The Terrible Power of a Minor Guilt

LITERARY ESSAYS

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7

A Father and a Daughter in an Unconscious Relationship

IN THE PRIME OF HER LIFE, BY S. Y. AGNON

Dostoyevsky once said that all of Russian literature emerged from under the cloak of Gogol. With this comparison in mind, it may be said that most of modern Israeli literature was born of S. Y. Agnon's wonderful novella *In the Prime of Her Life*. Indeed, many are the Israeli writers who have pulled threads of gold out of this novella and used them to weave their own varied and various stories. This novella, together with the novel *A Simple Story*—which shares several of the same characters—has been analyzed and commented on often enough and can still be found on the desks of new as well as veteran literary commentators. Thus, my attempt at locating and probing this work's moral map bears no pretence at being general and all-inclusive, but aims only to present another possible angle.[1]

As is our habit, we shall turn again to the story's final pages, where we receive a clear picture of the ultimate objective of the plot. Akavia Mazal and Tirtza are married, and they are starting their married lives in Akavia's old apartment, to which another room has been added in order to accommodate a married couple. Now, after the initial period of happiness, Tirtza continues with her story: "But not all times are the same. I began to resent cooking. At night I would spread a thin layer of butter on a slice of bread and hand it to my husband. And if the servant did not cook lunch then we did not eat. Even preparing a light meal burdened me. One Sunday the servant did not come and I sat in my husband's room, for that day we had only one stove going. I was motionless as a stone. I knew my husband could not work if I sat with him in the room." And she continues, "My husband's misfortune shocked me and gave me no rest. Was he not born to be a bachelor? Why then have I robbed him of his peace? I longed to die, for I was a snare unto Akavia. Night and day I prayed to God to deliver me an infant girl who would tend to all his needs after my death."

Tirtza has achieved her goal. She has managed to force her will not only on Akavia but on her father and her surroundings as well, and has married her mother's lover. But this marriage, which is supposed to make amends for the mistakes of the previous generation, does not appear to have such a good beginning. Her inner feeling is one of failure. She suspects that Akavia is actually not made for marriage and that she has "robbed" his peace. She feels a sense of alienation toward her husband because she has been unable to separate him from her father, so that it sometimes seems to her that rather than gaining a husband, she has actually obtained another father: "Now I glanced at my father's face and now at my husband's. I beheld the two men and longed to cry, to cry in my mother's bosom. Had my husband's sullenness brought this about, or does a spirit dwell within the woman? My father's and my husband's faces lit up, by the force of their love and compassion each resembled the other."

Although Tirtza is a very young woman indeed (only about seven-

1. Among all the writings about Agnon, I have been especially helped by three important works: Gershon Shaked, *The Art of Agnon's Storytelling* (Tel-Aviv: Sifriat Ha-Poalim, 1973); Adi Tsemah, "Double Image," in his book *Naïve Reading* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1990), 11–24; and "Unhappy Loves," by Nitza Ben-Dov.

teen), she is already talking about death and writes a memoir that would suggest her short life is drawing to an end rather than just beginning. If we are to ask ourselves what exactly Tirtza is hoping to gain by writing this memoir, then the natural reply is that she wishes to reach an understanding of all that has happened to her since her mother's death through relating the events in the chronological order in which they occurred. How and why did she go through with a marriage that she herself did not think would bring her joy and happiness? Was the marriage to Akavia essential, the fruit of her autonomous desires, or could it have been avoided? This, in fact, is going to be the way in which we shall examine the events described in this novella. It is hardly a normal occurrence when a son or daughter sets out actively to repair the failed love affairs of their parents and goes so far as to marry an aging lover who did not fulfill his or her original love. Moreover, the deviation involved in the act described in *In the Prime of Her Life* is deepened when placed within the context of the norms accepted in the traditional Jewish society in which the story's heroes live.

