

Selected Stories  
of  
S. Y. AGNON

Edited with Introduction, Interpretations  
and Vocabulary

By  
SAMUEL LEITER

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## PREFACE

This volume aims to introduce the works of S. Y. Agnon to students of literature who are limited in their knowledge of Hebrew. It tries also to cultivate the student's critical approach to the stories.

The reader of this anthology will find in it specimens of the main themes, techniques, and styles of Agnon's fiction. Stories of Galicia, of Central Europe and of Palestine, are intended to represent the range of Agnon's subjects, to introduce the places and the people that are characteristic of his work, and to indicate the poles of the sacred and the profane, the traditional and the modern, that delineate the territory of his fiction.

The interpretations attempt to show how Agnon develops meaning in his stories, to examine the use of such elements as irony, symbol, and allusion that he uses to give depth to his story and to charge it with complication. Interpretation follows the story. It intends to point out those questions that, in the editor's judgment, merit attention. It offers comments that grow out of the body of criticism on Agnon's stories. It gives the reader a cross section of the views of critics like D. Sadan, B. Kurzweil and M. Tochner. The interpretation is by no means dogmatic. Its purpose is to stimulate the reader's imagination, to offer directions he may choose to follow or to challenge. The questions following the interpretation intend to raise further points of interest to the critical reader.

The vocabulary at the end of each story has been designed to facilitate uninterrupted reading of the story. Thus, words

that require explanation are listed in the vocabulary in the order of their appearance in the story. In the case of what experience has shown to be a difficult word, the word is repeated in the vocabulary when it occurs in a story again. The meaning of a word is defined by its use in the context of the story. All words that are included in the vocabulary are vocalized and are given in the form that appears in the story. These considerations in preparing the vocabulary will help the student encounter the story in a natural reading experience and will, it is hoped, minimize the need to cope with the language as well as with the story.

Hebrew definitions as well as English translations have been given in the glossaries in order to build the student's Hebrew vocabulary and to promote the use of Hebrew in the classroom. The allusive nature of Agnon's style is reflected in the many references to traditional literature that are included in the glossaries.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge my indebtedness to my wife Tamar for preparing the glossaries and vocalizing the Hebrew text. Her valuable suggestions have clarified points in the interpretations of the stories as well.

I wish to thank *Midstream* for permission to reprint part of my article "The Vision of the Fallen House" which appeared in the February 1967 issue, and also *Conservative Judaism*, for permission to reprint parts of "The Ironic Imagination," which appeared in the Winter 1967 issue.

S. L.

## INTRODUCTION

S. Y. Agnon was born in the security of the nineteenth century. His home town, Buczacz, was in the serene province of Eastern Galicia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in which the long reign (1848-1916) of Franz Joseph stood for stability and permanence. To the Jew of Buczacz, society was coherent and rational and the throne in Vienna seemed a symbol of order.

Diverse national elements had been integrated into the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The variety of cultures in contact provided fertile ground for Agnon's education. Languages surrounded the Jewish child in concentric circles. He was first of all exposed to Yiddish, the language of home and community; then to Hebrew, the language of learning and devotion. Next came the tongues of the peasant majority, Ukrainian or Ruthenian, naturally used more in the villages than in Buczacz, although here, too, it was indispensable to commerce and was likely to be heard on market day. Ukrainian also appeared in the peasant wit that peppered Yiddish conversation. The language of the professional class, in turn, was primarily Polish. German was naturally one of the official languages of the Empire. In their compulsory schooling, children were taught Ukrainian and Polish in the lower grades, and German later on. The Jewish women, whose secular schooling was less inhibited by religious restrictions, were often well-versed in German and Polish literature. They were especially fond of Schiller; later, when Polish became the mark of cultural distinction, they took to Adam

Mickiewicz. A Jewish child in Buczacz often heard the poems of these men at his mother's knee.

The Jewish culture in Buczacz was also not monolithic. Although Hassidism tended to dominate there, it did not stand alone and unrivalled. The Hassidic teachings penetrated Buczacz at a relatively late date; in the Great Synagogue there, the traditional Ashkenazi rite was always followed. As in nearby Brody, there was a select class of scholars in Buczacz whose sterner Talmudic *paideia* shaped out of the gentle Galician disposition a character more masculine than the somewhat romantic one developed by the mystical doctrine of Hassidism. Thus, Agnon's story "The Outcast," takes on special interest as a contribution to the typological study of piety by presenting the Hassidim as well as their opponents, the Mithnagdim, in a sympathetic light, and exploring the nuances of the two types of religious experience. Agnon admires the tradition of learning and has put it to good use, for his narrative art has been shaped as much by the Talmudic turn of argument as by the Hassidic tale. It was the Hassidic tale, together with the Biblical story and the rabbinic exemplum that opened his imagination. Learning has found expression as well, in Agnon's devotional study of religious texts and in the anthologies of traditional literature that he has collected and edited.

