
Religion in Agnon's Work

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In the first chapter of this book I tried to prove that Agnon "must not be interpreted as a religious writer in terms of any particular orthodoxy." But more than that: I have insisted again and again on the error of those who see in Agnon's attachment to traditional Jewish life, in his choice of epic themes from religious life, proof of a "return to the source." His literary output, seen as a whole, could never delude us into thinking our own world could resemble that Jewish existence sometimes described nostalgically in his stories. Such a nostalgia could only take shape as the product of the clear and final knowledge that this balanced, harmonious existence of unambiguous moral values has gone beyond recall. And since in my book *Modern Hebrew Literature—Continuity or Revolution* clear distinctions have been made between religious literature and secular literature, I left no room for doubt that I regard Agnon as a secular writer.

Nevertheless, voices are frequently raised to reopen the question. In religious circles in particular there is a strong desire to discover a religious group among modern writers, with the result that there is much talk about religious poets and religious authors. This question interests me only in so far as it is concerned with trying to understand the nature of any literary work. It must not be confused with any discussion of the way of life of any writer.

Agnon's writings are the sole subject of my discussion. They are not liturgical literature; it is not the claims of simple faith which determine their character. The spiritual and artistic scope of Agnon's stories is not

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identical with the range of possibilities of thought and experience latent in orthodox Judaism. *A preference for epic themes and ingredients from a particular reality must not be taken for dogmatic allegiance to that reality.* The artist is not to be identified with his characters; the faith of Menasheh Hayyim, Reb Yudel, Reb Shlomo Bach, Tehilla and Reb Hayyim is not Agnon's faith. Furthermore, even in the portrayal of extremely religious characters such as Reb Yudel, Hanania and Menasheh Hayyim, we can sense breaches in the completeness of their faith. Sometimes the source of the breach is the spiritual revolt of the hero himself, as in the case of Menasheh Hayyim; sometimes it is the artist's own *irony* which destroys the illusion that he shares the opinions of his characters. This self-excluding irony is conspicuous in almost every chapter of *Hachnassat Kalla* ("The Bridal Canopy"), and it emerges at the end of the religious fable *Bilevav Yamim* ("In the Heart of the Seas"). It is present-day reality which separates Agnon from "our brothers in faith," and creates the artistic distance necessary for the chronicler of "The Bridal Canopy." *For only one who does not share Reb Yudel's faith is capable of immortalizing him and his period,* which is what Agnon has succeeded in doing. The epic standpoint from which the lives of pious Jews, *Hassidim* and "our brothers in faith," can be described must be outside those lives. Agnon's stories are not documents of faith but documents of art. And if clear proof is required of our claim that a vast distance separates the artist from the faith of his heroes, it is to be found in most of his stories, where the story-teller ceases to be omnipotent and is embroiled in the events he describes. This is the situation in *Ore'ah Nata Lalun* ("Wayfarer Stopped for the Night"), in the stories of *Sefer Ham'asim* ("The Book of Happenings"), and in a long list of stories written in the first person. All these stories are marked by confusion and revolt, and the purpose of the revolt is without doubt a protest against the world of traditional faith, prompted by the story-teller's unwillingness to accept the constraints of religion.

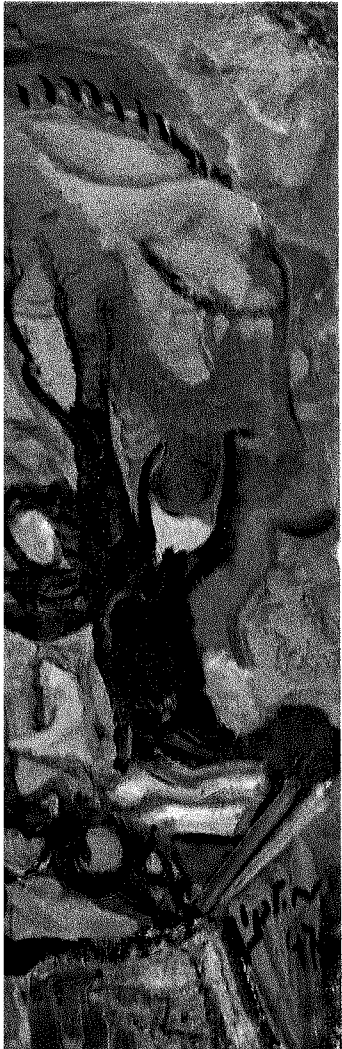


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It should also be pointed out that the artist's apprehension of Judaism is not uniformly positive throughout his works. Next to a great affection for religious Jewry's way of life there is also room for a different approach. It is a question of fluctuating attitudes, and from the religious point of view his whole output is open to divergent interpretations. There is no one monolithic picture of Jewry and it is difficult to maintain that Agnon's writings stem from one stable, predetermined, rigid standpoint. This traditional pattern is no more than an outer covering. It also serves as a mask in the artist's contact with his readers.