Many of the commentators who have dealt with this work are justified in pointing out Tirtza's dynamic intensity against the inertia of the men in her life—Mintz, Mazal, and even Landau. Her name—Tirtza ("she wants")—also indicates her determined nature. Indeed, it would appear that Tirtza initiates her relationship with Akavia and takes advantage of her illness to force both her father, Mintz, and her mother's lover to turn that relationship into a marriage. But from a closer and more cautious look, especially at the first part of the story, it is obvious that right from the beginning, Tirtza's behavior is not at all autonomous. Her behavior is motivated by something extremely powerful: her father's guilty conscience toward her deceased mother's lost love. A powerfully significant moral feeling passes through a subconscious dialogue between father and daughter, and it

works so effectively on Tirtza's behavior for the simple reason that it is hidden from view rather than obvious.[2]

This exact region is where we shall try to examine the moral activity in this marvelous novella, the particular way in which Agnon's writings manage to establish the special activity of the moral element (for good or for bad) within his characters' subconscious dialogues.

Our discussion on *In the Prime of Her Life* continues the discussion on Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and joins the debate on Dostoyevsky's *The Eternal Husband*, where we saw the destructive power of a particular minor guilt, which overcame all the psychological justifications and rationalizations that accompanied it. But whereas in *The Eternal Husband*, the guilt presented between the two protagonists is obvious and above board both to the characters themselves and to the reader, in Agnon's work we shall look into the powerful effect of moral guilt that floats somewhere in the subconscious parts of the story's main characters.

If I were asked to clarify in a single sentence the literary greatness of S. Y. Agnon, I would say that it lies in his ability to actualize for us the job of his characters' subconscious, which is also the reason why we are constantly drawn not only to reread his works but also to try

2. From now on, I shall make frequent use of the term *subconscious*. I refer to that midregion, that shadowy area between the conscious and the unconscious, an area in which it is still possible to find residues of denial. Unlike the unknown, the subconscious refers to information that is not to be found in a person's awareness, but that does exist in the soul, whereas the unknown exists neither in the awareness nor in the soul. The test of something being either unknown or subconscious lies in its ability to drawn up from the regions of the soul and brought into open awareness—that is, when a person feels that the information was indeed within him, but he really did not know about it. The subconscious, therefore, is the middle ground in which a person still senses how he denied, forgot, or ignored the existence of this or that detail in his awareness for one emotional reason or another.

to decipher them. The characters, their thoughts, and acts are placed before us in such a way as to permit us to feel their additional, unsaid words. The spaces drawn into the text by this artist's hand create within us a state so parallel to the characters' subconscious that our own personal subconscious is filled with the characters' subconscious spiritual material. We cannot quench our thirst as readers in one conclusive reading, but we are tempted to return to the text in order to dig and dive into it again and again as if it were ourselves we were diving into.

Much of the movement of *In the Prime of Her Life* involves this kind of spiritual material because the story is presented to us only from Tirtza's point of view (apart from the chapter that relates the memoir of Akavia Mazal—also written in the first person—which appears as a separate section in the middle of the novella and tells the story of the past: Mazal's arriving in town as a young student and falling in love with Leah, Tirtza's mother). Tirtza's point of view, aside from being limited by the first-person singular, is restricted also in two other ways: (1) the beginning of the story is presented from the point of view of Tirtza as a child, whose knowledge of past details and the history of the relationship between the various characters is extremely limited; and (2) at the stage that things start becoming clear to her, she has to continue to conceal her real intentions from those around her and perhaps from herself, too, so that her unconscious behavior is extremely intense.

I have no intention of describing here the complexity of the novella we are examining, but I would like to point out the strength of the moral element (expressed in the father's feelings of guilt) that transgresses from the father's subconscious to his daughter's subconscious, especially in the first few chapters. Thus, although at first glance we get the impression that Tirtza's vehement efforts to make amends for her mother's injustice toward her lover constitute autonomous behavior, a more cautious read proves that such is not the

case. The other characters' responsibility for the young girl's marriage to the aging bachelor does not fall short of her own, although their responsibility is less obvious. Subconscious moral responsibility is problematic in the extreme; it is elusive and defies definition. Altogether, how can we talk about responsibility for something that is unknown? But still, many are the times that we hurl accusations, even legally, against persons who could have known but did not take the trouble to know or did not want to know, and we can even tell such a person why it was so convenient for him to deny all knowledge of that something. It seems to me that Agnon's fine and narrow artistry can draw attention to a new and very enigmatic kind of moral dialogue.

