THE POLYPHONY OF JEWISH CULTURE

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3 THE CRISIS OF JEWISH IDENTITY

S.Y. Agnon's *Only Yesterday*[1]

S.Y. (Shay) Agnon was born as Shmuel-Yoysef Tshatshkes in the town of Butshatsh in eastern Galicia, formerly a part of the great Kingdom of Poland, and between 1772 and 1918 incorporated in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (today in Ukraine). The Polish spelling of his and his town's name—Czaczkes of Buczacz (read: Cháchkes of Búchach)—sounds almost grotesque, and his flight from the name was a symptom of his flight from the shtetl world.[2] In local parlance, the Jewish name of the town was Bichúch, and Agnon imitated the name in his fictional Shibush, a decaying, valueless, dying world, as portrayed in his novel *A Guest for the Night*. Hebrew critics made a great deal of this symbolic name—*Shibush*—for its dictionary meaning is: breakdown, disruption, blunder—and this sounded like a death sentence on the Jewish Diaspora. Furthermore, breakdown is a cognate of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, representing the breakdown of the bourgeois world. Yet in the living language—the Hebrew incorporated in Yiddish—Shibush (pronounced: Shíbesh) means: a worthless thing, a negligible value: if something costs a shibesh, it practically costs nothing (derived from a worn-out penny, the

1 Introduction to the Israeli Nobel Prize winner for literature, S.Y. Agnon's novel *Only Yesterday*, translated by Barbara Harshav, Princeton University Press, 2000.

2 The facts on Agnon's life are based primarily on Dan Laor's *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishers, 1998); and on the still-classical biography of Agnon by Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968).

smallest coin with the Emperor's face rubbed off). And this perception evokes Y.L. Peretz's Yiddish romantic poem "Monish": "In kinigraykh Poyln / Nit vayt fun der grenets / ligt zikh a shtetele / groys vi a genets" ("In the Kingdom of Poland / Close to the border / Lies a town / As big as a yawn.").

In fact, considering the demographic structure of that time, Búchach was not a small shtetl but quite a large town, a center of a whole district, well connected to a network of similar towns around Galicia. The town sent a delegate to the Galician Sejm and later to the Parliament in Vienna, as well as a delegate to the first Zionist Congress in Basel in 1897. In 1890, when Agnon was three years old, the town counted 6,730 Jews, about 70 percent of the total population, as was typical for towns in Eastern Europe. Since 1874, the town had an elected City Council (12 Jews, 9 Ukrainians, 9 Poles) and between 1879 and 1921 Berysh Stern, the son of the head of the Jewish Kehilah, was mayor of Buczacz—not quite a Jewish exile. The Jews engaged in trade (indeed they conducted the trade of agricultural products for the whole region) and in crafts: they were the tailors, furriers, carpenters of the area. There was also a vigorous political and cultural life: Hasidim and their opponents, the Misnagdim, enlightened Maskilim, semi-secular, and worldly; there was a Jewish Socialist party and a Socialist-Zionist party, and so on. The language of the Austrian state, army, bureaucracy, and university was German (which was relatively easy for Yiddish-speaking Jews to acquire, especially when they had ties to German market cities, such as Leipzig and Danzig), while Polish had an autonomous status in Galicia and enlightened Jews studied in Polish Gymnasia. On the other hand, the Jews spoke Yiddish and had close relations to their brethren on the Russian side of the nearby border, and infused it with the two languages of study, biblical Hebrew and talmudic Aramaic (both together were called "The Holy Tongue"). Thus, the minimal education of boys was in five languages (girls often studied French).

Agnon was born on 8/8/1887, yet he claimed he was born on 8/8/1888 (lucky number) which fell on Tish'a Be-Av, the ninth of the month Av in the year 5,648 since the creation according to the Hebrew calendar. This claim is simply wrong, because that date fell on August 17, 1888. The ninth of Av is a most significant date: it is a day of fasting to commemorate two events of apocalyptic proportions in Jewish history: the Destruction of the First Temple and the First Exile from the Holy Land and the Destruction of the Second Temple, causing the two thousand year long Exile. It is also, according to one tradition, the day the Messiah will be born. Agnon lived in a mythological universe, in

the ahistorical world perception of Talmudic Judaism, where dates were less important as points in a chronological narrative but rather as significant moments in a universe of meaning.

In a similar way, Marc Chagall, who was born a few weeks before Agnon on the other side of the Russian border, claimed he was born on 7/7/87 (the actual date was June 24, 1887, according to the old Russian calendar, i.e. 6/7/87). But for Chagall, the magical number was an omen of his chosen destiny as an irrationally creative artist (see his "Self-Portrait with Seven Fingers"), while Agnon's fictional birthday was linked to the two great Destructions of the Jewish nation in the land of Israel (and perhaps, to the nation's Salvation, as mentioned in the first sentence of this novel). Did Agnon see himself in his innermost soul as the Messiah, the visionary prophet who would find the lost key of Jewish destiny, or perhaps as the witness to a final Destruction, *Khurban*, as represented in his two great novels?

Agnon received a traditional Hebrew education from the age of three until the age of ten, then was tutored by several private teachers and embarked on an intensive course of study and reading. His father was a furrier, was steeped in traditional Jewish learning. He prayed in the prayer house of the Chortkov Hasidic sect, whereas his maternal grandfather was a Misnaged (opposed to Hasidism). His mother was an avid reader of German literature, and at an early age, along with extensive readings in the traditional Jewish Library, Agnon learned Polish and German, read modern Hebrew secular literature as well as European fiction, as mediated through Yiddish and Hebrew translations, and read German literature as well as the fashionable Norwegian writers Ibsen, Bjørenson, and Hamsun in German translations.