The religious element has a special importance in the stories of Agnon. The greater part of modern Hebrew literature has to do with religion—a fact that does not make it religious literature. On the contrary, we are entitled to maintain that in the works of Agnon “the special, unique character of the religious problem is revealed to us.” In other words, the stories of Agnon are *a singular revelation of the form the religious element takes in secular literature* and it is possible to summarize what is peculiar to the artistic presentation of the religious problem in Agnon as the revelation of contradictions, especially among those who protest against traditional Judaism, without adopting any definitive standpoint *apart from that of a frantic reaction to the confused flight from orthodox Judaism*. This is the rule in most of the stories in “The Book of Happenings” and elsewhere. The denouement in, for example, “A Whole Loaf,” “Friendship,” “The Candles,” “From Flat to Flat,” or “The Last Bus,” is not just the result of *a balanced judgment, moral, religious or intellectual, but rather an existential expression of a spiritual change of direction which takes its origin in shock, terror and dread*. It is also difficult sometimes to speak of “repentance,” when any moral or religious consideration is lacking, and the drama ends in flight! “At that moment I recalled the old man standing in front of the Ark, reciting the prayer ‘And for our sins,’ and banging his head against the door until all the walls of the prayer-house shook. My heart shook and I was drawn towards him, but Mr. Anderman held my hand. I stood and contorted my face, trying to give it a pleasant expression.” (*Samuch Ve'nireh*—“Near and Visible,” p. 107).*

* The references are to the standard, eight volume, Hebrew Edition of Agnon's works issued by Schocken Publishing House, Ltd., Tel Aviv.



This is a typical situation. The old man, "a man of presence in whose synagogue I was wont to pray during the High Holidays," is a characteristic representative of the world of traditional Judaism. It is also he who wishes to restore the story-teller, the adventurer, to his wife. Also important is the fact that of all the old man's prayers the story-teller in his confession recalls "And for our sins." But the story-teller's hand is clasped in the hand of Mr. Anderman, the "other man," who comes as it were from the devil's camp. Anderman is merely a variation of Mr. Gräsler—the man of dread—in "A Whole Loaf." Another member of the same family is Mr. Apropos—the man of the casual opportunity—in the story "The Candles." Apropos, Gräsler and Anderman are alike merry fellows, fickle-minded, whose aim is to seduce the narrator. And here he stands, in the story "To the Doctor" and confesses how his hand was clasped in that of Mr. Anderman, and yet he could not free himself from the eyes, bleary with tears, of the old man, a man of presence who was "standing in front of the Ark, praying, 'And for our sins . . .'" In other words, the story-teller affirms the contradictions, and lives them, without reaching a decision of his own volition. His wife, the post-office, the way to the doctor's—all such elements appearing in the short stories—represent moral and religious injunctions, missions, obligations, that religious tradition imposes on the first-person narrator who wants to flee from them to the world of the Andermans, the Gräslers, to accept the bait of Apropos, the casual opportunity. A spiritual prerequisite of this process is *the story-teller's renunciation of his personal power of decision*. In all these stories we meet a kind of passivity, a readiness to trail after the will of the Gräslers, the Andermans, for the sake of Apropos—the casual opportunity—as if the "happenings" recounted took place after the release of the self from responsibility. Only physical shock delivers this passive, impoverished self from the terrors of his adventures. And it sometimes happens that the story leaves the matter open. Reduced to a state of inner schism, torn in two, the "I" demonstrates his estrangement, his desolation, his suspension between two opposed worlds. This is what occurs at the end of the story "The Last Bus": "How much I needed then to be transported away from those who did not love me and one who was my enemy. But he who could have taken me away was busy with his own affairs. He bade me farewell, parted with a faint smile, and went his way. And *I went*

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trailing after one who was my enemy and the rest of his fellows who were no friends of mine" ("Near and Visible," p. 113; my italics—B.K.).

The solitude and desolation are the result of egocentric yearning which knows only itself, following the breach in the wall of relationships erected by traditional Judaism. This modern self is dissembling when it demonstrates a fictitious allegiance to the framework of religious tradition. Actually it is squinting, this schizophrenic self, at the world of the Andermans, of Gräsler and Apropos. But the fact that life outside the religious framework is stamped with the seal of the Andermans and the Gräslers, and is a life of Apropos, of casual opportunity, alone—this fact affirms better than a hundred witnesses that *this wretched self is devoid of any power of unequivocal decision in favour of a new life completely free of the authority of the world of religious tradition*. Consequently it is passivity, a readiness to go trailing after, which characterizes the condition of the hero of these strange "happenings." "I went trailing after him (Mr. Apropos) and entered with him a house where I had never been before" (*ibid.*, p. 117). It is the abnormal, the strange "house" which leads him astray. But the house is always an allusion to the erotic. "I was embarrassed, for I knew I was not acceptable to him, since I had cast my eyes on his daughter who was not meant for me" (*ibid.*). The hero's passivity also determines his attitude to Mr. Anderman. In this story too, the ground for Mr. Anderman's activity is prepared by the deterioration of relations between the hero and his wife: "It does me no credit to recount that I was a little resentful of my wife, and I was wondering to myself what profit there is from women. In a nearby road, close to the black bridge, Mr. Anderman found me and gave me greeting. I returned his greeting and sought to get away from him. He held my hand... Mr. Anderman grasped my hand and would not let me go" (pp. 106–107). Similarly in "A Whole Loaf," where the action derives from Mr. Gräsler and the hero trails after him: "Mr. Gräsler halted his car and took me in" (*ibid.*, p. 150).

The nature of solitude in a considerable portion of Agnon's stories teaches us the extent of the religious crisis. The egocentric, schizophrenic "I" who tells the story is the consequence of the weakening of basic principles of life in the religious community. The religious community held part of the meaning of life for each and every individual. In Agnon's

