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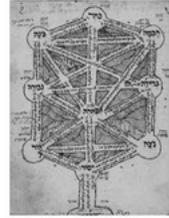
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**“A STRANGER AT HOME”: DELAYED RETURN IN A
NOVELLA AND IN A SHORT STORY BY AGNON:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**
Chaya Shacham

Abstract: *This article touches upon the theme of delayed return: a familiar literary theme that is manifested in different languages, cultures, and periods; it usually involves a man returning to his home and wife after a prolonged absence during which he was presumed dead, while his wife's circumstances radically changed. S.Y. Agnon published two well-known works on the subject: “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight” (1912) and “Fernheim” (1949), which are the object of this study. This article approaches these two works in a comparative context from a genre analysis—a novella versus a short story—arguing that the subject matter sometimes dictates the choice of genre. Thus, the two delayed returns differ markedly. The novella form is well-suited to “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight” which places the devout protagonist, upon his delayed return, in a tragic dilemma, while Fernheim's is not a delayed return in the exemplary-archetypal sense.*

The delayed return of a traveler to his home and wife after a prolonged absence, during which he was presumed dead, is a familiar literary theme in different languages, cultures, and periods. On a deep level, this narrative seems to contain a primal, universal fear of losing one's personal identity, of its being replaced by a different identity, or erased by being driven from the place defining it—home, with all that word entails.¹ Two of S.Y. Agnon's well-known works published nearly four decades apart—“Ve-haya he-‘akov le-mishor” (“And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight”) (1912) and “Fernheim” (1949)—rely on the theme of the delayed return. In both works the main character is forced by circumstances to leave home for several years. He returns only to find himself locked out of his own house, since his wife, for whom he has been yearning, has in the meantime given her heart to another man. In both cases, the returning traveller

1. Georges Van Den Abbeele, who examines the “economy of travel,” writes: “Home, the very antithesis of travel, is the concept through which the voyage is “oikonomized” into a commonplace. . . . The positing of a point we can call home can only occur retroactively. The concept of a home is needed...only after the home has already been left behind.” See Georges Van den Abbeele, *Travel as Metaphor from Montaigne to Rousseau* (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xviii. Hannah Naveh writes that the travel “deepens the understanding of the notion of ‘home’ by exposing the relativity and the fluidity of its meaning.” See Hannah Naveh, *Nos ‘im ve-nos ‘ot: sipurei mas’ a ba-sifrut ha-‘ivrit ha-‘hadashah* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishing House, 2002), 10.

relinquishes his dreams and, out of his love for her, lets his wife stay with her new partner.

Despite similarity between these two works in the broader strokes of the fabula, each work has its own unique qualities, beyond mere details of narrative structure or the different settings of time and place.² “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight” provides copious details as to the traveler’s wanderings and adventures, from leaving his hometown to his return. In the end, the character avoids going home upon learning by chance, to his astonishment, that his wife had married another man in his absence, and borne him a son. Not wishing to disrupt her new life, he resigns himself to a life-in-death existence in the cemetery, culminating in his actual death. “Fernheim,” by contrast, sparingly records the hero’s actions from his leaving home to his return. This account is presented in a brief retrospective glimpse from the character’s own point of view. The entire thrust of the narrative leads to the traveler’s encounter with his wife upon his return from captivity as prisoner of war, and the ensuing developments. Although the story ends with the door shutting with him outside the home, he does not react with a sense of existential finality.

The differences between the two stories may be read not simply as narrative variations on the same fabula, but rather chiefly as distinctive features differentiating one genre from the other: “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight” is a novella, while “Fernheim” is a short story. The comparison of the two works demonstrates that Agnon cast the same basic fabula in two different genres; and that the materials used in each of the works namely: details of backdrop like time and place, or protagonist’s character, in fact, may have dictated the choice of genre.

In non-Jewish European literature this theme of delayed return is an inversion of “the joyful return” in the Odyssean model,³ and appears in various periods and literary genres. A few examples of treatments of the theme of delayed return in world literature are: Balzac’s novel *Colonel Chabert*, Tennyson’s long poem “Enoch Arden,” Maupassant’s short story “The Return,” the novel *The Late Mattia Pascal* by Luigi Pirandello, and the play “The Living Corpse” by Tolstoy.⁴

The theme of delayed return usually involves a man returning to the radically altered personal circumstances of the woman he left behind. In some cases, the returning traveler is dismayed to find not only that, due to a chain of

2. Baruch Kurzweil noted that “Ve-haya he-‘akov le-mishor” was Agnon’s first treatment of the theme of delayed return, which would recur frequently in a variety of ways throughout his entire oeuvre Baruch Kurzweil, *Massot ‘al sipurei SH.Y. ‘Agnon*, (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1962), 28.

3. The return of Odysseus, after twenty years’ absence, brings about his reunion with his wife Penelope, who remained faithful to him all that time, declining her suitors with all kinds of clever excuses. Odysseus’s return home, then, is complete and joyful.

4. Luis Landau, “Bein maup’assan le-‘Agnon: min ‘ha-shivah’ ‘ad ‘ve- haya he-‘akov le-mishor” *‘Alei-Siah* 10–11 (1981): 109. For additional examples, see Luis Landau, “Mekorot u-pseudo-mekorot be-ve-hayah he-‘akov le-mishor le-SH.Y. ‘Agnon” *Hasifrut* 26 (1978): 95–96 n. 3; and Gershon Shaked, *Mendele, Lefanav ve-‘aharav* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University; Magnes Press, 2005), 170 n. 4.

Delayed Return in a Novella and in a Short Story by Agnon

unusual events, his wife had married another man, but that she has also borne that man children—a fact that now makes return as such impossible.