"My mother died in the prime of her life." With these words, Agnon opens the novella. In other words, she left Tirtza when she was in the middle of her life. But the young narrator is also in some kind of "prime of her life" of her own. Leah's death takes place when her daughter, Tirtza, is still too young to have formed any kind of identity or personal worldview and when her dependence on her parents and her home is at its greatest. On the other hand, the girl is old enough to understand—or, more accurately, to sense—what is happening in her home, with its various messages, both hidden and manifest. Indeed, during her mother's last days, in the house that is taken over completely to the needs of the sick woman, Tirtza feels two things: her father's utter submission and addiction to his wife's sickness and the distance that the woman keeps from her husband.

After his wife's death, the husband is so caught up in his grief that from then on, until the end of the novella, it will override everything he does, so much so that his bereavement seems to define his personality. From the very beginning, his extreme mourning is clearly based more on guilt than on a rare and special loss, and it most certainly does not express the eternal loss of a rich and satisfactory love life. Indeed, the guilt pangs Mintz suffers are clear and defined: Leah

and Akavia were already engaged to be married when Mintz met Leah, but this fact did not prevent him from causing the breakup of their engagement and marrying Leah himself, thus pleasing her father, who, because of his daughter's heart condition, preferred the wealthy Mintz to the poor student, Akavia. Not only did Mintz help in tearing Leah and Akavia apart, but the objective of this injustice—Leah's health and welfare—never materialized. Mintz's money (his name means "coin") is unable to help keep Leah alive.

Thus, after his wife's death, Mintz is concerned less with his orphaned, motherless daughter than with the guilt that is eating him up. In order to pacify and appease this guilt, he turns to the rejected lover, who, ever since the dissolution of his engagement has lived on the edge of town, as far as possible from the object of his affections, who married another. Now, though, Mintz makes him a partner in his mourning, a kind of second husband-widower to Leah. He visits Akavia to ask him to write the text for Leah's tombstone.

> The days of mourning passed by and the year of mourning was close to its end. That entire year a somber unmoving gloom crouched over us. My father resumed his work and when he returned from the store he silently ate his food. In my grief, I said my father has forgotten me; he has forgotten my existence.
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> One day my father stopped saying the Kadish, and he approached me and said, "Come, let us go and erect a tombstone for our mother." I put on my hat and gloves. "Here I am, Father," I answered. My father drew back in surprise, as though only today noticing that I wore mourning. And he opened the door and we left.

But what can Mintz's conscious and unconscious intent have been in taking along his young daughter to so significant a meeting with his dead wife's lost lover? There is no doubt that there is meaning and purpose to taking the child, who was virtually forgotten by her father during the year of mourning. So deep was his grief that he could not even distinguish that his daughter was dressed in mourning.

Here, we are required, as readers, to follow a silent dialogue between the father's subconscious and the young girl's, a dialogue whose moral repercussions will be impossible to ignore with regard to Mintz's role and responsibility in his daughter's unhappy marriage. Why does Mintz take his daughter with him to visit Akavia Mazal? Mintz's thoughts are not revealed in this story, and we are obliged to assume what they are from Tirtza's point of view. Not only does she not know much, but at this stage she is not asking any questions, as if, in her silence, she is prepared to cooperate with what is unsaid by her father (and perhaps unknown, also).

If we try to penetrate Mintz's secret thoughts, we could say that he is taking Tirtza along with him as a buffer in his difficult meeting with Mazal. On the one hand, he seems to be determined to honor Mazal by recognizing him as a partner in mourning, as one who all these years had been an additional, clandestine husband to Leah ("and at times my father would say, 'we the sad widowers.' How strange were his words, as if all the women had died and every man became a widower"). He even goes so far as to let the rejected lover be the one to write a poem for the gravestone. But on the other hand, notwithstanding his guilty conscience and his desire for atonement, Mintz is not willing to face his dead wife's true love without taking along his daughter, Tirtza. It is as if he were saying to Akavia Mazal, "I am well aware that she loved you and not me to the day she died, and maybe that is also the reason that I was unable to keep her alive, but still, Leah and I have something in common that you have no part of—our daughter."