Indeed, his familiarity with Hebrew literary sources is evident in every line of his work. His style is a blend of many centuries of Hebrew. He has assimilated various strains of Hebrew style into his own vision. All of these strains are absorbed and reshaped by an exact sense of language, a keen mind and a fertile imagination; they are stamped by a tough, modern vision of

life. The needs of modern fiction always control the stylistic strain of a specific story.

It would be convenient to speak of four general strains in Agnon's style. His Midrashic strain is limpid and lyrical, supple and wistful. It can evoke the wonder of childhood and the moment of grace. It excels in nostalgia. This is the style of stories like "The Kerchief." Agnon's medieval strain is the language of late devotional literature, of veiled, mystical experience of legend and miracle, of folk-tale and the popular Yiddish story. It is denser, more antique, than the first style. It is quaint, veiny, tenebrous. "And the Crooked Shall Become Straight" is an example of this style. The Biblical strain is incantatory. It is poetical, elegaic. It is characteristic of stories of death and love. "My Bird" is one of the stories written in this style. The modern strain is less allusive than the others. It speaks of the desacralized world of modern man, of anxiety and alienation. "An Other Face" is typical of the European subject that is suitable for this style.

In his work Agnon frequently refers to the long period of imperial stability as "bygone days," the qualities of which he seeks to recapture in present experience. He celebrates the delights of a provincial childhood, the warmth of a Jewish home, the traditions of a small town, and the certitudes of faith. Many of his stories, however, are complicated by his attitude, his nostalgia tempered by irony, his love and sense of loss controlled by detachment. His story *Until Now* shows his awareness of the total dislocation of modern man. It gives new perspective to the innocent fact that one of the group of enthusiasts whose miraculous journey to the land of Israel is related in *In the Heart of the Seas* dies, after finally arriving

in Jerusalem, of a common cold. We are sufficiently cautioned that we are not dealing with a mere spinner of pious tales but with an author whose moral vision is extremely complex.

This modern sensibility is revealed in Agnon's four novels. The first, *A Bridal Canopy*, chronicles a picaresque journey across Galicia. It reconstructs the old society in detail. A wealth of folklore, customs and types of character are depicted in their original habitat. Again the author controls his material. His admiration is not unmixed. His faithful description of the old world is not infrequently narrated tongue-in-cheek. The quaint is set off by the quixotic, the simple by the foolish.

His second novel, *A Simple Tale*, analyzes the deterioration of an individual who is victimized by the norms of society. Love is frustrated by money. In this story of bourgeois life in a Jewish town at the end of the nineteenth century, the author is clearly on the side of the outsider. He stands with the suffering individual and the rebellious spirit against the safe conventions of society.

The irrevocable changes wrought in Buczacz with the fall of the Habsburg monarchy are depicted in *A Guest for the Night*. The economic, social and moral decline of Buczacz after the First World War is represented by a mutilated world – men without noses, with rubber arms and wooden legs. The narrator-hero is given the key to the abandoned synagogue but he loses it. The book ends on a note of hope. When the narrator returns to Palestine he finds the key. In the reality of Zion the past can be restored and the spirit of bygone days can be revived.

In his fourth novel, however, this hope is not realized. *Yesterday* is a long study of life in Palestine before the First World War. Old and new are satirized. Both the traditional world

preserved in Jerusalem and the new world rising in Jaffa are examined for spiritual values. They are found to be pretentious and banal. The past seen face-to-face is no more pleasant than the present. The reality of Zion does not change human nature. Bygone days live only in memories of childhood.

Subject, then, does not fix the meaning of Agnon's stories. Although these stories are often structured in a mythic world, a whole array of techniques indicates the author's deep-rooted ambivalence. A tolerant, self-inclusive irony allows Agnon to explore the old values with detachment. His irony is an open, perceptive way to consider the values of a culture that is no longer absolute and to shape his moral vision out of a broad experience which does not confine itself to traditional attitudes.