He began publishing in Yiddish in 1903 and published stories and poems in Yiddish and Hebrew. When he reached the age of twenty-one, rather than being drafted to the army, Agnon left Buczacz. After visiting Lvov, Cracow, and Vienna, in June 1908 he immigrated to Palestine, settled in Jaffa, in the new Jewish neighborhood of Neve-Tsedek, and worked as an assistant editor of a literary journal. Here, his first story, "Agunot" ("Abandoned Women") was published, signed: Sh-Y Agnon ("the teller of 'Agunot'"). In 1912, he lived for several months in Jerusalem, where Yosef-Hayim Brenner, the highest literary and moral authority among the Labor-Zionist settlers, published at his own expense Agnon's most important early novella, *And the Crooked Shall Be Straight.*

In October 1912, like most members of the Second *Aliya* (the wave of Jewish immigrants to Palestine between 1903–1914), Agnon left Palestine and

returned to the Diaspora. He settled in Berlin, where he met Sh.Z. Schocken, a well-known German businessman, Zionist, and publisher, who became his lifelong patron. In 1918, the translation of *And the Crooked Shall Be Straight* was published in German titled: *Und das Krume wird Gerade*. In 1920, Agnon married Esther Marks from Königsberg, with whom he had a daughter and a son. In 1921 they settled in Bad Homburg, but in June 1924 the house burned down, along with Agnon's library and manuscripts. In October 1924, Agnon returned to Palestine and settled with his family in Jerusalem. During the Arabic pogroms against Jews in 1929, Agnon was moved to the center of Jerusalem and his house in Talpiot was badly damaged. In 1930 he traveled to Leipzig in Germany, where his collected writings were being edited in Hebrew (published by Schocken in four volumes in 1932). In the summer of 1930 he also visited Poland and his hometown Buczacz, which served as the basis for his novel *A Guest for the Night* (published in 1939). He was twice awarded the prestigious Bialik Prize for literature and twice (in 1954 and 1958) the highest Israeli award, the Israel Prize. In 1966, Agnon was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, together with the Jewish-German poetess Nelly Sachs. Agnon died on February 17, 1970, and was buried in a state funeral on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.

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As Agnon felt that this strangely intensive bygone world happened "only yesterday," but was timelessly valid, so his own fictional world was alive, pervading all of modern Hebrew culture "only yesterday," and can—and should—stand beyond its ostensibly parochial landscape as one of the great literary myths of the twentieth century.

Shmuel-Yosef Agnon's Hebrew novel *Only Yesterday* (*Tmol Shilshom*) was written in Palestine under British Mandatory rule in the late 1930s, finished in 1943 during World War II, before the full scope of the Holocaust was revealed, and published after the war in 1945. The prominent Israeli literary critic Barukh Kurzweil, who had a Ph.D. in German literature and was a leading authority on his fellow Austro-Hungarian novelist, pronounced: "The place of *Only Yesterday* is among the greatest works of world literature." Those were not parochial sentiments of a "minor literature"; similar opinions were voiced by Leah Goldberg, Hebrew poetess and polyglot, translator of Petrarch and Tolstoy into modern Hebrew, and first Professor of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem; and by Robert B. Alter, Professor of

Hebrew and Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley, a discerning critic and scholar of the European novel.

On the face of it, it is a simple story about a simple man, Isaac Kumer, who immigrated from Austrian Galicia to that cultural and political backwater, the southern Syrian province under Ottoman rule—the historical Palestine and the new Jewish settlement, the *Yishuv*. He arrived with the Second *Aliya*—a wave of a few hundred secular idealists, mostly Socialist Zionists from Russia, who came to the Land of Israel between 1903 and 1914 to till the soil, revive "Hebrew labor" and the Hebrew language, and became the founding generation of Israeli society. Isaac, however, who was neither a Russian nor a Socialist but believed in their ideals of resettling the land, drifted back to the fold of Orthodox Jewry, the Guardians of the Walls in Jerusalem.

Yet on this most unbelievable margin of all margins, the great themes of twentieth century literature reverberated. Among the main concerns of the book are "the death of God," the impossibility of living without Him and the impossibility of returning to Him, the reversibility of the Siamese twins Homeland and Exile, the weight of the traditional Library and the hollow sound of inherited discourse, the power of suppressed eroticism, and the ambivalent and drifting individual consciousness in an age of ideology. The book was written after Schopenhauer and Freud, after Spengler and Lenin—and grounded in the most austere, minimal society, in an impoverished fossil of an ancient myth.

Summarizing the book would be a futile exercise since its strength lies not in events but rather in hesitations about events. The historical context is as follows: in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, when Jews were barred from most Western European countries, the great majority of world Jewry was concentrated in the largest European state, the united Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania, which included what is today most of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Between 1772 and 1794 Poland was dismantled by its neighbors, Russia, Austria, and Prussia (which later became Germany). The majority of Russian Jews found themselves in a huge geographical ghetto, the Jewish Pale of Settlement in the Russian Empire, and a large community lived in Galicia, the southern part of former Poland, now incorporated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Yet the Austrian Jews obtained full citizenship under the rule of a benign Emperor. There was an enormous explosion of the Jewish population in the nineteenth century: from 2.2 million worldwide in 1800 to 7.5 million in 1880 and 16 million before World War II. The authentic

Jewish territory in Eastern Europe was a network of small towns, where they constituted between one-half and two-thirds of the population. What united them was not an administrative hierarchy, but a dense cultural network, a religion with a Library of texts and a modern network of social and cultural institutions: separate Jewish schools, cemeteries, philanthropic organizations, hospitals and hospices, publishing houses, books and newspapers, a literature in several languages, as well as modern political parties and social organizations. All this was conducted in three private languages: Yiddish (for daily communication, education, politics, and modern life), Hebrew (of the Bible), and Aramaic (of the Talmud), as well as the languages of state and culture.