Thus, in order to reinforce himself and his status at this important meeting prompted by guilt, Mintz takes his daughter and uses her, whether knowingly or not, as a personal means of defense. But is this all? Can he also be harboring in the depths of his soul some more ex-

treme intention, not only to strengthen himself in this difficult meeting but perhaps also to "offer" the girl—the living image of her mother, Leah—in some way to the elderly bachelor who lives on the outskirts of town? Is his guilt so powerful that he would be willing to go to such lengths? We can only hypothesize on so wild and extreme a subconscious intention; we cannot be sure. Had Agnon given even a very slightly clearer hint, he might have lost our faith not only in Mintz but also in himself as a storyteller, and the wind of grace and charm that blows over the story from start to finish—in spite of its great sadness—would have been gravely marred. Thus, the textual work here is extremely careful, and the moral censure slips through the folds of the subconscious—the reader's as well as the characters'. It is amazing, after all, that although Mintz is "making use" of his daughter by taking her with him on his visit to Mazal, he is unable and unwilling to reveal to her the identity of this strange man and why he has chosen him, of all their friends and acquaintances, to write the inscription on her mother's gravestone: "Looking at him I was suddenly reminded of my mother, for the gestures of his hands were identical with my mother's. My father stood before the man. So they stood facing each other. 'Who knew then,' my father said, 'that Leah would leave us.' The man's face brightened for a moment as my father's words appeared to encompass him in his grief; little did he realize my father's words were intended for me."

The confusion between knowledge and no knowledge is illustrated nicely in this little chapter. In saying "us," the father does indeed mean himself and Mazal, not himself and Tirtza. But Tirtza, who has no way of knowing the important role her mother played in this man's life, is sure that the "us" includes herself and that the man's happiness at being "encompass[ed] . . . in his grief" is basically mistaken.

But once Tirtza and her father leave Mazal's home, not only does she not draw his attention to Mazal's "mistake," but she does not even ask the simple, most obvious questions: "Who is this unfamiliar

man? And what makes him so special as to be asked to write the inscription on my mother's gravestone?" The two fall into a silence, as if they have made a new covenant not to know what they could have known so that such knowledge will not disturb someone else. After the gravestone is raised and Mintz, in a pathetic gesture, places his forehead on the stone and his hand grasps the hand of the strange man who has suddenly become part of the family, the covenant of silence continues to exist between Tirtza and her father. After all, had she known that Akavia Mazal had been her mother's true love, she might have been averse to him, if only for the sake of protecting her miserable father for not having had her mother's love in return. But in his guilt—which, as we shall see, will reach even greater heights—her father still appears afraid of revealing Mazal's true identity to his daughter. Knowingly or not, Tirtza continues to internalize Mazal's significance, so that when she does finally uncover the identity of the significant and definitive love in her mother's life, it will already be too late to remove his presence from her soul.

On another occasion, before they visit Mazal a second time, father and daughter have the following conversation:

> "Let us go for a walk," my father said one day during the intermediate days of Passover. I put on my festive dress and approached him. "You have a new dress," he said. "It is my holiday attire," I answered as we departed.
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> And once on our way, I thought: what have I done, for I have fashioned myself a new dress? Suddenly I felt God stirring my conscience and I stood still. "Why have you stopped?" my father asked. "I couldn't help thinking why have I worn holiday clothing," I replied. "It doesn't matter," he said.

Here again we see a very fine web of a dialogue between the conscious and the subconscious. The simplicity of the text does not tell

us whether the father intends from the beginning to go to Mazal's house or makes up his mind in the middle of their walk. It is quite clear to us, however, that he prefers not to tell her of his intention. But why? Tirtza has already visited Mazal's home and has even seen him take his place next to her father at the gravestone-uncovering ceremony. Is the father afraid that this time Tirtza will demand to be told about Mazal's importance in their lives? In any case, notwithstanding the lack of communication and without knowing of his intention (an intention that might not even have completely ripened within him), the girl has put on a new dress for the visit. I stress *without knowing* because during their walk she also finds herself surprised that she has put on a new dress. Is it the sight of the new dress that encourages Mintz to go to Mazal, or was this his intention from the beginning? The answer is something we shall not be able to learn from the text, which is told only from Tirtza's point of view. But one thing we are sure of is that the unconscious covenent between the father and the daughter is becoming steadily stronger. If Mintz's intention is to atone for what he did, he will have to make retribution by presenting—or better still, by sacrificing—his daughter, who so resembles Leah; it would thus be a good idea if she were to wear a new dress, which would give her a better chance of pleasing Mazal.