In the context of Agnon's works, "delayed return" refers to traveller's return to a place and situation that have remained unchanged in his mind, although in fact the situation has changed dramatically—and irreversibly. Van Den Abbeele observes that the home to which the traveler returns is not the same one he left; it has changed beyond recognition. For if this were not the case—if journeys began and ended at exactly the same point—no journey would ever be possible.⁵

Yet, despite obvious similarities at their narrative cores, these two works have not yet been discussed extensively in a comparative study. In the preliminary remarks to his discussion of Agnon's "Ovadia Ba'al Mum" ("Ovadia the Cripple,") Gershon Shaked considers the common motif of these stories, like others by Agnon, to be as follows: "A man returns home to find that his wife has 'ground' for another man."⁶ Baruch Kurzweil, in his study on the portrayal of Western Jews in Hebrew literature, touches upon "Fernheim" in this regard, noting that the story presents "the complete loss of Jewish values and content."⁷ As for "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," according to Kurzweil, the message of the story was that "there were values, life had a point to it."⁸ His brief comparison addresses only one aspect of the stories— whether they contain Jewish values, or not. Uzi Shavit mentions both pieces together too, in his article on "Fernheim": "'Fernheim' ... is ostensibly similar in subject to certain of Agnon's early stories, such as 'And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight' and 'Ovadia the Cripple.' At their core too is a hero whose destiny is a function of 'delayed return.'"⁹ Luis Landau, in his article on "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," enumerates works of world literature with a similar theme, adding: "Agnon himself took up this theme once again, in his 'Fernheim.'"¹⁰ Hannah Naveh, writing on "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," observes: "Travel narratives without much travelling or stops along the way may also embody the returning traveller who finds his front door locked, and stands there knocking, like the protagonist of Agnon's 'Fernheim.'"¹¹

5. See Van Den Abbeele, *Travel as Metaphor*, xix.

6. See Gershon Shaked, *'Amanut ha-sipur shel 'Agnon* (Merhavaya and Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Po'alim, 1973), 178–179. The expression "to grind for another" is a euphemism for a woman's sexual relations with a man who is not her husband (from Job 31: 10).

7. See Baruch Kurzweil, "Dyokano shel ha-yehudi ha-ma'aravi ba-sifrut ha-'ivrit," in *Perakim mimorashtah shel yahadut Germanyah*, eds. Aaron Tarshish and Yoḥanan Ginat (Jerusalem: The Leo Beck Institute; ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 1975), 180.

8. See Kurzweil, "Dyokano shel ha-yehudi ha-ma'aravi," 181.

9. See Uzi Shavit, "'Me'uvat lo yukhal litkon': 'al 'Ferenheim' le-SH.Y. 'Agnon," *Moznayim* 49 (1979): 127–133. Later in his discussion Shavit points out dissimilar narrative situations in "Fernheim" and other works he mentions in that group, to refute claims of their similarity.

10. See Landau, "Bein maup'assan le-'Agnon," 109.

11. Naveh, *Nos'im ve-nos'ot*, 126.

THE NOVELLA “AND THE CROOKED SHALL BE MADE STRAIGHT”

A precise definition of the novella as a genre is a well-studied question in genre theory, with which many have grappled since the flourishing of the form in the nineteenth century, particularly in Germany. While the present framework does not allow for an extensive treatment of the various theoretical approaches to the novella form, some prominent features of the novella are worth discussing.¹² The novella, more than any other genre, has been defined chiefly vis-à-vis other genres: the novel, on the one hand, and the short story, on the other. External characteristics, such as length, as well as structural features, may indeed occasionally blur the dividing line between the novella and these two other genres. Strict, normative definitions of the novella form are not always helpful, as they tend to break down in the face of literary reality. According to the teleological approach put forth by Judith Leibowitz,¹³ in the prose genres the narrative purpose determines the very means for achieving that purpose. Leibowitz considers the novella as serving a dual narrative purpose that integrates that of the novel with that of the short story. The novella therefore strives at one and the same time to achieve *density* and to create the impression of *expansion*.¹⁴ These effects are achieved by the novella's repetitive structure, which centers on a single theme, and also by its complex structure of secondary themes linked in some obvious way to the primary one, yet left undeveloped themselves. The novella thus keeps its primary theme in constant focus, maintaining its intensification at practically every textual station along the way. While the principle of genre-dependent narrative purpose, as formulated by Leibowitz, is sound, still she disregards the criterion of the novella's length, which is at the core of past and present attempts to define the novella form.¹⁵ Of course, intermediate length, although typical of many novellas, is, in itself, an insufficient condition for defining a work as belonging to the genre of the novella. Yet the length criterion does allow Leibowitz's essential conditions to obtain for attributing a work to the genre. On this point, Einat Baram Eshel notes the following:

12. For an overview of novella theory, see, for instance: Karl Konrad Polheim, *Novellentheorie und Novellenforschung Ein forschungbericht 1945–1964* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1965). For an overview of the novella's development see Robert J. Clements and Joseph Gibaldi, *Anatomy of the Novella: The European Tale Collection from Boccaccio and Chaucer to Cervantes* (New York: New York University Press, 1977). In Hebrew, Einat Baram Eshel surveyed and described the development of novella theory in the first chapter of her book *Bein ha-mish'ol le-derekh ha-melekh: li-feriḥatah shel ha-novelah ha-'ivrit bereshit ha-me'ah ha-'esrim* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University; Magnes Press, 2001). For an example of a critical study which does not automatically subscribe to the theoretical framework of earlier novella theorists, see John M. Ellis, *Narration in the German Novelle: Theory and Interpretation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

13. See Judith Leibowitz, *Narrative Purpose in the Novella* (The Hague: Mouton, 1974).

14. See Leibowitz, *Narrative Purpose in the Novella*, 16, 20–50.

15. Not all agree that the novella form has a fixed length: “Basically, the *Novelle* is a fictional narrative of indeterminate length (a few pages to two or three hundred),” J. A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 641.