Agnon continues to call his homeland "Poland" (*Polin*), though under Austrian rule its culture was increasingly Germanized; whereas the Jews in Russia rapidly accepted Russian culture and ideologies and were considered "Russian Jews." The revolutionary fermentation among Russian intellectuals, on the one hand, and the inferior status of Russian Jewry (deprived of the right of citizenship and disrupted by waves of pogroms), on the other, gave rise to a self-conscious literature and a whole gamut of political solutions and parties among the Jews of Eastern Europe, as well as the immigration of millions to the West and the U.S. This fermentation brought about a total transformation of the Jews, their languages, professions, education, their very place in general culture, geography and history, which we may call the Modern Jewish Revolution.[3] The Zionist immigration to *Eretz-Israel* (The Land of Israel) was a mere trickle in a great stream—although its eventual results changed the nature of Jewish culture and identity as we had known it for two thousand years.

In the 1880s, a movement of Lovers of Zion (*Hovevey Tsion*) emerged in Russia, centered in Odessa, propagating the revival of the historical Land of Israel. In 1881, a small group of young intellectuals, who called themselves BILU (an acronym for "House of Jacob, come ye and let us go," Isaiah 2:5), immigrated to Palestine and thus started the First *Aliya*, the First Zionist Immigration (1882–1903). This was the first wave of Zionist settlers in Palestine, the so-called New Yishuv (the "new settlement" or "new population"). They built Jewish settlements (or "colonies"), supported by Rothschild and ICA (the Jewish Colonization Association), and became farmers on the land. Only

3 See my book, Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

in 1897 did Theodor Herzl proclaim the World Zionist Organization in Basel with the goal of establishing a Jewish State in Palestine by political means. Herzl's ideal swept the imagination of Jews everywhere, especially among the millions in Eastern Europe, but most Zionists paid the membership Shekel and stayed where they were. The real implementation of Herzl's dream came through the subsequent waves of idealist immigrants, especially those arriving from Eastern Europe.

There was also an Old Yishuv of a few thousand Orthodox, mostly old Jews, who came "to die in the Holy Land," yet raised families and maintained a Jewish presence, mainly in Jerusalem, Tiberias, and Safed. Many of them lived on the minimal "Distribution" (*Haluka*) given them by "Societies" (*Kolel*), according to their cities of origin, where the financial support came from. Traditional learning and reading religious books was a major preoccupation of the men.

The new Zionist immigrants regarded this subsistence off the Distribution, poor as it was, as the most abject, parasitic aspect of Jewish Diaspora life. Yet, as Agnon tries to show, winds of change penetrated these walls too: Some built new neighborhoods outside the Old City walls—a symbolic as well as practical move—and established the first agricultural colony in Petach Tikvah ("The Opening of Hope"), some were artisans and supported their families with productive labor.

After the first wave of settlers ebbed, the Second *Aliya* arrived (1903–1914). Their ideological fervor was carried by young Socialist Zionists, mostly from Russia (fiercely debating between Marxist and anti-Marxist positions on Zionism). The immediate impulse was the pogrom in Kishinev in 1903, and the self-defense against the pogrom in Homel the same year (at the age of fifteen, young Rosa Cohen, mother of Itzhak Rabin, was one of the fighters and immigrants). The new pioneers intended to work the land, but work was scarce or nonexistent and the landlords of the First *Aliya* preferred cheap Arabic labor to the inexperienced socialist and secular bachelors. Collectives of Hebrew itinerant laborers emerged, reviving the Hebrew language in public communication and, after World War I, erecting the first agricultural communes (*kibbutzim*) on national land. All in all, there may have been three thousand pioneers in the Second *Aliya*, most of whom abandoned the Land after a year or two; according to Agnon, only two hundred Jewish workers remained. In 1908 there were sixty members of the Marxist party *Poaley Tsion* and ninety of the anti-Marxist Socialists, *Ha-Poel Ha-Tsa'ir*. Their slogan was: "Hebrew

land, Hebrew labor, Hebrew language." And though Hebrew sentences were spoken throughout the ages, between 1906 and 1913 the Second *Aliya* created the first Hebrew-speaking society, a Hebrew city, and Hebrew schools.

At the same time there was an influx of secular Zionist immigrants to Jaffa and Jerusalem, and trade flourished. In 1909 Neve Tsedek, a Jewish neighborhood north of Jaffa emerged, which later turned out to be the beginning of the first Jewish city Tel Aviv. The first Hebrew high school, Gymnasiya Herzliya in Tel Aviv, and the Bezalel School of Art and Design in Jerusalem were the pride of the New Yishuv. During World War I, Jews were persecuted by the Turkish authorities, some were conscripted into the Turkish army (fighting with Germany against the Allies), and some were expelled from Palestine. But after the war, when Palestine became a British Mandate territory where a "Jewish Home" was to be established, and a new wave, the Third *Aliya*, came in 1921 from the Russian Revolution, the pioneers of the Second *Aliya* (Berl Katznelson, David Ben-Gurion, Meir Dizengoff) became the leaders of the new Hebrew Yishuv.