I feel I may have gone too far, and I should stop here and explain my intention in analyzing the fine and hidden web of unknown material being revealed by the text. The end of the story is known to us, and we are advancing toward it all the time: the marriage of Tirtza and Mazal. I want to examine what brought about this strange and unconventional marriage, which is clouded from the very beginning with unhappiness and joylessness. Which behind-the-scenes partners pushed, knowingly or not, toward this bad marriage, and what was it that made them succeed? At one point, after attaching herself to Mazal immediately after she fell sick, Tirtza asks Kaila, the maid, to take a love letter to him, but Kaila (the only one who has no hidden interest in this marriage) is naturally averse to this new relationship developing between the young girl and her mother's rejected lover: "'Don't foam at the mouth, my bird,' Kaila said. 'The man is old while you are young and full of life. Why you are just a child, and barely weaned at that.'"

There is something right in the spontaneous response of the devoted and faithful servant, and indeed all those who have written commentaries on this novella point out the sense of deprivation in Tirtza's marriage to Mazal. The question of moral responsibility for its failure is a very real one. But is the word *moral*, really the right one to use here? We can talk about responsibility for failure, and we can discuss responsibility for success, but what has morality got to do with the free choice of a spouse, whether this choice is a conscious or an unconscious one?

Am I not placing myself unnecessarily in the middle of a minefield?

As readers of Agnon's novella, we find ourselves in a much foggier region of moral definition. True, there is no doubt that the father appears to be motivated by a good and genuine sense of guilt toward his dead wife's rejected lover. But does not this motive cloud his awareness with regard to the fate of his young daughter? After all, sometimes good intentions and overpowerful moral guilt can lead to a hazardous path, which is why we are required to do our moral judging not only in accordance with results and acts, but also in accordance with motives and intentions. In Mintz's noble motives for reparation and atonement, we can also identify some fantasies or "uses" that turn out to be dangerous or exaggerated (such as a covert homosexual desire on the part of the father to get close to his wife's true love by means of his daughter). Does the reader have the right to morally judge these fantasies when the text gives the impression that their owners are not aware of them? Altogether, can there be any validity to morally judging the subconscious?

I insist on believing that there is significance to expanding on if not moral *judgment*, then at least on the moral *issue* in unconscious intentions, from which so many feelers are sent out toward acts that are good and bad, successful and not. Know yourself, said the Greeks, and I still don't know a sentence that better bears solid witness to a correct way of life. Know yourself and all that is inside you; you are responsible not only for what you know about yourself but also for what you could have known.

Here we can be helped by literature to better navigate our understanding, and literature has its own special way of doing so—through identification. An understanding of the working of the subconscious minds of the characters in *In the Prime of Her Life* can give us profound and penetrating insight into the events in the novella to be better prepared for forthcoming surprises, but also to feel disappointed and angry about what could have been and was not (the Landau affair, for instance). By personally touching the internal subconscious of the characters, we are also able to judge them more correctly or accurately—where they went wrong as well as what and why they did not understand. Indeed, it will be a soft kind of judgment, forgiving in character, tragic in its understanding, but a judgment nonetheless. And here, in our reading, we now arrive at exactly the same point at which the heroine's subconscious joins the subconscious of the reader. We are still with Tirtza and her father on their second visit to Akavia Mazal.

> Reaching the town's outskirts my father turned off the road in the direction of Mazal's home. Mazal hurried toward us as we entered. Removing his hat my father said, "I have rummaged through all her belongings." After falling silent for a moment he sighed and conceded, "I have labored in vain, all my searching has come to naught."
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> My father saw that Mazal did not grasp the meaning of his words. "I thought to publish your poems and I rummaged through all her drawers, but I could not find a thing." Mazal shook, his shoulders shuddered, and he didn't say a word. Shifting from one foot to the other, my father extended his hand and asked, "Do you have a copy?" "There is no copy," Mazal answered. My father drew back, frightened. "I wrote the poems for her, that is why I did not make any copies for myself," Mazal added. My father sighed and ran his palm over his head. Mazal then grasped the corners of the table and said, "She is dead." "Dead," my father answered, and he fell silent. The day waned. The servant entered and lit the lamp. My father bade Mazal good day. And as we left Mazal extinguished the lamp.