Delayed Return in a Novella and in a Short Story by Agnon

It is precisely the novella's intermediate length that provides the organizing principle for its materials, and it is what enables the novella to attain the dual impression of density and expansion, due to selection and combination of those materials. [Therefore] it is certainly possible to take length as a necessary condition which interacts with its other elements.¹⁶

Yet, some essential features of the novella were pointed out already in the nineteenth century. One of the most important the *Wendepunkt*, or "turning point" was identified by Ludwig Tieck (1773–1853):

The Novelle presents in a clear line a happening of greater or less importance, which however easily it may occur, is yet strange, and perhaps unique. This twist in the story, this point from which it takes unexpectedly a completely different direction, and develops consequences which are nevertheless natural and entirely in keeping with character and circumstances, will impress itself the more firmly upon the imagination of the reader, in so far as the story in spite of its strangeness might under other circumstances be completely commonplace.... It [the novella] will always have that extraordinary and striking turning-point (Wendepunkt) which distinguishes it from every other narrative form.¹⁷

What is known as the "falcon theory," advanced by Paul Heyse (1830–1914), isolates another feature attributed to many novellas: a tangible object with a distinct silhouette that stands out in the narrative and acquires a symbolic meaning:

We expect of a Novelle ... that it should present to us a significant human fate, an emotional, intellectual or moral conflict, and that it should reveal to us by means of an unusual happening a new aspect of human nature. ... One must ask oneself, whether the story to be related has a strongly marked silhouette, the outline of which expressed in a few words, would make a characteristic impression, in the manner in which the contents of that story of the falcon in the *Decamerone*, narrated in five lines, impress themselves profoundly upon the memory.¹⁸

Many novellas are concerned with events that reflect the tension between chance and fate. According to Edwin K. Bennett: "By its concentration upon a single event it tends to present it as chance (*Zufall*) and it is its function to reveal that what is apparently chance, and may appear as such to the person concerned, is in reality fate. Thus the attitude of mind to the universe which it may be said to represent is an irrationalistic one."¹⁹ These features of the novella are presented

16. See Baram Eshel, *Bein ha-mish'ol le-derekh ha-melekh*, 38.

17. See the translated citation of Tieck in Edwin K. Bennett, *A History of the German Novelle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 11. See also Bennett's remarks on 12.

18. See the translated citation of Heyse in Bennett, *A History of the German Novelle*, 13. See also Bennett's related discussion, 13–16.

19. See Bennett, *A History of the German Novelle*, 18.

in Agnon's "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," a story of a childless couple in a village in Galicia, Menashe Ḥayim and Kreindl Tcharni, who become impoverished and lose the store that is their sole source of income.

As expected from the genre, Agnon's novella centers on an extraordinary event: Menashe Ḥayim, encouraged by his wife, sets out to wander from town to town, begging for alms, provided with a letter of introduction from the local rabbi. He wanders for several years, gradually losing touch with his wife; nor does the begging go too well. In the course of his wanderings he meets another beggar, who talks Menashe Ḥayim into selling him the rabbi's letter for a goodly sum; Menashe Ḥayim is won over and sells the letter bearing his own name. Before returning home, he stops at a fair where he can trade and buy his wife a present. But at the fair he gets drunk and all the money he received for the rabbi's letter is stolen. Once again he becomes a wandering beggar, until he eventually decides to return home. Meanwhile, the beggar who bought the letter from Menashe Ḥayim dies. Since the letter is found in the beggar's possession, his body is mistakenly identified as that of Menashe Ḥayim. Following the news of Menashe Ḥayim's death, his wife, Kreindl Tcharni, receives rabbinical permission to remarry; she marries again, and gives birth to a son. Just before the circumcision ceremony, Menashe Ḥayim comes back to town. Hearing by chance the news about Kreindl Tcharni, he flees to keep secret the fact that he is still alive—so as not to make his wife an adulteress, and her son—a bastard, according to Jewish law. A beggar once again, sleeping in cemeteries for the most part, he comes to the very cemetery where the other beggar is buried, and settles there. One day he happens to notice that a headstone with his own name is being erected over a grave. The grave keeper notices Menashe Ḥayim's emotion upon seeing the headstone and coaxes his story out of him. Upon Menashe Ḥayim's death, the grave keeper sets the stone bearing his name—Menashe Ḥayim—over his grave. When Kreindl Tcharni comes to the cemetery to mourn her first husband, it turns out that she is weeping over the right grave after all.

The plot of "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" certainly turns on an extraordinary event, of the type Hasidic storytellers called "horrific";²⁰ though unusual, the event is still within the bounds of the possible and plausible. This is in fact precisely how Goethe defined the novella, in conversation with Eckermann.²¹

The story combines focus on one primary theme—Menashe Ḥayim's departure from his home and village to become a wandering beggar, a fateful decision that ultimately precludes any possibility of return—with secondary, related themes (by inverted analogy): digressions into Hasidic tales as ironic comments on the

20. Agnon got the idea for "Ve-haya he-'akov le-mishor" from Hasidic sources. See Landau, "Mekorot u-pseudo-mekorot," 95–96. The story has several versions two of which are cited in Landau's article. In Landau's opinion, the target audience of devout Jews "were attracted by its conflicting tendencies: a) attraction to the *dark, terrible things in life*; b) a desire for confirmation of their faith" (emphasis added). Those dark terrible things in life are the very extraordinary events that are typical of the novella.

21. Goethe defined the Novelle as follows: "What else is a *Novelle* about but an event which is unheard of but has taken place?" see Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 642.

Delayed Return in a Novella and in a Short Story by Agnon

protagonist's predicament. The broad sweep of the work enables narrative expansion that manages never to obscure the main theme—fateful departure from one's home.