stories this meaning no longer exists. It is an object of nostalgic longing; its social embodiment, the religious community, engages Agnon again and again, but rather as something that is gone for ever. This is the situation in "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night," and was already in "A Simple Story," "And the Crooked shall be made Straight," and "Only Yesterday." The repeated searches for the ideal congregation in *Pi Shnai'im* ("Twice") and *Hamichtav* ("The Letter") are only a mask for the bitter crisis of faith. The place for the ideal congregation is childhood or the world of dreams and shades. It is the breath of life of the religious community, but since the end of childhood, reality has changed its aspect. The community no longer provides a sheltering roof for the self, whose own development has led it far away. And for a complete apprehension of this double distance—that of the first-person narrator from an earlier reality, and that of the self from those impressions engraved on its soul at the dawn of childhood—there is no greater moment of truth than the ultimate confrontation in the present with the object of emotion in the past. This theme, central to "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night," is inseparable from a great part of Agnon's stories, especially those written in the first person singular. In the chapter of this book discussing the story "Twice" I have shown that it is not the synagogue and the prayers which have changed; the alienation in the description of the various prayers on the Day of Atonement is merely an outward manifestation of the sense of alienation in the soul of the narrator. The community and the congregation are no longer wrapped in a halo of divine sanctity. They are human institutions and bear the marks of human defects. With a sober, cruel eye the poet examines them and takes pitiless vengeance for the noble dreams of his childhood. The community is like all other mortal institutions. The prayer-house which the story-teller in "The Letter" visits with Mr. Klein, recently deceased, is a *prayer-house of the dead*. The genuine contacts with which the story-teller-confessor involved himself lead to the world of shades and ghosts. The fact that the story-teller finds it difficult to write a letter to the daughter of that late lamented man of affairs, Mr. Gedalia Klein, "one of the great men of our town," is proof of this re-appraisal of the life of the Jewish community. Klein is actually, like his name, small. And the false greatness which determined his value in the community was based on money. "Mr. Gedalia Klein, one of the great men

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of our town, a *wealthy son of a wealthy father*, beloved of the government and respected by everybody . . . married off his daughters to the best minds of his generations, took *rich* wives for his sons, lived to see shrewd and nimble grandsons and granddaughters, ready for anything the country might require . . . All temporal successes were heaped upon him in this world and *doubtless in the world to come all that is best awaits him* by virtue of the money he left for beneficent deeds of charity" ("Near and Visible," p. 221).

The pronounced satiric tone in this story is directed against the conventional values of the Jewish religious community. In modern Jerusalem men of affairs like the great Mr. Klein continue the discredited tradition of awarding greatness to the rich. But the satiric tone also strikes at the religious sphere. The temporal successes which come together in this world also await the wealthy in the next world, where "doubtless all that is best awaits him." The opening of the story also protests against the forms of philanthropy practised in the community, what are called "beneficent deeds of charity." But this protest against those practices of the Jewish community which in other places, when Agnon is describing the distant past, seem so ideal—this protest is familiar to us from his greatest stories. The peak of criticism of the Jewish religious community is reached in "A Simple Story." The real Buczacz of "And the Crooked shall be made Straight" and certainly of "A Simple Story" is far from that perfection which other stories of Agnon sometimes try to see as the distinguishing mark of the Jewish religious community.

A thorough study of the stories of Agnon compels the conclusion that there exists a vast difference between descriptions of the life of the Jewish religious community, and that everything depends on *the distance in time*. The reality of the present day and the immediate past is described from a critical, ironic point of view, with the religious community an object of almost intellectual satire. On the other hand, Agnon lets himself draw an ideal portrait of the life of the Jewish community, its religious institutions, its great rabbis and its holy men *in the distant past*. But this contrast, whose existence can be proved from almost any story by Agnon, has a remarkable meaning for the portrayal of the religious element in his total literary production. As an example, let us linger further in our discussion on the story "The Letter," where *the lack of stylistic uniformity of language* also testifies to the existence of different and opposed spheres.

It is easy to show that the language is grave, sad and formal in those passages whose theme is that *distant perfect world of ideal Jewry no longer to be found in present-day reality*. After the opening chapter describing the mighty deeds of the great Klein, after the characteristic confession, "as soon as I sat down to write I didn't know to whom to write," testifying to the story-teller's revulsion against the obligatory ties and values of convention after the egocentric gloom, concomitant of a profound dissatisfaction with present reality, we sense a turning-point. More precisely, Agnon discloses here the second of the two poles around which his stories are constructed. This bi-polarity is characteristic of all Agnon's stories. "For a year and a half I had freed myself from all worldly occupations in order to study the books of recent rabbis. *I had forgone temporal pleasures* and spent little time in sleep. But I had *daydreams better than the greatest dreamer dreams at night*. Bygone days and perished communities came and stood before me, from a time when all Israel devoutly worshipped God and adored the wisdom of the Torah. Sometimes I was privileged to behold the great ones of Israel, princes of Torah in their generation. There have been times when our elders and ancestors, judges and kings, heroes and warriors, seers and prophets, men of the Great Assembly and Hasmonaeans, Tannaim and Amoraim, Saboraim and Ge'onim, nobles and princes, rabbis and scholars, secular and religious poets have magnified the glory of Israel and sanctified His name upon earth. But I love our recent rabbis. Like *an infant* standing in near darkness and consoled that the Sabbath must still linger awhile, I too was consoled with the works of recent rabbis in whom a little of the wisdom of the Torah still remains" (*ibid.*, pp. 223-224; my italics—B.K.).

This paragraph has great importance. It opens our eyes to the spiritual landscape providing the story-teller with a refuge from the challenge of present-day reality. Submerging oneself in a sea of books is a highly problematical solution, and Agnon is just the one to spare no effort in showing us the quixotic nature of such a flight. The story *Ad Hena* ("Hitherto") shows clearly the connection between an unstable home and flight to the world of books. *The home has ceased to represent the one reliable, enduring focus in Agnon's stories*. In grotesque fashion he describes the weird pursuit of books which, instead of granting a man salvation, have become a hindrance. They have no absolute value; they will perform

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any function imposed on them. In a period when the values of society are tottering, books attest man's impotence. "From time to time the soul awakens and remembers what was before, how there were wise men and poets, and of all their poetry and books of wisdom nothing whatever remains, *for they were used as fuel to cook meals and bake bread*" ("Hitherto" p. 24; my italics—B.K.). The value of a book is only relative. It serves man's purpose, not the reverse. This is a revolutionary approach, in conflict with the scheme of values of the Jewish religious community. Dr. Levy's books, the object of all the running around in "Hitherto," reveal the change in attitude to books: "The fact is that Dr. Levy had set aside two rooms full of books and in the meantime they had been eaten by rats. Yet even if the rats had not eaten them and they had remained just as they were, that whole generation that had need of his books is dead" (*ibid.*, p. 29).