This is the context Isaac Kumer enters. The rough outline of his story is as follows: Isaac Kumer was born to a poor family in a Jewish town in eastern Galicia. Losing his mother at an early age, he turned his father's little store into a Zionist club and brought it to bankruptcy. A naïve bachelor, unlike most of his career-oriented generation, he consumed the Zionist phraseology lock, stock, and barrel, adapted it to his religious discourse, and actually went to realize the Zionist slogans. He went to the Land of Israel to plow its soil and revive it as in biblical times. But agricultural work was not to be found, since the earlier immigrants of the First *Aliya*, landowning farmers in new Jewish settlements, preferred cheap Arab labor to the rabble-rousing young socialists. Labor Zionism, too, turned out to be a pipe dream. Almost dying of starvation, Isaac found work by chance as a housepainter in Jaffa and then in Jerusalem, and instead of tilling the soil or building the country, he painted over old houses—a symbolic gesture as well as a practical, life-saving trade.

In Jaffa he neglected the religious commandments and drifted into secular behavior, common among his generation. He became intimate with Sonya, the daughter of a well-to-do family in Diaspora and a Gymnasium student. Like most members of the Second *Aliya*, Sonya was Russian, and for some reason she flirted with this Galician simpleton and later rejected him capriciously. But when he ascended to Jerusalem, he wound up back in the Orthodox and anti-Zionist religious world of the Old Yishuv. Inexplicably, he

fell under its spell and eventually married Shifra, the daughter of an extreme Orthodox fanatic, who was paralyzed and could not object to the match.

One critic called the book "the Epic of a period," and another described it as "the most weighty and important attempt in our literature to depict the life of the Second *Aliya* in the Land of Israel." Indeed, one construct that Agnon offers the reader is a faithful and meticulous historical record, including descriptions of buildings and neighborhoods in Jerusalem, and mundane, humanizing anecdotes about legendary historical figures. Yet the documentary program resides only on the surface; behind its façade, enfolded in the novel's allusive and elusive, ironic and shrewd style, is a complex field of multidirectional and ambiguous meanings, raising a tangle of constructs, to be made by the reader and contradicted again, questioning the major aspects of the human condition.

The text is built on a series of ambivalences: Exile as a homeland versus the national Homeland as an exile; Jaffa versus Jerusalem; the liberated Sonya versus the Orthodox Shifra; subconscious drifting versus the dominant ideology of the collective Will, and so on. Actions and events "happen" to him, though usually he intended the opposite; and the motivations for those actions are always overdetermined, leaving the reader puzzled about which motivation to accept and which system of values is decisive.

But after several clues, planted yet unnoticed by the reader, there comes the powerful twist and the novel soars to Surrealist-Kafkaesque dimensions. Isaac playfully drips paint on a stray dog, writing "Crazy Dog" on his back in Hebrew. The dog Balak takes over the story: wherever he appears, he wreaks havoc, creates panic, and gets pelted with stones. Shifra's father is terrified into a stroke, and Balak has to flee into exile, to non-Jewish neighborhoods, where the Hebrew inscription on his back is illegible, and thus the dog becomes the embodiment of Exile. On the other hand, running around the city, he serves as the reader's guide to the precise geography and history of the neighborhoods and housings of Jews from various countries in early twentieth-century Jerusalem. The exuberant descriptions of Balak's predicament are among the most powerful chapters in the novel; the dog has been interpreted as an allegory of Jewish Exile, as Isaac's erotic projection, as the embodiment of the irrational, demonic force that subverts all Enlightenment rationality, as a guide to Jerusalem, as a satire of its outlandish Orthodox society, as a Kafkaesque parable and a Surrealist vision. He is probably all of those

combined. Persecuted without understanding why, Balak really does go mad, and eventually bites his patron Isaac, who dies of the venom.

It was impossible for Isaac to stay in the fossilized religious world of Eastern Europe, which had come to a dead end and was abandoned by his peers, who chose assimilation in a foreign culture. Filled to the brim with a universe of codified discourse, it became impossible for him to live a normal, secular life. In the end, Isaac's improbable and irrational return to the outer reaches of Orthodox society was an anti-utopian move, a dead end, destined to fail, too.

In his tongue-in-cheek, "naïve" voice, Agnon takes on the great themes of Modernity in European literature from the most marginal margin possible. The Jews seemed absurd and alien in Christian Europe; they were further marginalized when they procreated and multiplied, according to the biblical commandment, and filled up hundreds of small towns that had been passed over by modern capitalism. The Zionists who called for an exit from Exile were actually marginal in Jewish society; and the "realizing" Zionist, who in fact carries out their ideals, was a mock-hero even in their own eyes. From the petit-bourgeois decency of Austro-Hungary, which had granted the Jews equal rights, and their beloved Kaiser Franz Josef, Isaac went to that backward country, the decadent, despotic, and corrupt Ottoman Empire, and to its most marginal province, Palestine, where the Jews were doubly marginalized: by the Turkish governors and by the Arab majority.

The pioneers of the Second *Aliya* landed in this situation, with their Socialist and Tolstoyan ideals of working the land. They were marginal to the religious Jewish society in Eastern Europe, which they fled, and were ostracized or feared by both the Orthodox Old Yishuv in Jerusalem and by the first wave of settlers in Palestine, the farmers of the First *Aliya*.