The narrative is permeated with symbolism deriving from a tangible object—as is typical of many novellas—the letter of introduction given to Menashe Ḥayim by the rabbi. The letter integrates the novella's various parts and runs through them all, governing the protagonist's actions as well as playing a decisive role at those junctions where the plot takes its fateful twists. Thus, for example, Menashe Ḥayim leaves town with the letter (he nearly loses it when it falls from his hand and he stumbles over it); he is talked into selling the letter to the beggar; the letter is found among the dead beggar's possessions, leading to the case of mistaken identity, which in turn enables the “widow” to remarry. This last appearance of the letter produces dire personal and legal complications. Had the letter not been retrieved from among the beggar's possessions Kreindl Tcharni would have never been declared free to marry again, and the plot would not have developed in the way it does.

Menashe Ḥayim's departure from home, his wanderings, and return attest to human blindness, a typical subject of so many novellas. He fails to read the inauspicious signals that indicate, in prophetic manner, the major disruption about to occur. At no stage of the plot does he perceive them: not when the letter falls from his hand, as mentioned before, and he stumbles over it as if encountering an obstacle; not at the sight of gleaming white headstones in the cemetery—the final image of his village, etched in his mind as he leaves it behind; nor the beggar's remark, as he persuades Menashe Ḥayim to sell his letter of introduction—words which, with hindsight, take an ominous significance: “You're not one of a kind in this world; there's many a Menashe Ḥayim in the marketplace;”²² not even the haunting tune he hears at the great fair, a symbol that in fact augurs his demise: “Have you ever laid eyes on such a miserable fellow as I, / my soul, oh, my soul is asking. / I have died and come back, / to find my door locked.” This tune plays over and over in his mind, until for a moment he himself thinks it is “a sign from heaven.” Yet not even this turns him homeward with no further delay. Instead: “Menashe Ḥayim then started repeating various kinds of melodies, to silence the babbling in his ears and guts.” Nothing more. Such portentous signs, many more of which can be found embedded in the text, underscore its tendency toward the irrational, precisely one of the genre's defining features.²³

22. See S. Y. Agnon, *Kol sipurav shel Shmu'el Yosef 'Agnon*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1964), 96.

23. Three more examples: we are told that every year Menashe Ḥayim would give the grave keeper a pair of undergarments, and his wife, Kreindl Tcharni, “would generously add wine to the synagogue, for the Sabbath Kiddush and Havdalah, and also diapers for the babies of the mourning women at the cemetery” (Heb., 1964, 169.) Kreindl Tcharni goes to borrow some flour from her neighbor, and is told: “My dear, do bake even for two Menashe Ḥayims, and God willing, you will soon be baking at home for a circumcision ceremony” (Heb., 1964, 82). The reference to babies foreshadows the ending, while the reference to “two Menashe Ḥayims” and the circumcision ceremony encapsulates the tragic plot. The third example—as Menashe Ḥayim weighs his decision to return home—he thinks: “Yet it is

The events that befall Menashe Ḥayim, namely: selling the letter given him by the rabbi; the death of the beggar who bought it; and the mistaken identity all fall within the scope of the possible and plausible. But the ensuing twists of fate that lead to Menashe Ḥayim's decline are given no convincing explanation. Instead, a deterministic atmosphere prevails, typical of many novellas. This tone is set not only by overt signals such as those described above, but also by ironic signals sent to the reader behind the character's back, exposing implicit meanings and foretelling the future. One example is the following disingenuous statement made by the narrator, addressed to the reader: "And now, dear reader, let us return to *that first man of mine*, and take an interest in Menashe Ḥayim Ha-Kohen" (emphasis added). The allusion to the book of Hosea (Hosea 2:9: "I will go back to my husband [=Heb. "man"] as at first, for then I was better off than now," hints at the symbolic story of the prophet Hosea's marriage to the "adulterous woman"—surely a portent of the future. The allusion (besides its legal implications: Jewish law prohibits a woman's remarriage to her former husband) is also ironic—the verse tells of a woman wishing to return to her former husband, saying she was better off with him; for Kreindl Tcharni, with her two husbands, things are quite the opposite.

Similarly, the narrator relays information, through the beggar's remarks, relating to Menashe Ḥayim's childlessness and failure to father a child: "The beggar said: 'Poor man, you're not much of a man at all, are you?'" The beggar intends this to mean that Menashe Ḥayim has failed to make advantageous, "economic" use of his letter of introduction from the rabbi, but the implied author is in fact communicating with the reader-addressee by referring the reader to Jeremiah 22: 30, source of the allusion in the passage just quoted from the novella: "Write this man down childless, a man who will not prosper in his days; for no man of his descendants will prosper sitting on the throne of David or ruling again in Judah." The prophecy refers to childlessness, failure to father a child and carry on the family line, as indeed proves true of Menashe Ḥayim.

THE DELAYED RETURN IN "FERNHEIM" AND A CHANGE OF GENRE

In contrast to "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," in Agnon's 1949 short story "Fernheim," there is no "horrific event" at all, nor the kind of disastrous results we have seen in "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight."

better for Kreindl Tcharni to live her life in accordance with Judaism . . . , and I am already lost" (Heb., 1964, 117). This is precisely what transpires: Kreindl Tcharni is accepted by the community following Jewish law, while Menashe Ḥayim is indeed lost. Some of the hints were mentioned by Kurzweil in *Massot 'al sipurei SH.Y. 'Agnon* and by Ya'akov Bahat, *SH.Y. 'Agnon ve-Ḥ hazaz: 'iyuney mikra* (Haifa: Sefarim Yuval, 1969). Arnold Band reads these signs as part of the symbolic technique used in this work. Although he does not refer explicitly to the Novella's features he maintains that "the sensitive reader cannot escape the fact that behind the surface of realistic details there lies another world of meanings and attached sentiments which both fund back into the realistic surface and charge it with new emotion and unity" see Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 90.