The shock is twofold. There is no certainty that books can withstand the ravages of time. They fall prey to rats. But what threatens even more the authority of the book as an aim in itself and a supreme value is the change in the intellectual atmosphere. *Each generation has its own books. The books that one generation finds needful another generation can do without.* Time makes a double assault upon the book; it is no accident that the background to the events of the story is the period of the First World War. As though from a different vantage point, Agnon describes the upheavals of time which are the central theme of "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night." It is the War which has destroyed all the illusions and certainties about the permanence of values and institutions. A new generation will arise with no attachment to the world of books, which once were man's abiding strength: "There is no one to learn from those books, and rats have come to gnaw them" (*ibid.*, p. 31). Again and again, in one variation after another, the same theme breaks through—the loss of the authority of the book. It would be appropriate here to dwell at greater length on the common elements in "Hitherto" and "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night," both in theme and in problems of composition (first person narrative, and the confessional nature of both stories), but we must content ourselves with pointing out the importance of "Hitherto" for the significance of the religious element in the stories of Agnon. Both stories revolve about a single axis: *the contrast between the world before the War and the*

reality which has followed in its wake. "I sit and gaze upon the days that were before the War" (*ibid.*, p. 77). The War has revealed the full power of time. This is the moral of "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night" and "Hitherto." The narrator has lost his bearings; he has been thrown into a world of chaos and where once stood apparently ageless houses and buildings the ground has now been cut from under his feet. "This is the irony of fate, that I go back from myself to the place I fled." This sentence from "Hitherto" could serve as a motto for "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night."

How significant and many-faceted is Agnon's feigned naivety, especially his "religious naivety," can be seen from the end of "Hitherto." On the last pages we hear of the erection of the house whose purpose is to provide a home for the books. "I was compelled to return to the Land of Israel. I took a piece of land and built a house of several rooms. I myself am content with one room, so why several rooms? Because I made ready a place for Dr. Levy's books... so I prepared a place for Dr. Levy's books... his sights are not set high and he knows that he has not acquired a house on his own merits, but through Dr. Levy's books, which need a home."

We have here an assumed naivety, as though the author were trying to make us forget the meaning of his story. The threats of time and the relative value of books remain unchanged. "Books are made and collected and left to heirs who have no need of them" (*ibid.*, p. 56). The book has no absolute value. Its importance depends on the attitude of each time, each generation. Nevertheless, there is also something more than an assumed naivety. A retreat into a fictitious certainty takes shape before our eyes. This is the foundation on which is built the final resolution in Agnon's stories, as far as the religious element is concerned. Flight compels a subjective solution in his stories. *It is a flight that is well aware of its refutation by present-day reality.* Consequently it is a flight into the past, "Like an infant standing in near darkness... I, too, was consoled with the works of recent rabbis in whom a little of the wisdom of the Torah still remains" ("The Letter"). On the other hand, the obligation to write the letter is one of the claims of the present, whose reality, together with the delineation of the religious community and its leaders, denies the value of the escape into the world of "our recent rabbis." "Until

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there arose the question of the letter and I set aside my studies" ("Near and Visible" p. 224). Between these two realities there is no compromise. One is represented by "our recent rabbis;" the other by Mr. Gedalia Klein, and especially by Mr. Schreiholtz. Within the works of Agnon, too, there is a deep schism whose source is the duality of his attitude to the religious question. On the one hand there are his modern stories, *Shira* and "A Book of Happenings;" on the other the flight to *Atem Re'item* ("Ye have Witnessed") and *Yamim Nora'im* ("Days of Awe") to *Hasidic* tales and a certain class of tales, the greater part of which are collected in *Ha'esh Veba'etzim* ("The Fire and the Trees").

Let us take another look at the story "The Letter," at the section we lingered over. It is clear that the character of Mr. Gedalia Klein gradually changes. The Gedalia Klein who converses with the story-teller bears no resemblance to Gedalia Klein when he was alive. The story-teller achieves a *genuine conversation* with this man of affairs only *after his death*. Their walk together and their visit to the ideal congregation take place in a sphere beyond reality, *in the world of shades and ghosts*. Everything gives rise to wonder, eeriness and terror. "Old men and women ran to and fro, as they do at the time of the afternoon prayers, and as they passed they gazed *in wonder* at Mr. Gedalia Klein and their lips moved. I looked after them *in wonder*, for they and their clothes were strange, unlike other old people from Jerusalem. *Fear seized me*" (*ibid.*, p. 225).

We are in the world of *the dead*. The atmosphere is familiar from the stories of "The Book of Happenings." "For he had no fear of being recognized as dead and an object of contempt" (p. 226). And here is the description of the house of study and the ideal congregation: "Then he began to grope with his stick like a blind man and said, 'Tell me, pray, if you can see a house of study here.' There was, indeed, a house of study there . . . the worshippers stood leaning with their faces to the wall. Mr. Klein went in and I remained standing by the entrance . . . there was dim lighting from four or five lamps of copper, tin, iron and clay. *A stillness not of this world* reigned in the room."