Furthermore, the Second *Aliya* itself consisted of a few hundred Socialist-Zionist ideologically motivated bachelors, coming from the revolutionary ferment and anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia; while Isaac was a fuzzy-minded general Zionist, a Galician Jew, alien to their ideological fervor and erotic liberties. He drifted to the Orthodox society in Jerusalem, a "medieval" fossil, stuck away in a backward province of a decaying empire, a society with little productive labor (the ideal of his youth), living in poverty on the alms of the Distribution (given by the "societies" of their hometowns), and guarding the graves of ancient Jewish glory and the texts attached to those bare stones. The Old Yishuv was excluded from the new revival of the Land of Israel and excluded itself from the spoken, secular Hebrew language and modern Hebrew

literature. And Isaac was an alien intruder among them, too. It is hard to imagine a more exclusionary exile from all exiles.

Yet in all this historical specificity, some of the major themes of the twentieth century reverberate throughout the novel. They are not formulated in any ideological or philosophical manner, but are constantly evoked by this "naïve" witness and textual juggler. In a century that celebrated the Will and the will to power (as reflected in Herzl's resounding slogan: "If you will it, it is no dream"), Isaac is constantly led astray by encounters and circumstances, always turning up in the opposite place from where he set out to be, and it is impossible to ascertain whether it is predestination, God's hand in the world, or blind and accidental fate that conducts this absurd existence. As Professor Boaz Arpali of Tel Aviv University put it, "The truths suppressed by the hero, the decisions he flees, the internal forces he shuns, knowingly or unknowingly or refusing to know, gather momentum in his soul throughout his life, and break out in the end, destroying both his soul and his life."[4]

The first sentence of the novel begins in the name of a collective "us," quoting the official Zionist line as an accepted fact, namely, that it was the fellows of the Second *Aliya* who brought our Salvation, our redemption from Exile.

> Like all our brethren of the Second Aliya, the bearers of our Salvation, Isaac Kumer left his country and his homeland and his city and ascended to the Land of Israel to build it from its destruction and to be rebuilt by it.

Indeed, in Hebrew, *Geula*, Salvation, is the opposite of *Gola*, Exile, locked in an interdependent binary opposition. It is the basic religious terminology, describing the timeless Jewish condition as Exile from their Homeland, to be redeemed when Messiah comes; yet here the language was secularized and transferred to the historical and political views of Zionism, which believed it could be a human task, performed in our generation. Etymologically, the word "homeland" (*moledet*) means "the land of your birth" and is used in Modern Hebrew literature as "fatherland" in the European sense. Thus, Chernikhovsky's famous poem *HaAdam eyno ela*, which takes part in a dialogue between the national Homeland and every Hebrew writer's private homeland, like Chernikhovsky's own very concrete birthplace in the southern

4 Boaz Arpali, *Masternovel: Five Essays on* Temol Shilshom *by S.Y. Agnon* [in Hebrew], Literature, Meaning, Culture 23 (Tel Aviv: The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, Tel Aviv University, Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishers, 1998).

Ukraine, begins: "A man is no more than a little plot of land / A man is no more than a pattern of the landscape of his homeland." And that is the homeland Isaac Kumer abandoned for the sake of the abstract "Homeland" of the Jewish nation. He did it, as the popular song of the pioneers proclaimed: *Anu banu artsa livnot ulhibanot ba-* "We came to the Land to build it and to be rebuilt by it."[5] The notion was that, as the Land was neglected and desolate, so were the Jews in Exile; the pioneers going to the Land to work its soil would rebuild their own "Diaspora mentality" by rebuilding the land; they would create a New Man and a New Jew, not hovering in the air and living on air, as modern Jewish literature described him, but physically productive, with a straight back and mind, with roots in the soil.

The centerpiece of this sentence is a verbatim quotation from God's commandment to Abram (before he became Yahve's Abraham), sending him out to the Promised Land. This is how Isaac Kumer, the naïve and wholesome Zionist, understood the biblical phrase: as an injunction to go to the Land on God's mission. Yet what a terrible price to pay! As the King James Bible translated it: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee" (Genesis 12:1). The double root *Lekh-lekho* ("Get going! Get out of here!"), with its drastic, harsh ring in the East European context, sounded as an expulsion, and in Jewish Diaspora semiotics (as opposed to religious dogma), the Torah portion, "Lekh-lekho," became a synonym for expulsion. The last chapter of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Milkman* is called *Lekh-Lekho* ("Get Thee Out") and describes the expulsion of the Jews from all Russian villages, even though they were born there. Quoting literally from the Bible and providing his own contemporary translation, as was the customary way of teaching Torah, Tevye tells Sholem Aleichem (in the original, the words in italics are in Hebrew, their mock-translations are in bold in Yiddish): "What weekly portion are you reading now? Leviticus? With us, it is a different chapter: the chapter of *Lekh-lekho. Get thee out*—they told me—*you must get out* of here, Tevye, *from thy country*—from your own land, *and from your homeland*—from your village, *where you were born* and lived all the years of your life, *unto a land that I will shew thee*—wherever your eyes may carry you! . . ."

Agnon's contemporary Marc Chagall used the same biblical text in his

5 In Hebrew, *banu* ("we came") includes the past as well as the first-person plural; hence *anu* ("we" or "us") is redundant and betrays the Russian or Yiddish thinking of its authors.

painting, "The Red Jew" (1915). One scholar in Jerusalem used the Zionist interpretation and read it as Chagall's autobiographical message: Chagall returned from Paris to his homeland Russia in 1914. But Chagall read the Bible through Sholem Aleichem and Yiddish folk semiotics, where "The chapter of *lekh-lekho*" means simply expulsion from your home. Indeed, in 1915, hundreds of thousands of Jews were expelled "within 24 hours" from their hometowns, and many thousands came to Chagall's Vitebsk. There is no trace of Russian Zionism or Chagall's homecoming here: an Eternal Jew, his face as white as death, is about to get up and leave his town behind.