Delayed Return in a Novella and in a Short Story by Agnon

“Fernheim” is a story about a man returning from captivity after the First World War to find his home locked. Fernheim hears from the concierge the news about his wife Inge leaving home after their baby had died, and about her staying in the village with her sister’s family. When he goes there to meet his wife her family is reluctant to cooperate. Yet, to his great amazement, his brother-in-law, Steiner, tells Inge that her erstwhile fiancé had in fact survived the war and, despite being presumed dead, had, in fact, returned. When Fernheim finally meets his wife he concludes from their conversation that her heart is no longer his. He leaves the room and closes the door, both actually and symbolically, on his former life.

In “Fernheim,” it is Karl Neiss, the former fiancé of Fernheim’s wife, Inge—presumed dead after being buried in an avalanche during the war—who returns home, alive and well, only to find that his fiancée had meanwhile married his friend, Fernheim. Yet Neiss is a minor character, who is only discussed, but never makes an actual appearance in the story. Thus, the “horrific event,” so to speak, does not even befall the protagonist—Fernheim. The story, then, is seemingly no more than an episode based on an improbable coincidence.

Werner Fernheim, unlike Menashe Ḥayim, does not find himself in an impossible legal predicament or in a fateful dilemma, upon his return from two years’ captivity as prisoner of war. Inge, his wife, is still married to him and him alone. But his return journey to his wife is not full of inauspicious omens like the signals that Menashe Ḥayim failed to decipher, and the concierge in his building is the first person whom Fernheim meets, who knows him and Inge. She informs him of the changes in his life in brutally direct terms: “And all this ringing—it’s really quite useless, because Mrs. Fernheim left and locked the house and took the keys with her. She didn’t imagine there’d be any need for keys, like now, for instance, that Mr. Fernheim’s back and wants to get into his house.”²⁴

The reader is not the only one to hear and draw conclusions as to the future of the couple, the tenants of that locked house; Fernheim too draws his conclusions. After his return, he does not travel right away to the village to meet his wife. He puts off the trip for two more days, as if postponing impending doom. He also pawns the gift he had bought her, using the money to purchase a return ticket, as though he knows that the reunion with his wife is doomed from the start.²⁵

Fernheim, then, unlike Menashe Ḥayim, does not inhabit an irrational world governed by transcendental powers. On the contrary, his own modern, secular

24. See S. Y. Agnon, “Fernheim,” in *Twenty-One Stories*, trans. David S. Segal, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), 236.

25. Uzi Shavit observes: “It seems that Fernheim is haunted by the feeling that the past cannot be undone, after his return from captivity, a feeling of ‘my worst fears have come true’. . . his struggle to get Inge back is really just for show; in actual fact, he is well aware all along of his real situation.” See Shavit, “‘Me’uvat lo yukhal litkon,” 132. Fernheim, with his eyes wide open, contrasts with Menashe Ḥayim’s willed blindness, with this point becoming another genre-related difference between the two works.

world has no room for weighty theological problems or reflections about the workings of the universe, of the kind Menashe Ḥayim engages in, only for healthy curiosity that depends on common sense he uses to puzzle out strange events, such as the unexpected return of Karl Neiss, who has (literally) displaced Fernheim: “Fernheim whispered, “Karl Neiss alive?” “Alive,” repeated Steiner. “Have the dead revived already, then? I myself, everybody with me—we all saw him disappear beneath a landslide and I never heard of his having been pulled out of the debris. ... And even if they did get to him, he couldn’t possibly have come out alive.”²⁶

In “Fernheim,” Agnon engages in an exercise on the topic of delayed return, allowing for a dual treatment of the topic within a single text. One part consists of Fernheim’s own story, while behind it, so to speak, is the “story” of Karl Neiss. The Neiss story has obvious characteristics of delayed return, as Judith Halevi-Zwick observes,²⁷ such as being presumed dead, then returning after a long absence to a beloved woman, who meanwhile had married another man and borne a son. For this returning traveler, though, the story has a happy end: he is reunited with his beloved and legally weds her (as Agnon wrote in the last part of the story, published posthumously).²⁸ As to Fernheim, although his marital status ostensibly remains unchanged upon his return from captivity, his story turns out to be a story of delayed return in which the returning traveler ends up bereft of love, wife, and family. However, unlike the treatment of this theme in “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight,” neither of the two returns in “Fernheim” has a truly tragic ending. Insofar as the happy-end Karl Neiss strand is concerned, things are clear enough.

Earlier readings have not attached much importance to the fact that in both works, the novella and short story, there is a double, or near-double who fulfills major functions in the course of the plot’s unfolding.²⁹ In “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight” this is obviously the role of the beggar who buys Menashe Ḥayim’s letter of introduction, thereby replacing him in name and in life but above all—in death. Another double of Menashe Ḥayim’s is the man who becomes Kreindl Tcharni’s husband once she is legally permitted to

26. See Agnon, “Fernheim,” 244.

27. See Judith Halevi-Zwick, *‘Agnon be-ma’aglotav: ‘iyunim be-’omanut ha-sipur shel ‘Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Papyrus; Tel Aviv University, 1989), 89.