Neither our world nor our existence is described here; it is a world of "dreams." Dreams can be good dreams, seen whilst awake, or they can be nightmares. But what is characteristic of the story "The Letter" is that here the story-teller joins the ideal congregation and meets "one of the supreme princes of the Torah, with whose books I had been concerned." The heart of the story-teller goes out to this great man, but the Rabbi pays no heed to the story-teller: "From the greatness of his piety and devotion to God he saw neither the trench nor me, who had come to save him from it . . . the Holy One, Blessed be He, had placed in the heart of this pious man the readiness to rely on me. His body was light as a baby's. Nonetheless I know I shall feel his touch till dust covers my eyes" (p. 227).

The experience of supreme happiness described here is the lot of one who is granted good dreams. However, only the distant past is capable of bestowing such happiness; it is not of this world. Moreover, life has no importance for such an experience. It recalls states of mind described by mystics: "Such a great event will not befall me again. I do not remember if I was sad or happy, but I recall feeling in my heart something different which no words, neither of joy nor sorrow, can grasp. If at that moment I had left this world I would have had no regrets" (p. 228). Death carries no weight. This "great event" dissolves the barrier between life and death, but such an event undoubtedly lies above and beyond present reality, which finds great happiness alien and destroys it. The self stands on the verge of extinction. "But I knew that if I raised the blanket and placed it on my head I could enter another world in a trice. May he *who seeks my welfare know such bliss.*" (*ibid.*, p. 228; my italics—B.K.).

I know of hardly any similar passage in all Agnon's stories which is nothing but yearning for annihilation of the here and now and release from the oppressive burden of life. This "great event," "such bliss," delivers the self from things that press upon it, from the terrors of time and the terrors of death, from those very fears which to a large extent determine the course of the stories in "A Book of Happenings," as though, at last, the soul has reached its destination: ". . . and I thought to myself, why do men fear death? They whispered to me, Lift the blanket. At once my fingers were filled with that same feeling *which no words, neither of joy nor sorrow, can grasp*" (*ibid.*). A kind of mystic experience, an experience of infinity, almost to be identified with a cessation of existence,

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overwhelms the self, annuls the barriers between the self and the entire world, and gives rise to a feeling of supreme happiness. And only at the other extreme within the works of Agnon, in the introduction to "Days of Awe", do we find anything comparable with this experience described in "The Letter." Rarely has Agnon concentrated so much irony, mockery and cynicism in one story as in this story, one of the most trenchant, destructive attacks on the emptiness of Jewish life ever written in the history of Hebrew literature. The "great event," "such bliss," are at the opposite pole from present-day reality which is dominated by the vulgarity, the hypocrisy and the overwhelming garrulous stupidity of all the various "Schreiholtzes." It is no accident that the first to eulogize the great Mr. Klein is Mr. Schreiholtz—"screaming wood": "Everywhere Mr. Schreiholtz was the first to speak. He pulled a sad face and began in a whisper, as though unable to speak from excess of grief. Suddenly he raised his voice and flung his arm up with fingers outstretched, seeking a word to express the profundity of his thought. Having found the word, he began to hold forth, running on and on, shouting 'the deceased was . . . the deceased was . . .' and between one 'was' and the next recalling where he had last seen him and so on and so forth" (*ibid.*, p. 244). Schreiholtz is the representative of contemporary Jewish reality, the first of a line of men who eulogize the dead: "a teacher who became a banker . . . a fellow-townsmen of the deceased . . . Mr. Aharon Efrati . . . the cantor from the synagogue . . . who took out a crumpled fur hat, stooped and placed it on his head, took out a tuning-fork, put it in his mouth, bent down and struck the table with the tuning-fork, replaced it in his mouth, held it to his ear, and then began to sign *El Malei Rahamim*" (*ibid.*, p. 245).

The description of the memorial service could serve as a scene from any drama of the absurd by Ionesco or Dürrenmatt. Here and throughout the story everything declares the disintegration and degeneration of Jewish existence.

I have dwelt at length on the story "The Letter," because it is a proof of Agnon's real attitude to the religious problem, which he sees in all its diversity, without over-simplification and without yielding to the orthodox standpoint. The actual writing of "the letter" is almost impossible, since such a letter of condolence would be an expression of hypocrisy, an acceptance of present-day reality. Even the prayers have changed their

character, and it is unnecessary to stress particularly the fact that this change in the nature of the prayer merely reflects the change in the story-teller's attitude to religious belief. "I stood and thought to myself, this prayer (*El Malei Rahamim*) which once filled my heart with awe, today it fills me with *boredom*" (*ibid.*, my italics—B.K.). Hence: *the boredom in the life of modern man has replaced the awe of the naïve believer*. In passing, it may be pointed out that the following passage is written in a grotesquely facetious style. This style is not fortuitous; I have already alluded to the many styles Agnon uses in this story, occupying in all less than thirty pages. Here is a small sample of the facetious style he uses to match present-day reality: "The *hazan* for the *schul*, a bit of a fool, his head capped with a hat that flapped, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down with his sobbing, throwing his inflections in all directions at the mourners and the grievers with his prayer for believers, a little ditty 'Oh God have pity'" (p. 245).

Such comic rhyming lays bare the true character of the "memorial service," but the tone of raillery does not merely succeed in revealing the nature of present-day reality; it also detracts from the power of prayer itself, throws doubt on its claim to be a supreme, absolute value. Everything here declares the collapse of values. Again, a virulent piece of satire, there comes a variation on the well-known verse from Samuel I, Chapter 3: "And the memorial candle was still burning there when the *hazan* had finished the memorial prayer . . ." (p. 246). The memorial service ends in a mixture of smells: "I left the house of lamentation. The square was full of automobiles . . . within a short while there was nothing left of them but the smell of burnt petrol, cosmetics and dust" (p. 247).