This was the duality of interpretation faced by Agnon: the overtly Zionist and optimistic ideology was subverted by a Diaspora reading. And interestingly enough, Agnon changed only one item: instead of "get thee out . . . from thy father's home" (a sense of guilt that haunts him throughout the book), he says: "from his town," the decaying town that was Agnon's emblematic representative of Exile. As the language of the Bible betrays, Abraham was expelled to the Promised Land, and in many ways, so was Isaac Kumer.

And here is a link to the hero's name. Agnon's admired poet Bialik began his poem on the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 with : *kum lekh-lekho el ir hahareygo*, which in Hebrew means "get up go thee to the city of slaughter." Why get up? And why is a conjunction missing between the two verbs (I Chronicles 22:16 says: "arise therefore, and be doing")? As the Hebrew critic Dov Sadan argued, *kum* here is in Yiddish (Bialik's daily language): "come, let us go," using the same biblical phrase, *lekh-lekho*, but this time he is told to come and see the city of slaughter. Agnon's protagonist is called Kumer, the one who came—to fulfill the commandment *lekh-lekho*, go thee to the Promised Land. Instead of Bialik's *kum lekh-lekho*, he heard *Kumer lekh-lekho*. But where did he go—to the Promised Land or to Bialik's devastation? In an important respect, the book is a sacrifice of Isaac, performed by himself.

When the book was published in 1945, before the establishment of the State of Israel, in a patriotic Zionist atmosphere, the opening sentence would have been taken seriously, at face value. It requires a long journey through the novel to discover that the opposite is true. The heroes of the collective myth, the laborers of the Second *Aliya*, are exposed as disillusioned and embittered remnants of an ideal, though Agnon does pay them reverent lip service. On the contrary, Agnon shows wherever he can that the Orthodox Old Yishuv also expanded beyond the physical and symbolic walls of the Old City. He set out to write the great epic of the Second *Aliya*, but wrote a novel about the

escape from it. As Dostoevsky intended to write in *The Brothers Karamazov* "The Life of a Great Sinner," but didn't get to it and wrote a long antinovel instead, that is a mere preamble to what should (and probably couldn't) have been written, so Agnon ended his book with a formulaic closure:

> Completed are the deeds of Isaac.
> The deeds of our other comrades,
> the men and the women,
> Will come in the book, *A Parcel of Land*.

Which, of course, he never wrote.

Amos Oz, in his rich and sensitive writer's book about an admired writer,[6] makes it clear that Agnon's mode lies in overdetermination: every move, activity, or event is explained by so many motivations that none makes sense. He uncovers the ironies and contradictory subtexts behind the ostensibly naïve façade of Agnon's style and argument. And he correctly places it all in the perspective of Agnon's Exile/Fatherland dilemma. Thus, the introductory essay begins with a quotation from Agnon about himself, and Oz's striking interpretation:

> *Because of that historical catastrophe when Titus the Roman Emperor destroyed Jerusalem and Israel was exiled from its land, I was born in one of the cities of Exile. But all the time I imagined myself as having been born in Jerusalem.*[7]
>
> Those words, as all readers of Agnon know, are true. But, strangely enough, their opposite is also true. Had Agnon chosen to say: "Because of that historical catastrophe when East European Jewry fell apart, I became a Hebrew writer in Jerusalem. But I always saw myself as one who was born in one of the cities of Galicia and destined to be a rabbi there"—those words would also be true and right on target.

The tragedy of Agnon's vision lies in his perspicacity: long before the Holocaust, he saw the degeneration, ruin, and end of Jewish Eastern Europe; for him, there was no way back to the Diaspora. Yet, the Zionist vision he embraced was far from a secure conquest, and its champions were far from idealists. Agnon's satirical view of the Makhersons (literally: operator) and

6 Amos Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God*, translated by Barbara Harshav (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

7 Y. Agnon, *From Me to Me* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Schocken Publishers, 1976), p. 85.

Makherovitches was relentless. There was no utopia in Agnon. But precisely for that anti-utopia in a utopian society, he could put the future in brackets and explore all problems of modernity in the fictional worlds of the past.

The quotations in the opening of the novel—from the Bible and from a pioneer song—are culled from Isaac's consciousness. The narrator presents him and his mind in the third person, thus either being faithful to Kumer's perceptions or creating an ironic distance, or both. Thus the narration is conducted on two levels in a Combined Discourse of the narrator and the hero's focus. The narrator leads the text and the hero is the observer. The narrator appears with his Royal We, sometimes representing the Second *Aliya* or the Zionist revival and collective ideology, sometimes representing Isaac's conscious or subconscious sensibilities, sometimes left alone with Isaac or serving as his voice, and always hovering just above him, yet shifting from reproducing his internal monologues to taking a distance and mocking him. Indeed, there is no specific person behind the "We," but an empty slot of a grammatical first person plural, to be filled in as variously as the text allows. And the same "We" takes over the dog Balak's consciousness in the second part of the book, interprets his innermost thoughts and observes him from the outside as well. There is no omniscient narrator here, for at every junction, the omniscience is suspended for the sake of a focused point of observation: Isaac's, hovering above Isaac, or the dog Balak's.