The important part of this conversation between Mazal and Mintz is not what is said, but what is unsaid and what is not even conjectured by the passive listener and onlooker, Tirtza. Is she aware or is she unaware of the connection between the poems Mazal wrote to Leah—the ones Mintz was unable to find—and the pages her mother burned before her death? And if she does indeed make the connection between the poems and the burned pages, the smoke of which her mother inhaled before her death, why does she remain silent and not reveal what she knows to the two men, who have lost the chance of advancing their guilt-ridden relationship by publishing together a book of love poems Mazal wrote to Leah? Had our story been told in the third person by an all-knowing narrator, we could have blamed him and his intentions for the ambiguity of Tirtza's silence. But because it is Tirtza who is telling the story, her silence and the silence of her conjecture on this point are very significant. She awakens in us an inner sense of the boundary of her subconscious and her hidden intentions, and prepares us for their going into action. The pain of the two men, who are no longer allowed to mourn for Leah, is expressed in the word *dead*, which they repeat to each other before parting with a feeling of such totality not only because of the woman they shared, but because of the possibility of

their future relationship. What does the young girl feel as she watches them, and what are the plans she is weaving in her heart? We don't know, and probably neither does she. She just feels because she is still unaware of who Akavia Mazal is and what he is doing in her and her father's world.

Our subject is complicated. An analysis of the moral element in the characters' subconscious is not an issue in which moral definitions can be easily determined and judged. Nonetheless, it seems to me that the moral element can be a good lead in drawing out the characters' work of denial and the way in which they pass on to us the sweetness of the tragic feeling at the story's end. We already know so far how Tirtza has been primed—whether out of conscious or subconscious intention—to discover the role Mazal played and his significance in her mother's life. We are also aware of the fact that Tirtza actually cooperates by not asking any questions, at a time when questions would be quite in order. We also know that Tirtza is aware of the fact that only through her resemblance to her mother can she expect to attract the attention of her father, so it really is worth her while to be like her mother, not only physically but also in the desires of her soul. "And the doctor smoothed his moustache with two fingers and laughed and said, daughter of courage. And you wanted to be praised. And as he spoke he turned to my father and said, 'Her face is the face of her mother, may she rest in peace.' And my father turned and looked upon me."

Thus, when the time comes for the true and complete revelation of Akavia Mazal's identity, via Mr. Gottlieb's story (with its almost manipulative intention of forming a connection between Tirtza and Mazal, perhaps due to memories of Leah's unrequited love for Mazal and the heavy shadow of her unhappy marriage), the moral considerations and indecision that fill the air with regard to Mintz and Mazal become decisive in Tirtza's reflections: "Night after night I lay on my bed, asking myself: what would not be if my mother had married Mazal? And what would have become of me? I knew such speculations to be fruitless, yet I did not abandon them. When the shudders which accompanied my musings finally ceased, I said: Mazal has been wronged. He seemed to me to be like a man bereft of his wife, yet she is not his wife." And she goes on: "How I loathed myself. I burned with shame and did not know why. Now I pitied my father and now I secretly grew angry at him. And I turned my wrath upon Mazal also."

Both Mazal's agreement to relinquish Leah and Mintz's stubborn insistence on marrying her despite her love for Mazal create in Tirtza a righteous anger toward the two men. But had she learned of the Mazal and Leah story from Mintshe Gottlieb or someone else without ever having met Mazal, had this man been no more to her than some abstract, unreal name, she would most likely have freed herself of the story with much less pain and much less distress. Her father's special relationship with Mazal has already determined a place for him in her heart so that it is impossible for her to simply discard him out of hand. On the other hand, had she come to know Mazal only after having first been aware of the Leah and Mazal story, it is quite likely that the shame and embarrassment would have so alienated her against him as to have neutralized any possibility of a future relationship with him. Thus, the special way in which the girl becomes acquainted with and attaches herself to him, via her father's visits and Mazal's attitude to her (he even strokes her head on that first visit and says—as adults do to a small child—"you've grown"), without her knowing his real identity, succeeds in planting her father's guilt feelings within her, although she does not know the reason for them. It is these feelings that will activate with such power the passion to compensate Mazal for his unrequited love, whether or not he really wants or needs this compensation.