The story concludes with a description of a further meeting with the late Mr. Klein in the house of the story-teller. Again, how different is this Mr. Klein from the man of affairs that Mr. Schreiholtz had eulogized! The core of their dialogue is the story-teller's appeal to Mr. Klein to help him rediscover the vanished world, the ideal community, the ideal congregation: "I drew near to him and said, I am looking for that house of study. He repeated my words in wonder. You are looking for that house



Avigdor Arikha: Illustration for S. Y. Agnon's story
Mazal Dagim

of study? What house of study are you looking for? The one you visited with me?" (p. 248-249). But this house of study is not of this world. Only the dead go there, and dreams, good or bad. Present-day reality is a disappointment. It is in conflict with the traditional, ideal picture of Jewish life; it is also evidence of a difficult crisis in faith and Jewish values. There is no solution to the problems, there are no final decisions, only an attempt, as it were, to live the contradictions, to affirm both the positive and the negative, and in the end flee from reality to the past, to the world of dreams.

"He took the cigarette out of his mouth and said, They had God in their hearts.

I whispered to him, God still exists.

He said, But not among us."

("The Letter"—"Near and Visible," p. 236).

The stories of Agnon, ruthlessly exposing the extent of the religious crisis, are also an overwhelming expression of modern man's longing for religion. The religious element in Agnon is more than just an artistic theme; it always leads to the heart of the conflict about the meaning of Jewish existence. Clearly its existence within the epic sphere reveals, consciously or unconsciously, the narrowness of the orthodox interpretation. Such an interpretation is only capable of seeing part of the phenomena; it does not grant validity to the totality of Judaism and Jewish life. This is also the reason why orthodoxy has not succeeded and will not succeed in creating a complete artistic masterpiece of secular reality. For orthodoxy can only remain orthodox by ignoring the many aspects of secular reality. In our world a true artist can only be one who is prepared to do battle with present-day reality—even if the personal reaction to the battle is ultimately flight. But before this passive resolution, the artist has managed to draw the picture of our wretched, crazy world, collapsing and coming back to life.

However, just as a naively religious interpretation misses the point of our discussion, so too does any attempt to see Agnon as the great

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* Moshe Shamir
Bar-Ilan Univ

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destroyer of religion: "Since Bialik there has been no greater destroyer of religion."* I have no intention here of indulging in polemics against Shamir's interesting article, but concern for a correct interpretation of Agnon's writing necessitates a clear dissociation from any attempt to see him through the mirror of Colin Wilson's *The Outsider*.** Only an inability to grasp the ambiguity, rich in contradiction and paradox, in the works of Agnon could lead to an interpretation which neither sees nor hears *the simultaneous affirmation and denial*; this is the true value to be ascribed to religious tradition in the writings of Agnon. This is not a consistent, logical solution, but it is the immanent truth of his work, which does not answer to the abstract demands of logical method. The artist fashions a certain view of life and reality which does not ask after the programme of orthodoxy or radicalism. Agnon is not to be interpreted as a nihilist and an unbeliever: "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night" is a story of the loss of meaning to life, of negation, of the repudiation of human existence. The ultimate degree of despair and unbelief" (Shamir, *op. cit.*, p. 83). No! This is a baseless generalization. Unbelief and despair are to be found in "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night," as in many of Agnon's stories, side by side with belief, confidence and hope. Similarly it is hard to find any proof in the text for the following worldly-wise, over-simple summary of "Only Yesterday": "Agnon's heroes have no serious problems to face . . . all is lies . . . only despair and death are tangible and real" (*ibid.* pp. 90-91). If it were so, if it were possible to define Agnon's attitude to Jewish religious tradition so facilely, his stories would never have attained such artistic profundity. Their multifarious character, their levels of meaning, are what attract and hold the reader spellbound. *The story gives voice to that no-man's land of unspoken things* which, however, elude all attempts to make them fit a rigid ideological framework, whether of the Left or the Right. Consequently, the enthusiasm of Orthodoxy and Progress, a kind of cupboard love, can end in bitter disappointment when Agnon's works are solemnly brought within the walls of an ideological stronghold. Suddenly it will become clear to both camps that with great

* Moshe Shamir: "The Torn Haversack" in *Yovel Shai* (Agnon Jubilee Volume), Bar-Ilan University, p. 81.

** Colin Wilson: *The Outsider*, London 1956.

joy and after much effort they have succeeded in dragging into their world a kind of *Trojan horse*. "God still exists" is said in a whisper, in a faint weary voice, but it is said. On the other hand: "But not among us." Who can build upon such avowals?—Certainly not those who interpret Agnon superficially one way or the other. *The lack of final resolution* in Agnon, as far as it is attested by his stories, his ideological suspension between two opposed worlds, *this in effect is his final resolution*. The heroes of his stories exist in two worlds together, and there is much movement between them, blurring the ostensibly distinct boundaries, until in the end a new unity is created whose nature is alien to those who draw clear solid lines between religion and unbelief.

Perhaps this unceasing movement, bursting the confines of convention, is first and foremost an expression of the artist's *desire for creation*; on no account can he accept the rigidity which is a hallmark of a dogmatic point of view. Indeed, the whole of Agnon's work declares war on rigidity, and artistic rigidity, characteristic of orthodox Jewry, is only one example of rigidity among the forces of life. Agnon's stories—in contrast with accepted opinion—are all dynamism, constant change, apparent and concealed. The balanced, measured language of the stories, on the surface so calm and economical, is a mask concealing dynamic tension. But this artistic language is also a protest against the ways of religious Jewry for hundreds of years, up to modern times. Religious Jewry has almost forgotten the taste of artistic creation.

