sion. Hebrew, of course, is different from any other language in that the Tora was given in Hebrew and the Lord created the world with Hebrew; all other languages are merely the product of human experience. Were the Temple still standing, claims the writer, he would have been one of the Levite choristers (Agnon is a Levite), but now he is forced to resort to the study of religious texts which are all that have remained of the past glory of Jewish history. He compares his own literary creativity to the suka a man makes for his shelter after he has been exiled from his father's house.

The grammarian's critique of Agnon's usage of the phrase suka meriḥa assumes broad metaphysical proportions because of the simile mentioned above. (Agnon often dramatizes the most insignificant details.) Though he was vindicated by a second grammarian (Yalon) he still felt unsure of himself. After a meeting with a descendant of Rabi Ya'akov of Lisa, the writer dreams of an old man holding a prayer book. He is sure it was Rabi Ya'akov of Lisa, the composer of the famous prayer book, *Derekh ḥayim*. Awaking from his dream, he checks the book in his personal library and finds the usage in question. He finds further corroboration of this idiom in a second prayer book and in an authoritative commentary on Psalms.

Beginning with an actual incident in his life, Agnon spins a tale of fantasy so beguiling that the reader is hardly aware of the transition from fact to fiction. The disparate elements are united by the repeated though varied metaphoric usage of the word *reaḥ*, (odor, fragrance, smell) and the particularly apt comparison of the Hebrew language or literature with a suka, a fragrant tabernacle that ultimately symbolizes the greater structure of past history. What is probably most autobiographical in this story is the writer's confession of his faith in his craft. The writer's obsession with his craft, his regarding it a surrogate for a lost faith is, of course, a romantic sentiment well known in European literature.

" 'Afar Erets Yisrael" ("The Soil of Erets Yisrael"), 1937

The polysemous symbol, well integrated into the narrative texture of the story, is one of Agnon's most successful rhetorical devices. In few stories has he selected a more versatile central symbol than in " 'Afar Erets Yisrael." "The soil of Erets Yisrael" immediately evokes several conventional associations: the actual soil of Erets Yisrael which is considered holy by pious Jews and an aspect of the return-to-nature mystique associated with much of modern Zionism; the handful of soil from the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem which the pious Jew desires to have buried with him; and, by extension of this tradition, a suggestion of the messianic

age when the dead will be resurrected on the Mount of Olives from which the soil is taken.[20] Agnon makes use of these associations either singly or jointly throughout the story, and adds to them a plot function that, in turn, opens up the inner recesses of the narrator's (here again is the narrative "I" as in "Sefer hama'asim") subconsciousness. The narrator has agreed to send a small bag of the "soil of Erets Yisrael" to an old, unnamed cemetery watchman he had met during a visit to his hometown and the graves of his ancestors. His struggle to bring himself to send the soil takes up the major part of the story; though the "soil" and the old cemetery watchman occupy most of the first chapter, it quickly becomes apparent that the narrator is the object of our attention.

The destiny of the anonymous cemetery watchman is always connected, at times ironically, with soil or earth. He was one of the first Zionists in town, but never fulfilled his dream of settling in Erets Yisrael. And since the soil of Erets Yisrael is sacred, his slighting of "the soil" is punished in kind; his declining fortunes are connected with the soil of the Diaspora. He failed in real estate, in agriculture, in the sale of farm supplies; finally, after his wife died and his sons were conscripted into the army, after the war (World War I) the community employed him as a cemetery watchman, a job again connected, however ironically, with the soil.

The cemetery visited by the narrator and watched by the old man assumes an importance of its own as we learn many of its outstanding features; the old section is hallowed by the graves of the tsadikim; the new section contains twice as many graves as there are living people in town, not including the piles of corpses mutilated beyond recognition in the war; many of the older stones are hard to read and the identity of the dead is being lost. The comments about the cemetery expand to embrace, by implication, the entire town which is a living graveyard. The narrator pities the dead buried here because they are not buried in Erets Yisrael and will not therefore be resurrected easily when the Messiah comes. We infer from the conversation between the two men that the cemetery watchman failed to adhere to his ideal because it was merely secular, not sustained by traditional religious faith. Years ago, when the old man was reading Zionist periodicals, the narrator, then a boy, was studying Pentateuch with the Rashi commentary; when the old man was selling shares and membership certificates in Zionist enterprises, the boy was building a model of the biblical tabernacle. The old man now regrets the course of his life and presses the narrator to promise to send him "soil of

[20] On the custom of burying the dead with a token quantity of soil from Erets Yisrael see **527**.

Erets Yisrael" from Jerusalem when he returns to his home there. The soil placed in the grave would serve as an expiation of his misdeeds.

Upon his return to Jerusalem, the narrator either forgot his promise or could not muster the moral energy to send the packet of soil. He encounters abundant distractions and obstacles, mostly the projections of his own reluctance to perform this good deed. As an excuse, he writes to the old man, "The time has not yet come" (p. 281), a phrase that echoes throughout the story. It is only by accident that he manages to scoop out a pocketful of soil when a funeral passes by one day and he follows it to the Mount of Olives in order to honor the deceased, apparently a poor man who had no family. Sending the packet of soil becomes a major ordeal for it involves one of the major afflictions of modern man, the bureaucratic regulations of the post office. After a long wait, he reaches a postal clerk who rejects the packet because it is improperly wrapped. The next day he tries again, but the clerk remains adamant.