The fictional world of the novel is presented with very little concrete and descriptive material, but is rather reflected through Isaac's responses to it. A constant stream of consciousness drifts through his mind, yet it is not consciousness that we are offered directly, but strings of quotations and formulaic, pious discourse. If ever there was a text to pervasively using what M. Bakhtin called "alien discourse" (what has later been renamed "intertextuality"), it is surely Agnon's. Isaac has ready-made phrases, stories, anecdotes, and formulae for whatever his eyes encounter. And those are excerpted not just from the Bible and prayerbook, but from the immense Hebrew library. But there is no distinction between religious and other sources: he uses the phrases and images of the most popular Zionist ideology (the image of the man with his plowshare) as well as official Austrian propaganda, stories of the marvels of Vienna as well as the exploits of the early pioneers in Palestine. It is not a stream of consciousness here, but a *stream of textuality*: consciousness takes a back seat to the mosaic of textual excerpts and patterns.

As witness to an apocalyptic event in Jewish history, Isaac Kumer is similar

to the narrator in Kafka's "Great Wall of China." Kafka's narrator is paradoxically both a simple laborer, ordered to do monotonous physical work on a senseless national project, and a scholar of Chinese history, both within the process and above it in time. Isaac is both a simple housepainter, even a simpleton, who believes and understands anybody and everybody, and as learned a reader of the Hebrew library as Agnon himself. Yet all the uses of traditional turns of phrases are not meant as specific allusions to specific texts, but rather serve as a stylistic layer which represents a textual culture, where the texts are preserved but their interpretations are shaken. Agnon's Israeli reader, who does not know that library, certainly perceives it so. Moreover, many Hebrew phrases and words that look like quotations actually have a subtext from Agnon's (and his character's) first language, Yiddish. Thus, in Israeli Hebrew, *bitahon* means "security," while in Yiddish it means quite the opposite: "you must have *bitokhn*" (the Yiddish pronunciation) means "to hope for the best" in a situation that is rationally hopeless, because the term derives from the phrase *betakh beHashem*—"trust in God" (rather than man).

In many ways, *Only Yesterday* is an abstract modern novel. From the beginning, reality is often presented not in individual situations and encounters, but in plural and in long catalogues. For it is not the external fact that constitutes the fictional world, but the summary of such facts in Isaac's mind, filled with categories and catalogues. When he leaves home, we are told: "Isaac parted from his father and his brothers and sisters and all his other relatives and set out on the road." But for all his guilt feelings about abandoning his family to exile, we are not told here the names of his brothers and sisters nor how many of them there were.

Traveling on a train is most convenient for that mode of abstraction.

> The train rolled on between villages and hamlets, cities and towns. Some were known for their great rabbis and others were known for their famous cemeteries. Some earned a name with the produce of their fields and the fruit of their trees, the fish in their rivers and the minerals in their mountains; and others earned fame with their poultry and livestock and other things in heaven and on earth. And yet other places have neither learning nor earning, but do have a Quarrel. Some sanctify the Name of the Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He with the Kedushah, *We shall sanctify You*, and others sanctify Him with *We shall bless You*, and they wrestle with each other and create a Quarrel. And another Quarrel, between Assimilationists and Zionists. The former want to be like all the other nations, and the latter want to be Jews, so they wrestle with each

> other and create a Quarrel. And yet another Quarrel, between those who want Salvation by miracle and those who want a natural Salvation, so they wrestle with each other and create a Quarrel.

A neutral classifier summarizes his observations, takes no stand on the alternative options, and empties them of any concrete content. Yet between the lines, we learn about the futility of the Jewish Quarrels that devour Diaspora society and willy-nilly are introduced to the major theological issue of the book and of modern Jewish history: Is Salvation to be brought by a miracle or in the normal course of nature—all this in passing on a train through named or nameless towns and cities.

He arrives in the legendary capital of his Empire, Vienna, and has several hours of free time on his hands. But first he delivers a catalogue of all the remarkable places in the capital without having seen any of them:

> Isaac was all on his own and considered where he would go. Would he go to Leopoldstadt with its splendid synagogues whose beauty is unsurpassed throughout the world, or to the Prater, the joy of the whole city, or to the big house called Bunch of Grapes, or to their church that has a clock where every single one of its numbers is more than two feet high, or to the library where the Book of Psalms is written in gold letters on red parchment, or to the Emperor's palace, or to the Museum. Many were the things here that we heard about and now we can see them. And now we stand at the entrance of Vienna and we don't know where we shall go or where we shall turn. Isaac stood a while, his mind flitting from place to place but his feet aren't moving, for with so many things, his head is heavy and his feet are heavier than his head.

Even more remarkable is his hymn to the greatness of the Austrian Empire:

> The train wound its way up, and wound its way down. High mountains flew by and snow lay on them, and even though Passover was already past, the snow didn't budge. And so, Isaac sits and rides through the realm of Austria, that same Austria that rules over eighteen states, and twelve nations are subject to it. One and the same law for the Jews and for the people of the land, their well-being is our well-being, for the Emperor is a Gracious King, he protects all who take shelter with him, Jew and non-Jew alike. Her earth is lush and fertile and the produce of her land is greater than the need of her inhabitants. She is blessed with everything and knows no shortage. One land makes wheat and barley and rye and beans and lentils and oats and corn; and

> another land makes potatoes and fruit of the orchard. One land makes plums for confiture and Slivovitz, and another land makes hops for beer. One land makes wine and another land makes tobacco and flax, and all lands are full of livestock, animals, and birds. Some give milk and butter and cheese, and some give meat and wool and skins and feathers. One land produces horses, and another land chickens and ducks and swans, doves, and pheasants, and bees make honey and wax, and her lakes and rivers are filled with fish and her mountains with silver and copper and tin and iron and lead for paint and salt mines, and coal and oil. And her forests make wood, and there are high mountains there, covered with eternal snow.