28. See Emunah Yaron, “He’arot ‘ahadot le-hemshekho shel ‘Fernheim,” *Haaretz*, February 25, 1972, 16.

29. Agnon’s use of doubles in his writing, “Fernheim” included, has been noted by Nitza Ben-Dov “Sipur shel Ḥayim ve-sipur shel sipurim: diun be-sipur ‘Fernheim’ le-SH.Y. ‘Agnon,” *Iton* 77, no. 141 (1991): 30–31, 50; and Shaked, *Mendele, Lefanav ve-‘aharav*, 169–202. However, they both regard Karl Neiss as Fernheim’s double, not the other way around. Ben-Dov notes: “Karl Neiss is not necessarily Fernheim’s rival—he is his mythic, mysterious double; like Odysseus, miracles happen and delayed returns end well in their territory,” Ben-Dov, “Sipur shel Ḥayim ve-sipur shel sipurim,” 51. Shaked writes: “Fernheim too has a double...Karl Neiss, who took his place with his wife. But when fortunes are reversed, and Fernheim returns from captivity, he finds himself locked out, and her family shun him, for in their view, the survivor, in this case the double (Neiss)—is the victor,” Shaked, *Mendele, Lefanav ve-‘aharav*, 194.

Delayed Return in a Novella and in a Short Story by Agnon

remarry. In “Fernheim,” however, it is none other than Fernheim himself who is cast in the role of double, as he steps into the shoes of Karl Neiss, presumed dead. Fernheim marries Inge, Neiss’s fiancée, fathers her child (who dies even before Fernheim returns from captivity, as the concierge reveals), assumes Neiss’s place in the family firm, and, for all intents and purposes, lives the life intended for Karl Neiss. As Fernheim’s brother-in-law, Heinz Steiner, puts it:

Once there was a daughter of a well-to-do family who was engaged to a certain man; only the ceremony had not yet taken place. It chanced to happen that a certain fellow started to frequent this man’s company. The man who was engaged to the girl disappeared, and this other fellow *who had been trailing along after him* came and started courting the girl, until finally he won her and she married him. [emphasis added]³⁰

In Steiner’s view, then, Fernheim is a usurper, a pale copy of the original. When the first fiancé—Neiss—returns, Fernheim is obliged to cede his place to him.

From this point of view, “Fernheim” is the inversion of “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight”: it does not tell of a man shadowed by a double who has assumed a central role in his life and furthers the plot toward a tragic end. Instead, the double is the protagonist himself, who “had been trailing along behind” Karl Neiss before the war. During the war and afterwards, Fernheim replicated his friend’s life—by “disappearing” (held captive by the Serbs), then by returning—seemingly unexpectedly—to his family, only to find himself starring in a sort of bourgeois farce, in the role of failed suitor who is left with nothing.

Despite grim enough events, captivity, death of his newborn baby, separation from his wife, shunning by her family—the story of Fernheim as a double does not bear the stamp of tragedy. For, as we infer from his brother-in-law’s remark, above, he does not lose anything that was rightfully his in the first place, only what should not have come to him at all. The impression of a non-tragedy is enhanced in “Fernheim” by various humorous discourses in the story. Suffice it to mention the concierge’s funny way of talking in the significant opening of the story, or the amusing dialogue between Gertrud and her little son Ziggy, who does not understand why his mother is lying when Fernheim is visiting, or Fernheim’s own rhetoric, replete with irony and cynicism, while talking to Steiner and then to Inge.

GENRE-DEPENDENCE IN AGNON’S WORKS

The novella form has often been likened to tragedy in terms of the unity of action, the reversal of fortune—*peripeteia*,³¹ and the moment of recognition—*anagnorisis*, when new information enables the hero to understand his life and

30. See Agnon, “Fernheim,” 243.

31. At this turning-point a sudden change takes place in the character’s situation or fortune (usually for the worse). Although sudden, the change is not arbitrary; it is causally linked to preceding events.

fate in a new way. These conditions are clearly met in “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight,” where the protagonist’s fortune is reversed, turning him from a wealthy shop owner to a wandering beggar deteriorating from bad to worse. In “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight,” the crucial moment of recognition occurs when, upon returning to his town, Menashe Ḥayim understands the imminent failure of his life—his childlessness—as he learns about his wife giving birth to a son by another husband. The choices that evolve from this new information bear tragic results for the protagonist.

Unlike “And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight,” “Fernheim” lacks a definite point of fortune’s reversal: in fact both characters’, Neiss’s and Fernheim’s fortunes are reversed in inverted symmetry. “Fernheim” also lacks the moment of sudden recognition that would shed new light on Fernheim’s life up to that point; after all, the salient details concerning his life with Inge become known to him in the opening scene, and even the improbable return of Karl Neiss cannot truly change the knowledge he already possesses. This reading is supported by those self-imposed procrastinations en route to his wife, as he heeds the warning signs he has already explicitly received from the concierge about Inge’s leaving home, indeed leaving him.

The two works differ on another important and genre-related point. Agnon weaves another motif into these two treatments of the theme of delayed return—the failed marriage. After Menashe Ḥayim is presumed dead, and his wife, Kreindl Tcharni, marries another man, she muses on her pregnancy, comparing her two marriages: “Recalling Menashe Ḥayim, who had not given her a child, while with this new husband, may he live long, she was rewarded, thus she knew that her first marriage had not been good for God either.”³²

Kreindl Tcharni perceives Menashe Ḥayim’s “death” and her own remarriage and pregnancy as a chain of events supervised by God, designed to rectify that first, unsuccessful marriage. Menashe Ḥayim himself, when he learns of his wife’s marriage and pregnancy, muses: “It must be God’s will, since He has not prevented her from having a child, such as never happened in all the time she was legally wedded to me.” Menashe Ḥayim and Kreindl Tcharni inhabit a world of faith; Divine Providence rules, and none but God knows the solution to the riddle of human existence. The statement: “It must be God’s will” frees the speaker of personal responsibility for his own actions, since he regards everything that happens to him solely as direct outcome of divine intervention. Indeed, an externally motivated event of fateful proportions is a defining feature of the novella form, regarded by some as quintessential.³³

For Menashe Ḥayim, his delayed return cruelly exposes the failure of his marriage. He perceives this as a random move on God’s part, beyond man’s

32. From a passage appearing only in the first edition of “Ve-haya he-‘akov le-mishor,” it emerges that Kreindl Tchami’s father married her off to Menashe Ḥayim only as the default option, so as not to let her marry the rich man’s son, since the latter’s family is tainted by the shadow of incest. So here too “the match was no match at all” from the outset. The mean-spirited in Jazlovitz said of Menashe Ḥayim and Kreindl Tcharni “that theirs was an unnatural match,” Landau, “Mekorot u-pseudo-mekorot,” 99–100.