In the meantime, Tirtza is still struggling over the revelations of her parent's past relationship with Mazal and tries to navigate be-

tween her anger at her father and Mazal and her pity for them both. After she is overcome at the sight of her father asking forgiveness from Akavia Mazal on the Day of Atonement, it seems that her pity is stronger for her unloved father, who insists on declaring his guilt. She tries to alleviate this obsessive guilt by deepening her ties with him, as if saying to him, "If my mother could not love you, I myself shall love you in her place." All the descriptions of the way they sit side by side, she deep in study and he working on his account books, show us that Tirtza is trying to reinstate the relationship between Leah and Mintz, and to make it what it was at the beginning of the story, except that this time with her own love she will compensate her father for the love that her mother denied him.

> At ten o'clock my father would rise, stroke my hair, and say, "And now to sleep, Tirtza." How I loved his use of the conjunction, *and*. I always grew happy in its presence; it was as though all that my father told me was but the continuation of his inmost thoughts; that is, first he spoke to me from within his heart, and then out loud. And so I would say to my father, "If you are not going to lie down then I too will not lie down. I will stay up with you until you lie down."

The repeated use of the word *lie* is most significant because of its erotic connotations. Tirtza is trying to reproduce/repair the scene that took place between her parents before her mother died (" 'If only I could sleep,' my father said, 'I would now do so. But since God has deprived me of sleep, I will sit, if I may, by your side' "). The father's enthusiastic sense of guilt toward Mazal and his unconscious yet endless efforts at retribution, however, do not permit Tirtza to find her identity and her own world outside of past affairs, and he again points Tirtza toward Mazal. The loss of the poems means that there is no longer any reason for further ties with Mazal, and there is no reason for the young girl to visit the elderly bachelor at his home on

the edge of town. However, Mintz *decides to send* his daughter to study at the very same college in which Mazal is a teacher, although this decision seems especially strange for a number of reasons: "I had no talent for teaching, but I also showed little enthusiasm for anything else as yet. I believed then that a person's deeds and future were decided by others. And I said, it is good. My relatives and acquaintances were astonished. How in the world will Mintz make a teacher out of his daughter?"

A first reading of the novella gives the impression that it is the young heroine who is in charge of the strange marriage match, her forthright behavior is so much in contrast to the inertia of the older generation, but a closer look reveals that her unconstrained behavior is navigated in accordance with her father's undeclared and subconscious intentions, as well as those of Mintshe Gottlieb and, to a certain extent, those of Mazal, who, although the most passive of the three, still manages to cultivate—albeit unconsciously—Tirtza's enthusiasm toward him by telling her all about his own mother, a strong and independent woman who took her fate in her hands, left her religiously assimilated family, and married a working-class Jew just for the sake of returning to her own origins.

Clearer proof of the fact that Tirtza is activated rather than active can be found in the scene in which she declares her love for Mazal at the bookbinder's shop and what follows this declaration. The declaration is conducted entirely in accordance with symbols belonging to her deceased mother, using the same synthesis and the same code—as if Tirtza has no personality of her own, as if another entity has entered her being. Immediately after the declaration, she falls sick, shocked and agitated by what has happened to her. In a conversation with Mintshe, who has come to visit, she discovers the true nature of her emotional declaration to Mazal. After Mintshe tries in a roundabout way to dissuade her from this match, Tirtza replies with a very strange response.

"Do you not know, Tirtza, that Mazal is very dear to me, but you are a young girl, while he is forty years old. Even though you are young, you can plainly see that a few years hence he will be like a withered tree whereas your youthful charm will grow." I listened and then cried out, "I knew what you would say, but I will do what I must." "What you must?" exclaimed Mrs. Gottlieb in astonishment. "The obligations of a faithful woman who loves her husband," I replied, laying stress on my last words.

What is the point of these *obligations*, that Tirtza stresses so firmly as a basis and as justification for her declaration of love for Mazal? Obligations to whom? To her mother, it would appear, with whom she identifies so strongly, so much so that she now takes on her persona and tries to amend past injustices. But who was it that planted in her this sense of obligation? Undoubtedly, her father and Mintshe and perhaps also Mazal himself, each in his or her own way, plays a role in the dialogue of guilt that fills the air after Leah's death. Now that all the secret partners in the "let's make amends to Mazal" conspiracy are trying, albeit half-heartedly, to articulate their protest at Tirtza's *marriage of obligation* and attempting at the last moment to shake themselves loose of what they had been secretly machinating all the time, now after they have gone this far in fulfilling their desires, the impassioned young girl has to sink deep into a serious malady, to be virtually on the verge of death, in order to truly become her dead mother and to achieve complete approval for carrying out her *obligations*.