Agnon explores the reality behind normal social appearances. He has spoken of Marc Chagall's desire to portray the late Chief Rabbi Kook, "to capture the face within his face." This inner face is likely to belong to legend or myth. A beggar is the Messiah, an old doctor is Moses. The ordinary behavior of Agnon's people often conceals the formalized gestures of ritual. A child's home or a post office is perceived as the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, a walk in the countryside is a protracted *Havdalah* ceremony. By this subtle, indirect method Agnon develops real situations into rich symbolic events.

In these stories meanings are also developed by the rhetoric of allusions. Allusions are often deflections of words or images which Agnon's art has moved out of alignment with their literary antecedents, lending ambiguity to the story. The struggle between the traditional source and the contemporary analogue adds tension and resonance to the style. Agnon's allusions are never caged references. They are untamed metaphors that

reverberate with connotation. Their constant presence emphasizes the discrepancy of values between the old traditional Jewish world and the secularized modern world.

In addition to irony, symbol and allusion, other techniques are used to sustain tension and amplify meaning in simple stories. Plots that proceed by analogy, diverse attitudes of author and narrator, subjects that are arranged by opposites and characters who are Doubles—these are some of the ways of charging simplicity with complication.

Agnon's work presents a panorama of Galicia, Palestine and Germany in the last few centuries. This collection of stories tries to introduce the reader to the places and the people that are characteristic of Agnon's stories. It attempts to be representative of the various strains of his styles, of his techniques, and of the themes which run through the whole body of his work. The reader is given a glimpse of the world of the foremost Hebrew writer. It is hoped that he will recognize and enjoy those qualities of greatness which have been universally acclaimed.

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1888 Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (Agnon) born in Buczacz, Eastern Galicia, on the Ninth of Ab, 5,648 (July 17, 1888), to Shalom Mordecai HaLevi and Esther (Farb) Czaczkes.
- 1891-1897 Attends traditional schools, studies Bible and Talmud.
- 1897 Begins to write.
- 1903 First Yiddish poem is published.
- 1904 First Hebrew poem, "The Small Hero," is published.
- 1905 First stories appear.
- 1907 Joins the editorial staff of *Ha'Et* in Lemberg  
Immigrates to Palestine.
- 1907-1913 In Palestine. Secretary of various institutions and societies. Lives in Jaffa and Jerusalem.
- 1908 Death of his mother.  
First Hebrew story to be published in Palestine. From this story *'Agunoth* he took the name Agnon.
- 1912 "And the Crooked Shall Become Straight" is published in book from by Y.Ch. Brenner.
- 1913 Leaves Palestine for Germany.  
Death of his father.
- 1913-1924 Resides in Germany (Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, Frankfurt, Homburg).  
Establishes reputation.  
Met Salman Schocken, who was later to become his publisher.

- 1920 Marries Esther Marx.  
 1921 Birth of daughter, Emunah.  
 1922 Birth of son, Shalom Mordecai (Hemdat).  
 Appointed secretary of *Mekize Nirdamim* society.  
 1924 Returns to Palestine and settles in Jerusalem.  
 Assumes Agnon as his legal name.  
 1930 Visits Germany to prepare four-volume edition of his stories.  
 Visits Buczacz.  
 1931 *The Bridal Canopy* (novel). Collected works appear.  
 1932 Stories of "The Book of Deeds" begin to appear.  
 1934 Bialik Prize for *In the Heart of the Seas*.  
 1935 *A Simple Tale* (novel).  
 1937 Bialik Prize for *The Bridal Canopy*.  
 1938 *Book, Author and Story*, an anthology of stories about books and authors collected by Agnon.  
*Days of Awe*, an anthology of devotional texts dealing with the penitential season.  
 1939 *A Guest for the Night* (novel).  
 1941 *Elu V'Elu*, a volume of stories.  
 1945 *Yesterdays* (*Temol Shilshom*, a novel).  
 1951 Bialik Prize for *A Guest for the Night*.  
 A new volume *Close and Visible* (contains "The Book of Deeds").  
 Visits Sweden.  
 1952 A new volume *Until Now*.  
 1953 Second edition of his work in seven volumes.  
 1954 Israel Prize.  
 1958 Israel Prize.

- 1959 *You Have Seen*, a collection of religious texts dealing with the revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai.  
 1961 *The Books of the Righteous*, an anthology of stories about Hassidic scholars.  
 1962 *The Fire and the Wood*, the eighth volume of his collected works.  
 1966 Nobel Prize.  
 1970 Dies February 17 in Israel.