33. See Bennett, *A History of the German Novelle*, 5.

Delayed Return in a Novella and in a Short Story by Agnon

control. Yet on another, parallel level, developed by the narrator, we overhear Menashe Ḥayim's thoughts: "How easily that deed could have been undone;" that is, he assumes responsibility, as a human being, for the disastrous outcome of his actions. Chance now takes on the power to cast his fate.³⁴

The thematic combination (of delayed return and failed marriage) is also found in "Fernheim": thus, Heinz Steiner tells his brother-in-law, Werner Fernheim, recently released from captivity, to stay away from Inge, so as to pave the way for her to return to Karl Neiss, her former fiancé. In doing so, Steiner recalls the twisted, arbitrary chain of events that led up to Fernheim's marriage to Inge. Steiner then pronounces Fernheim's fate with the following pitiless remark: "From the very start the match was no match at all." This statement does not carry the same weight as do the musings of Menashe Ḥayim and Kreindl Tcharni about their failed marriage, since "Fernheim," in contradistinction to "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," does not portray its characters as believing that transcendental powers arrange human destiny.

In "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," Menashe Ḥayim's delayed return—enabling Kreindl Tcharni's marriage-of-error and her pregnancy—is the factor that exposes the failure of his marriage. In "Fernheim," the fragility and vulnerability of Fernheim and Inge's marriage is exposed not by his own delayed return, but by the return of her former fiancé, Neiss. Neiss returns in the role of the lover, who upsets Fernheim and Inge's relationship. Steiner's remark, quoted above, is not a product of Fernheim's consciousness but of Steiner's, in the parodic role of God wielding power over man's destiny in the modern world of unbelievers. Steiner's judgment is not based on any new knowledge about Fernheim and Inge's relationship (as was the case with Kreindl Tcharni's pregnancy). He is motivated, rather, by the desire to restore the bourgeois order that had been disrupted by Inge's marriage to Fernheim.

A decisive genre-dependent difference between "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" and "Fernheim" is the ending. "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" fulfills the convention of the novella in which the unpredicted turning point (i.e., the sale of the letter of introduction) redirects the course of the plot, altering the fate of the protagonist. As a result of this tragic turn Menashe Ḥayim declines rapidly and dies: in this respect the ending is final, complete, and tragic.³⁵ "Fernheim," by contrast, observes the short story convention, whereby its very brevity and density result in what has been called "a work moving toward its ending from the very beginning."³⁶ It follows that one

34. See Bennett, *A History of the German Novelle*, 18.

35. On "ve-haya he-'akov le-mishor" as Jewish tragedy see Sarah Halperin, "Le 'ofyah ha-yehudi shel ha-tragedyah 've-haya he-'akov le-mishor" *Alei-Siah* 10–11 (1981): 101–108, and also Ariel Hirschfeld, *Likro 'et SH.Y. 'Agnon* (Tel Aviv: Aḥuzat Bayit, 2011), 165–199. Hirschfeld writes: "The tragedy unfolding before our eyes is a Jewish tragedy. Jewish, since it is a trial of faith—the faith of the lonely man, which gradually reveals itself to be an act of courage, understood by no Divine Presence. This faith takes place in total solitude, meeting with no response or reward," 187.

36. See, for instance, Norman Friedman, "Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition" in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, eds. Susan Lohafer and Jo Ellyn Clary (Baton Rouge: Louisiana

should be able to “guess” the ending of “Fernheim” from the start, that is, from the opening scene in which reader and character alike learn details of his private life that bear upon his future. In fact, the reader can infer the ending from the very title, meaning, in German, “far” plus “home.”

Similarly, Fernheim’s hurried “journey” within his brother-and-sister-in-law’s home, on his way to meet his wife, emphasizes the way the story strives toward its ending, at every step of the way. Each “station” in this short journey hastens the end of Fernheim’s relationship with his wife. Thus, he meets Gertrud, his wife’s sister, who greets him “without the least show of joy, as if he had not returned from prison camp, as if years had not passed without her having seen him;” she also “looked shocked” when he asked her where Inge was “as if that were too personal a question.” Then: “Finally, when he looked at the door opening to another room, Gertrud said, “You can’t go in,”” using a lie that her son’s bed was blocking it.³⁷

Ziggy, the Steiners’ small son, reacts the same way when he throws a mal-
evolent look at Fernheim and refers to him merely as “a man,” (rather than as a relative, for example, or Uncle Werner) when sent by his mother to inform his father of Fernheim’s arrival. Again, the same reaction recurs in Fernheim’s tense conversation with his brother-in-law, Heinz Steiner, who “had a vexed look, the kind he wore regularly when having to appear before a *stranger*. As soon as he came in and saw Fernheim, his pent-up anger doubled. Utter amazement covered his face. Scratching his moustache and scarcely opening his lips, he muttered, ‘*You’re here?*’” (italics mine).³⁸ In their abrasive conversation, when Fernheim expresses his angry surprise that his wife had not come to meet him at the station, Steiner replies calmly: “Inge is on her own; we don’t pry into her affairs. And let me advise you, Werner: don’t be prying into her affairs.”³⁹

The last station on Fernheim’s “journey” at his in-laws’ is his meeting with Inge herself, correct enough on the surface, but brimming with alienation: “Where were you all these years?”⁴⁰ —she asks him, as if speaking to a casual acquaintance, and continues: “But weren’t you a prisoner of war? I thought I heard that you had been captured,” as if he weren’t her husband, though she is still legally his wife, and has borne his child. The yawning abyss of alienation between them is all too obvious to Fernheim, as is Inge’s wish to be rid of him so that she can be with Karl Neiss again.