The reader, familiar with the atmosphere and narrative technique of "Sefer hama'asim," will recognize them here: the irresolute, vacillating narrator; the meaningful, chance occurrences or encounters; the polysemous symbols or motifs. The past is very much alive in the present and the planes of consciousness often fuse. The realistic situation of the post office gains metaphysical dimensions by the introduction of several descriptive phrases. The narrator refers to the postal official as "he who dwells in this house," a phrase that ordinarily refers in the prayer book to God; the rules for tying packages are called halakhot, a term ordinarily used for rabbinical laws. The sending of the packet is, of course, a mitsva in that it fulfills a promise and provides an old man with sacred soil for his burial. The narrator's irresoluteness, in addition to being a personal trait, also carries broader religious connotations because the hero cannot find the willpower (kavana) necessary for performing the mitsva.

It should not surprise us that his frustration turns into anger that first fastens on the old man and the postal clerk, but then turns inward; he is keenly aware of his hesitating, skeptical character, "for I am not one of those to whom the world seems to be a plain and who enjoy the illusory tranquillity in which all err. How deplorable is this error! The skeptics, the doubters, the suspicious are the only men of truth, because they see the world as it is, not like those who are happy with their lot and with their world who, because of their own happiness, avert their eyes from the truth" (p. 284). The packet of soil now begins to become the focal point of his being. Nightmares plague him; he imagines he wanders in places where he is unknown; even Jerusalem seems to be foreign to him; his friends conspire to mislead him. In masochistic obsession, he reads the

old man's letter over and over again. He even begins to entertain anarchistic thoughts: were it not for the government he could have sent the packet, and so on.

"A man's thoughts are not founded upon anything. You think one thing and He who is above you plans to do otherwise" (p. 285). This insight, which prefaces the third chapter, marks the turning point of the story. It is the breach of the previous impasse, and raises the unanswerable question of causality that qualifies the ultimate implication of the plot. Within the confines of the story there are three possible causes of events: the narrator's personal characteristics; divine providence, and random fate. And we are never sure which one or two are operative. The writer's statement would suggest that it is God, but it is obvious from the tone and development of the story that external events are often projections of psychic states. If, on the other hand, there is some "power above" it is not clear whether it is fate (*goral*) or the God of Israel. In chapter 3, for instance, the narrator tells us of reading in the newspapers of a postal clerk, a Gentile, who had stolen monies from the mail and had absconded. In the next chapter we find that this was apparently the bureaucratic clerk who had rejected the packet; the narrator, who had gone there for some other reason, finds in his place a pleasant Jewish girl who eagerly accepts the packet and immediately sends it on its way. The breach of the impasse of the first two chapters cannot be attributed to mere chance as it seems to be from a superficial reading of chapters 3 and 4; all the other aspects of the story preclude the possibility of a random, hence meaningless, source of causality. After the frustration and nightmare of chapter 2, the narrator becomes intensely interested in sending the packet; prior to this, he had neglected his promise. The parallelism between the crystallization of his will and the change in postal clerks is no mere coincidence for the latter is a projection of the former in narrative terms. Once the packet is sent, the narrator, who had previously harbored rebellious thoughts, praises "the ruling power" (*shilton*), a term often attributed to God.

The conclusion (chap. 5) maintains and enhances the mystery of causality. The narrator receives a letter from the sons of the old cemetery watchman thanking him for the packet of soil which had arrived shortly before their father's death. The father, already in his death throes, had recognized the packet, smiled, and expired. When the sons settle in Erets Yisrael after the year of mourning, they tell the narrator of their wonder at the miraculous timing of the packet's arrival: in two letters the narrator had said there was still time and then sent the soil at the right moment. The narrator dismisses the sons' belief in his possession of "the spirit of

holiness" and relates the external facts as they happened: the funeral to the Mount of Olives, the two postal clerks, the laws of packaging, and so forth. When the sons persist in their wonderment, he concedes, "It was not I who calculated the day [of death], but the land, since Erets Yisrael itself possesses the spirit of holiness" (p. 288). Moreover, the very fact that the sons had decided to settle in Erets Yisrael, proves that the father had always wanted to do so and therefore deserved the sacred soil.

The final paragraph on the everlasting holiness of Erets Yisrael balances the graves of the Diaspora of the opening paragraph of the story, thereby completing the thematic framework for the central problem of skepticism, the concomitant paralysis of will, and their conquest after a crisis of the soul, after a nightmare. As in *Ore'aḥ nata lalun*, the regenerative force is the enduring holiness of Erets Yisrael.

"Baya'ar uva'ir" ("In the Forest and in the City"), 1938

So many of the most fundamental themes of Western literature permeate and energize "Baya'ar uva'ir" that the reader is repeatedly amazed that the writer succeeded in handling them so succinctly (ten pages) and unobtrusively. "Baya'ar uva'ir" is presented as a sentimental recounting by a mature writer of a boyhood experience: the delightful, carefree summer days in the forest and the encounter with the condemned murderer Franczisk. But through this narrative the writer deals with God's governance of the universe, the nature of evil, innocence versus experience, social norms versus natural feeling, and, more concretely, the forest versus the city. The story is far more complicated than suggested by certain critics for this is more than a thematic antithesis between city, the realm of life by law, by the Tora, and the forest where man is open to the temptations of his natural inclinations. Historically, "Baya'ar uva'ir" is probably the most sophisticated of many attempts on the part of Hebrew prose writers to give literary expression to the confrontation with a natural landscape and all the emotions or thoughts it evokes. A. L. Strauss has sensitively described the thematic complexities of the story;[21] our reading agrees with his in most points.

"When I was a boy, I spent most of my time in the forest" (p. 267). The narrator is carefree at the period of the story: he has cast off "the yoke of Tora" and has not yet been burdened with earning a livelihood, the perfect condition for an *éducation sentimentale*. The sheer sensual delight of the boy in the lush forest with its clear stream and swarming wildlife, evokes some of the finest paragraphs in all Agnon's writings.

[21] On "Baya'ar uva'ir" see **400, 417, 459, 569.**