Moral responsibility—for good or for bad, for unconscious feelings or intentions—is a matter that is both complex and delicate; it is like trying to fashion a piece of cloth out of a spider's web. What is the fine border beyond which the unconscious wish can be made to stand evaluation and trial? What is the fine boundary between deep psychological need and responsibility for the act that results from it?

The unknown in Agnon's characters is very weighty indeed, and the author's artistry allows us, as if by means of an ultrasound scan, to follow accurately its every move. Thus, the unknown activates not only Tirtza's subconscious in the novella *In the Prime of Her Life*, but also our own subconscious as readers. By the time we reach the allegoric chapter that brings this beautiful work to a close, we feel no anger or hostility, not for Mintshe, not for Mintz, and not for Mazal, who led the young girl to this sad marriage that has no future but only consolation for the past (they married during the week of the Ninth of Ab).

Tirtza's marriage to Mazal is sad and disappointing not only because it is an unsuitable substitute for the proper marriage that Tirtza rightly deserved to Landau, the wealthy young Zionist, the warm-hearted lover with the strong personality, who asked in vain for her hand. The girl's real passion, however, is for her mother, who died when she was a child and because of whom she receives two fathers, with whom the power of the oedipal relationship arouses in her—not by chance—a feeling of death.

I have already mentioned that Tirtza's role in the novel *A Simple Story* is no more than shadowy, but there is one brief chapter in which she appears in the flesh. It is a strange chapter, but one that I believe to be of great significance. Immediately after Bluma takes her things, leaves Herschel's home, and moves into Mazal's home, the text says:

Bluma stood in the home of her new employers and arranged her things and hung her father's picture above her bed. Her father's likeness had faded, his blond beard that circled his face had paled and the ephemeral light of another world floated over it. Since childhood, Bluma had not followed her father. Out of pity for her mother, she would rise up against her father, who sat with his books, reading and sighing. Now that he was dead he was dear to her. Everything that re-

minded her of her father made her heart stand still. If there was any doubt that she sensed his attributes, now that she no longer had any more of him than his portrait, her heart overflowed.

While she was talking to herself, there was a light knock on the door of her room and Mrs. Tirtza Mazal, the mistress of the house, entered and asked if there was anything she needed. She also looked at the picture and asked, "Is that your father?"

Bluma replied saying, "Yes, it is my father."

Tirtza Mazal looked in wonder and was silent.

Bluma said, "I resemble my mother." And as she spoke, her face reddened as if she were lying.

The two stood in silence facing the picture. The face was soft and sad and bathed in peace. It was a picture of a man whose only complaints were external ones. Bluma dropped her head and Tirtza left silently. From Mrs. Mazal's words, Bluma saw in her father what she had never seen in him all her life.

Indeed, a strange little piece. As a result of her talk with Tirtza, Bluma experiences a profound and new revelation with regard to her father (something she had never seen before in all her life). But what was it that Mrs. Mazal had said to her? Not only does the author not give away anything in Tirtza's name, but it also appears that she does not actually say much. It is as if her mere presence with its ingrained double Oedipus complex reflects messages and suspicions from Bluma's unawareness, allowing her to look at her father through different, more critical eyes. Is this, once again, another example of moral transference from one unconscious to another?

The objective of this discussion was not to add one commentary to the dozens of commentaries that have been written in the past and those that are yet to be written on this wonderful novella, but to try this time to direct the moral beam that we switched on at the beginning of the book at that twilight zone between the conscious and the subconscious, at those fine processes of denial formed by the characters in the novella that pose a riddle to us all. It seems to me that apart from the patient and orderly work conducted on mental care, people have little opportunity to deal with the revelation and understanding of the crossroads in their lives in which denial processes take place, an understanding that will bring them closer not only to their psychological biography but also to their moral one. What good did they do to themselves and to their surroundings, and what bad? If literature offers us so excellent an example of this kind of elucidation, it would be wise not to miss it.