Perhaps there is no character who gives such quintessential expression to this change, this desire to create, as Ben-Uri in *Agunot* ("Deserted Wives"). In tragic fashion the story describes *the clash between the creative and the fossilizing elements in Judaism*. The entire story appears to be a positive statement about the way of life of traditional Judaism. But this is both correct and incorrect for, as always in Agnon, affirmation and denial are interwoven. Agnon affirms, because he describes traditional life with love, affection and approval. But Agnon the artist says no, for the whole story is a protest against the undervaluation of *creative force, always being renewed and changing reality*. The representatives of this dynamic force are not the official representatives of Judaism. Not Reb Yehezkiel, the unfortunate bridegroom, nor Reb Ahiezer the official, but the artist-craftsman, young Ben-Uri. He alone, creator and innovator, is capable of building the

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Ark. In his soul burns the holy fire, but his contemporaries, frozen in a world which knows none of the changes wrought by innovation, are remote from any appreciation of his handiwork. Only Dina, Reb Ahiezer's daughter, senses his genius, the spark of holiness in the soul of the artist. And she knows that this spark is a revelation of the divine. Reb Ahiezer is also aware of Ben-Uri's talents, but for him he is only a craftsman. Dina, however, knows the truth, revealed to the reader by the narrator, about Ben-Uri's personality: “He was a humble man, a taciturn man, apparently no more than a simple craftsman, but exuberance of spirit shone in his eyes and in his work” (*Elu Ve'elu*—“These and Those,” p. 407). Thus the artist is not what he seems. He is “a simple craftsman,” but the “exuberance of spirit” which “shone in his eyes and in his works” no one was capable of seeing. There exists a profound connection between the active creative force of the artist and the passive creative force of the woman, the representative of *eros*. The whole story interweaves with consummate skill the themes of *eros* and the creative artist. The first chapter is already a wonderful piece of camouflage, as though the story-teller wants to tell us a simple traditional religious story, whereas behind the mask of “a tale of the Holy Land, May it be Rebuilt” an entirely different truth is revealed. The use of themes from The Song of Songs is ambiguous from the very first lines of the story. “And when the Blessed One sees that she has not grown ugly and abhorrent even in the land of her enemies, He inclines His head towards her and praises her, saying ‘Behold, thou art fair, my beloved.’ And this is the secret of the greatness, strength, elevation and love felt by every man of Israel. But sometimes an impediment makes itself felt, a thread catches in the material, the praying-shawl is spoilt . . . all is beset by a feeling of shame, ‘and they knew that they were naked’ ” (*ibid.*, p. 405).

Everything here apparently refers to the relationship between God and the People of Israel. But the inner truth of the story invests these lines, whose ostensible meaning is religious, with a significance which is secular and erotic. “Her beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone, she sought him, she sighed and said, ‘If ye find my beloved, tell him that I am sick of love.’” Up to this point the reader could still delude himself into thinking this is a case of the traditional religious interpretation of the Song of Songs, but the following sentence strips the veil and it becomes clear that the subject is secular love between man and woman: “And this sickness of love

can lead to nothing but melancholy, God preserve us!" Here we have, in miniature, the essence of the tale of the fate of Dina and Ben-Uri. The two of them represent the forces of creation, perpetually renewed, eros and art, in opposition to the forces of stagnation. Creative force, the will to create, are in conflict with the stability that leads to stagnation, but the creative force of the artist is different from the force of love. The artist desires love, fascinates the woman and subdues her. But whereas love sees itself as its sole justification and final purpose, the artist uses it merely as a means to an end: "Dina heard his voice (Ben-Uri's) and was faint with joy. For he had so tuned his voice that it might carry off her heart with its music, that she might stand there and never more move." The force of artistic creation knows no bounds, no compromises. *It is all-demanding*. Woman, love, the whole world submit to its tyranny: "But once Ben-Uri was busy at his work, he became so absorbed in it that eyes and heart and mind were first fixed upon the Ark, to the exclusion of all else. Ben-Uri did not then think of Dina, but forgot her utterly" (*ibid.*).

What can Reb Ahiezer and Reb Yehezkiel understand of the world of Ben-Uri? Dina, too, can only love Ben-Uri; his exclusive devotion to artistic creation she regards as infidelity. Consequently, she is jealous of the Ark which has driven all thought of her from Ben-Uri's mind: "She pushed and thrust at the Ark. It leaned over and fell through the open window" (p. 408). Although the Ark is not damaged, its sanctity has caused eros to rebel, for love approves only of itself, just as artistic creation acknowledges only its own limits. With the completion of the artistic process there is no room left for anything else, and a great emptiness is felt in the world: "Ben-Uri looked at his handiwork and marvelled at it where it stood, and he himself but an empty vessel. His soul grew sad and began to weep" (*ibid.*). In the story *Agunot* ("Deserted Wives") eros and the will to create become free of the supreme authority of religious tradition; *eros and art even determine their own place in the world of religious sanctity*. "What did the Ark resemble at that moment? A woman with her hands outstretched in prayer, her two breasts like the two tablets of stone, lifted up with her heart in prayer before her Father in heaven" (p. 409). *The woman and her two breasts are identical with the Ark and the two tablets of stone*. In the end the Ark is hidden away. The artist disappears, no one knows where.

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The matchmaking was not a success. Reb Yehezkiel and Dina "never became close." It was money that determined Reb Yehezkiel's choice. He had abandoned a worthy maid, Friedele, in the Diaspora, because she was poor. The *yeshiva* established by Reb Ahiezer grows more and more empty. The students go off. Finally Reb Yehezkiel gives his wife a divorce: "And just as he never looked at her when they were wed, so now he did not look at her as they divorced" (p. 414). The traditional ways of life have made plain their sterility.