State University Press, 1989), 24. He mentions that some new approaches follow two of Poe’s principles. The first is the desired singleness of effect and the second “is that if everything is so constructed to answer to the end, then *the end controls the beginning and the middle*” (emphasis added). See also Susan Lohafer, *Coming to Terms with the Short Story* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 94: “Short fiction, it has been said, is the most ‘end-conscious’ of forms. Readers of short fiction are the most ‘end-conscious’ of readers.”

37. See Agnon, “Fernheim,” 237.

38. Agnon, “Fernheim,” 240.

39. Agnon, “Fernheim,” 242.

40. Agnon, “Fernheim,” 245.

Delayed Return in a Novella and in a Short Story by Agnon

Yet, despite the story's ending—with Fernheim actually shutting the door behind him, symbolizing the end of his former life—it is not an act of existential finality for the character. This is borne out by his remark to Inge: "I'll go. And maybe the future will be brighter for me than Mr. Hans Steiner and Miss Ingeborg of the house of Starkmat think. My black fate isn't sealed forever. Not yet."⁴¹ Further evidence supporting that Agnon did not regard the ending as final for the protagonist (in contradistinction to the ending of "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight") can be found in the story's continuation, found among Agnon's papers after his death and published posthumously.⁴² It emerges there that Fernheim carries on with his life, albeit without Inge, maintaining some sort of routine and fantasizing that she would one day come back to him. Meanwhile, resigning himself, he scours the newspapers for the announcement of her marriage to Karl Neiss.

The two delayed returns in Agnon's two pieces differ markedly. The novella form is well-suited to "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" which places the devout protagonist, upon his delayed return, in a tragic dilemma.⁴³ He is forced to choose between his commitment to Jewish law, on the one hand, which would impel him to declare himself, making his wife an adulteress and her son a bastard,⁴⁴ and on the other hand, is his love for his wife. Each possibility is fraught with disaster from his perspective. This kind of situation echoes in the statement, as recalled by Menashe Ḥayim, the words of one of the most prominent Ashkenazi sages in the seventeenth century, Isaiah Halevi Horovitz, (1558–1628): "The keys are placed in a man's hand," that is, the individual has free will to determine his own fate, since he has the power of choice, as indeed Menashe Ḥayim's fate is cast by his own choice. He decides to hide the fact that he is still alive, so as not to disrupt his wife's new life, and lets himself decline into death.

Fernheim's world is the inverted image of Menashe Ḥayim's: secular, with his Jewishness bearing no import for the narrative. His life's course embodies the modern, urban European shocked by the First World War into painful transition from pre-war life to what followed.

Fernheim's delayed return can be read not as the exemplary-archetypal type of the fabula, but as a kind of semi-parodic variation on the theme of delayed

41. Agnon, "Fernheim," 247.

42. See Yaron, "He'arot 'ahadot le-hemshekho shel 'Fernheim.'"

43. On the tragic nature of Menashe Ḥayim's dilemma and decision, see Landau, "Mekorot u-pseudo-mekorot," 99. Ziva Shamir observes that the kind of choice made by Menashe Ḥayim can only be made by a modern person, motivated by modern values, such as love and humanism, while ignoring religious concepts such as "Divine Providence." Moreover, she regards him as no less than "Promethean rebel," with no limits or limitations in dealing with the dilemma he faces. Her conclusion: "This is no tale of resignation but a story of rebellion against God." See Ziva Shamir, *Shai 'olamot: ribui panim be-yezirat 'Agnon* (Safra: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 2010), 63.

44. Interestingly, in the two works discussed here, the delayed return is tied up with a child. Kreindl Tchami's baby is the decisive factor in Menashe Ḥayim's decision not to declare himself and show that he is alive and well after all—this is his own final step in the dissolution of their marriage. This should be compared to Fernheim and Inge's dead baby, mentioned in the opening scene of "Fernheim." This dead baby signifies the breaking of the last thread of their ties.

return, reversing most of its features. His close circle knows that he is alive and about to come home (he has sent letters); nevertheless, they are not expecting him. His wife has not married another man in his absence nor borne anyone else's child. Nor does he follow her and her life from afar, as does Menashe Ḥayim. Instead, confronting his wife and her family in painful conversation, he protests their attempts to remove him from his home and former life. He does not hold the keys to his own fate. It can be said that Menashe Ḥayim would have been able to change his fate by changing his actions, even after the sale of the letter of introduction (for instance, had he hastened home without delay). But Werner Fernheim could not have impacted the chain of events that led to the dissolution of his marriage, either by action or inaction, just as he had not been involved in Karl Neiss's disappearance or in the latter's return to Inge safe and sound. It would seem that no action or lack thereof on his part could possibly have influenced Inge and her family's decision to take Neiss, her first fiancé, back in his stead. Fernheim ultimately resigns himself and gives his wife a bill of divorce, so that she can marry the other man.

As E. K. Bennett noted, "with regard to many genres the specific quality is not merely in the form but also in the subject matter."⁴⁵ The subject matter, thus, sometimes dictates the choice of genre. In the case of Agnon's works, the strict form of the novella, resonating with doom, was not an appropriate vehicle for the semi-parodic content of Fernheim's delayed return. Agnon therefore chose to cast it in the form of the episodic short story. The distance between the genres of novella and short story parallels the distance between the tale of the naive believer, Menashe Ḥayim, whose world is shattered upon his delayed return, and the episodic, albeit wrenching story of a modern man who follows arbitrary fate to the tortuous path of his life but not to his death.

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45. See Bennett, *A History of the German Novelle*, 2.