewish authors commented on virtually everything under the sun—except themselves. The weight of tradition—and the demands of the commentarial mission—suppressed the bold sounding of the author's voice. Only belatedly did modern Jews, unshackled from the constraints of the past, feel at liberty to position themselves at the center of their own writing. And when they did, they did so with a vengeance.

This at least is the received wisdom. It certainly seems the case that the autobiographical voice has grown more pronounced, at times even dominant, in our current phase of Jewish literary history. To be sure, we inhabit—or perhaps have just exited—an era, the postmodern, in which self-reflection and confession are vital tools of intellectual self-definition. One apparent consequence of this hyper-reflexive moment is the boom in autobiographical and memoiristic accounts, including by notable late-twentieth-century Jews. A somewhat narrower though related consequence is the redoubled commitment of scholars in our day to explore and acknowledge the byways of their own formation by inquiring into the life and work of inspired predecessors. A third effect is the new scholarly interest in the genre of autobiography itself.

To take stock of the intriguing surge in self-accounting, the present issue of *JQR* focuses on different aspects of the autobiographical genre. The issue's first two articles pose the big question of when and where the autobiographical voice surfaced in Jewish writing. Yossi Chajes speculatively and imaginatively probes early sources of a Jewish autobiographical voice. His chief interest is in what the Dutch historian Jacques Presser called “egodocuments,” not fully formed autobiographies but rather autobiographical expressions inserted into letters, journals, and other literary texts. Chajes discusses the known profusion of autobiographical writing among sixteenth-century Sephardic kabbalists, but then expands his own angle of observation backward and forward to review other personalities, eras, and genres (e.g., the *pinkas*) often excluded from the story of Jewish autobiography.

His essay serves as an interesting foil to Marcus Moseley's study of Hebrew and Yiddish autobiography in Eastern Europe, especially since Chajes directly engages Moseley's own views about genre and dating. Moseley begins his magisterial article by surveying the literature on autobiography as backdrop to his conclusion that *Jewish* autobiography emerges in Eastern Europe (in Yiddish and Hebrew) as a response to Rousseau, who decisively introduced a set of "autobiographical lenses" into the culture of reading and writing in Europe. And yet the Jewish response was belated, often a century later than that of other Western European literary cultures. Moseley suggests that this belatedness, particularly in the case of Yiddish, has something to do with the distinct *Russian* literary reception of Rousseau.

The juxtaposition of Chajes and Moseley, precisely because they are exploring different phenomena, raises interesting and important questions about what we mean when we speak of Jewish autobiography. Further reflection on the relationship between authorial subject and historical object comes in John Gager's retrospective on the late Israeli scholar David Flusser. Following Gager, Elliott Horowitz shares with the reader the origins and depths of his own affections for autobiography. And finally, we feature three review essays on recent (and past) Jewish autobiographies and memoirs by Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, Liliane Weissberg, and Françoise Meltzer. While these varied and learned contributions on Jewish autobiography may not achieve closure on the key definitional and historical questions, they do provide novel insight into the genre and the important scholarly issues attending it.

The second part of this issue offers up its own novelties and pleasures in reading. In our Book Forum section, we have asked three scholars—representing three time periods—to comment on the important new volume edited by David Biale, *Cultures of the Jews*. Then we have chosen to substitute a large number of short reviews with two in-depth review essays by Michael Satlow and Robert A. Harris. Concluding this number is Moshe Idel's note on a largely unknown body of medieval Ashkenazi mystical writing. As a whole, this issue represents the very balance of tradition and innovation, in genre and content, that we sought to introduce in our inaugural volume—and struggle to calibrate anew each time.

David N. Myers