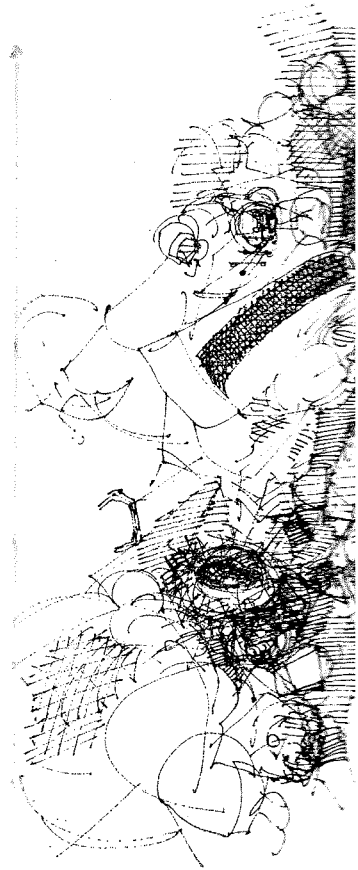
"Souls desolate and fumbling in their distress, striving to be re-united." ("Deserted Wives").

The arrangements of the ostensibly decent world of religious tradition are harmful to the forces of true life. What seems like creation ends in destruction. Such arrangements separate what should be yoked together, yoke together what should be separated. In Agnon the act of artistic creation is looked upon as the supreme expression of the realization of a full, true life. The development of all religious element in the stories is a corollary of the immense importance attributed to the forces of artistic creation and eros. "Deserted Wives" is, as we have said, only the concise artistic expression of Agnon's esteem for creative force, of his protest against everything rigid in those ways of life, which do not recognize change and dynamism in life. The ambiguous use of the traditional religious interpretation of the Song of Songs is a recurrent motif in the stories of Agnon, in particular the passage "Shlomo Ya'acov's Bed" from the third chapter of "The Bridal Canopy." The story *Laila min Haleilot* ("One Night") is a secular variation on the Song of Songs, and the point of the plot of *Sippur Pashut* ("A Simple Story") is a protest in the name of eros against the forces of stagnation in the Jewish religious community. Similarly in the story *Bidmi Yameha* ("In the Middle of Her Years"). In "Deserted Wives" Agnon censures the rigid pedantry which has lost contact with the healthy, creative forces of life. Money and lust for money separate souls that were meant for each other; Reb Yehezkiel deserted Friedele for Reb Ahiezer's money. Money causes the souls of Ben-Uri and Dina to "gape and fumble in their

distress and keep striving to be reunited." Money dazzles the eyes of Baruch Meir in "A Simple Story," he abandons his betrothed Mirel and marries the ugly Tsivel. Money ruins the life of Herschl Horowitz and yokes him together for life with a woman he hates, Minna, instead of Bluma, who was meant for him. Devotion to money harms the forces of creation.

And since traditional Judaism does not properly appreciate the forces of creation, the laws of change and dynamism in life, it endangers *the home*. The threat to the home in Agnon's stories, and the whole question of the home are connected with Agnon's opposition to stagnation. *Eros and the will to artistic creation* are the main rivals of the settled home. At first sight one might be inclined to see in this protest against the fossilization of traditional ways of life a continuation of the principles of the *Haskala* (Enlightenment). But the case of Agnon is different from the stories of the *Haskala* writers. *Agnon does not place the blame on orthodox Judaism in all its aspects*, as did the writers of the *Haskala*. What stands out in his approach to the religious question is his laying bare the tendency in orthodox Judaism to lose all contact with the wellsprings of creation. Agnon's stories do not reject traditional religious life. Orthodox Judaism is called upon to heed the necessity for reform within the framework of orthodoxy itself.

As a creative artist, Agnon's final decision is always in favour of the forces of creation, renewal and growth. It is this decision which impels him again and again to question religious values and seek the living meaning of religion, for he will not tolerate stagnation and withdrawal in the face of the change. The importance of eros in the stories derives from the fact that eros is a perpetual guarantee of renewal and creation. And when we consider the force of artistic creation and eros and the struggle of these forces against traditional Jewish life, it becomes clear that Agnon's stories lay bare the deterioration of religious life, just as they do not weary of criticizing the deterioration of secular life. A cause for concern in the deterioration of religious life is its alienation from the springs of beauty, art, dynamism and innovation. Sometimes the forms of religious life



Avigdor Arikha: Illustration for S. Y. Agnon's *Kelev Hutzot*
(from the novel *Tmol Shilshom*)

become problematic, degenerate, evidence within the epic stories of a *process of alienation* in the religious world. This process becomes an acknowledged fact the moment the religious world abandons the living, life-giving connection with the springs of creation and constant renewal, with eros, with artistic creation, with the building of Israel. Contrariwise, creation, the new and the novel wander aimless, directionless, once they lose contact with the spirit of Judaism. The artist Ben-Uri is a true artist because his artistry is put to the service of the Ark. His artistry bears the mark of sanctity and serves the highest purpose.

And so there opens up before us that same dimension in the works of Agnon wherein are portrayed situations, characters and images which testify in the most acute form to the gravity of the religious problem in its two bewildering forms: the dissociation of religious life from the well-spring of creation, and the dissociation of modern life from its centre, its direction, its meaning. This is the reality in the stories of "A Book of Happenings," in a story like "The Letter," and in *Sefer Hamedina* ("The Book of the State").

To sum up: the desire for artistic creation determines to a considerable extent the character of the religious problem in the stories of Agnon.

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