"Her forests make wood, and there are high mountains there, covered with eternal snow." There are no specific names for trees, no specific places in the mountains. He does not use the realistic technique of describing one of those provinces or talking to one person who may have boarded the train. We don't even know which province produces what product. And more important, Isaac does not confront this paean with his Zionist ideology; if this Empire is so rich and Jews have equal rights in it, why is he going to that desolate Palestine?

The paucity of realistic details reflects both the relatively undifferentiated world of lower-class folklore and the Jewish Diaspora imagination, living in a fictional world of books, in a timeless Holy Land or Babylon, and not distinguishing between one tree and another or one mental situation and another. Nineteenth-century Hebrew dictionaries translated the names of specific birds or trees as "a kind of bird" or "a kind of tree." The great European fiction with its immense wealth of differentiated descriptive details of the physical world, nature, and civilization, as well as of states of mind, did not reach traditional Jewish society in Eastern Europe. The ways of resolving this situation (aside from writing a derivative European novel) were ways of abstraction and textuality.

The great Jewish writers of the twentieth century responded to this period of transition from a medieval, traditional society, religious in its framework and codified in its forms of behavior—to the world of modern, secular Europe, with its individualism, centrality of consciousness, and historicity. It was not a move exclusive to Jewish society, but here it was telescoped into a very short period of one or two generations, and dramatized by both the internal textual tradition of this people and the external perils to their exis-

tence. Agnon, Sholem Aleichem, or Kafka evoked that fault line and gave it mythological forms. Sholem Aleichem knew he was not Tolstoy, that he could not describe aristocratic drawing rooms in exquisite detail because the authentic Jewish world was the world of the small town, the so-called *shtetl*, poor in physical objects, whose inhabitants lived in an imaginary universe, a mishmash of folklore and snippets of learning. He diverted the level of concreteness from actual events and their historical causes to the stream of speech of his garrulous protagonists. Even when a wave of pogroms washes over Russia, Tevye the Milkman says, "when they began talking about pogroms." Thus Sholem Aleichem erected a fictional world in Yiddish, using the most authentic material of the Yiddish language: its associative, rambling talk, filled with proverbs, idioms, stories, and asides, and studded with shards of distorted quotations from the Hebrew Library. Writing in Hebrew, Agnon mined the historical layers of the written Hebrew language and created an illusion of textuality, using both phrases and anecdotes from the Library as well as syntactical patterns that imitated the traditional books. Kafka, on the other hand, lost both the talkative Yiddish and the Hebrew Library of texts. In his fictional work, Kafka moved out of the Jewish domain, yet his *realia* was just as poor in concrete details. He too resorted to abstraction, used catalogues of items in plural and presented the significant discussions of the "system" (in *The Trial*) in abstract, ideological terms.

In all of them, the front narrative was trivial; the real, profound issues were presented not in telling examples, but in the deep background, in ideological discourse. What remains concrete on front stage is *diverted concreteness*. Tevye talks, K. moves from one corrupt abode to another, Isaac changes places and jobs, but such concrete situations serve merely as occasions for verbal speculations and evocations, raising the great questions of human existence, the "rules of the game" in God's world, and the hierarchy of values or loss of them.

Thus, writing in Hebrew was not just a linguistic matter, but a resort to the totality of ways of seeing the world through the mountain of traces from a Borges-type Library. That Hebrew Library entailed a panhistorical and transgeographical view of Jewish existence: it does not much matter where or when the characters were, the essential conception of the Homeland-Exile dichotomy remained eternal, until Salvation comes. There is very little here about any problems of the Ottoman administration or the Arab majority in Palestine, the Russian revolutions or technological advances, the building of

Tel Aviv or the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language. Poverty in the most marginal marginality of Jerusalem under Ottoman rule means exclusion from the technological age. Isaac's escape from the workers of the Second *Aliya* also means escape from the age of ideology. Yet the traditional religious view did not allow for Salvation by human hands, for the Zionists' "pushing the end." Thus, the impasse is given, no matter what end it may take.

Furthermore, at first reading, the novel sounds like a naïve and meandering story about a naïve and drifting housepainter, until it explodes with the Mad Dog (the French translation of the novel is even titled, *The Dog Balak*). From here on (at least), all rationality is thrown to the dogs.

The discussion of the specific Hebrew substance of the novel, its ascetic minimalism, focusing on a nonintellectual, non-ideological antihero, must not obstruct our view of its deep European roots. Agnon was the last Mohican of Diaspora Hebrew literature, still able to invoke and visualize the religious world of the simple folk in East European Jewry, looking back from the territorial context of the Zionist revival in Palestine. Furthermore, Agnon did it while having read a library of European novels, though masking his modern concerns in the rhetoric of the traditional Library and its "naïve" readers.

Boaz Arpali, who analyzed the genres intersecting in Agnon's novel, called it a "Master-Novel" or "Super-Novel," written by a "Super-Master": "*Only Yesterday* is a Super-Novel, for it includes several models and central aspects of the European novel since its inception. It is a conglomerate in which those models and aspects obtain new meanings and functions both in themselves and one vis-à-vis the other, thus creating new and exciting relations among them." The plot of the novel, too, is at least a double plot: "On the one hand, from its very inception, it is mainly a picaresque, panoramic, episodic and comical plot with a strong social orientation. On the other hand, it is a plot of character and destiny (or, perhaps preferably: character that is destiny), a dramatic-tragical plot, whose links derive from one another in a tight causal chain with a psychological-existential orientation. The first story emerges in a consecutive reading from the beginning onward, while the shock brings us to the second story, in a retrospective reading from the end to the beginning."