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Where Is Sanctity to Be Found?

A Sceptical Approach to Jewish Tradition and Zionist Utopia in Agnon's A Guest for the Night

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Abstract

This article investigates the connection between scepticism and modernism in Shmuel Yosef Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night*. What is at stake here is not simply the "old-fashioned" opposition between faith and its contrary or between doubt and certainty, but rather the positioning of Agnon in the modernist literary current that is in turn characterised by uncertainty and doubt about reality and the subject.

Keywords

modernist literature – modern Hebrew literature – scepticism – Zionism – Jewish folklore – Sambatyon

1 Introduction[1]

> "Where is it more beautiful, there or there?" "What do you mean, Raphael, what do you mean by 'there or there'? Or perhaps you meant to ask about

1 I conceived the idea and the main outline of this article while I was a research assistant at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies—Jewish Scepticism from 2015 to 2016. My gratitude goes to the centre's director, Prof. Giuseppe Veltri, for nurturing its intellectually stimulating ambience and for his guiding hand. Where not otherwise indicated, I have used the following English translations: the JPS Bible, available at http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm; Isidore Epstein, ed., *Hebrew/English Babylonian Talmud*, 36 vols. (London: Soncino Press, 1935–52); Harry Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds. and trans., *Midrash Rabbah. Translated into English with Notes, Glossary, and Indices. Volumes 1–2: Genesis*,

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> there or here, meaning in the Land of Israel or in Szibucz." Said Raphael, "Yesterday I read in a book about the River Sambatyon and the Ten Tribes and the Sons of Moses, and I ask where is it more beautiful, there or in the Land of Israel?" "You are asking something that is clear of itself," I replied; "after all, the Ten Tribes and the Sons of Moses look forward all their lives to go up to the Land of Israel, and unless the Holy One, blessed be He, had not surrounded them with the River Sambatyon, wouldn't they hurry to the Land of Israel? But all week long the River Sambatyon races rapidly and casts up stones, so that no one can cross, because they are very pious men and observe the Sabbath. And you ask where it is more beautiful! Certainly in the Land of Israel."[2]

The above-quoted conversation is drawn from "Beyond the River Sambatyon," a chapter of Shmuel Yosef Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night*, whose plot is quite simple: on the eve of the first Yom Kippur after the First World War, the nameless protagonist-narrator, afterwards labelled "the guest," returns to his hometown of Szibucz from the Land of Israel. The novel essentially recounts the story of his stay there, during which he re-encounters the people he left behind when he made his *ʿaliyah*, hears what happened to them while he was away, and also meets some other people who were previously unknown to him.

This chapter deals with the legend of the River Sambatyon, whose origin is to be traced back to stories surrounding the ten lost tribes of Israel who did not return from exile after being taken captive by the Assyrian king Shalmaneser V, as reported in the Bible.[3] Later sources slowly yet constantly adapted the story, turning it into a legend whose main ingredients are the destiny and whereabouts of the Ten Tribes[4] and the possibility of their return, which is at first

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foreword by Isidore Epstein, 3rd ed. (London: Soncino Press, 1961); Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Jerusalem Talmud: A Translation and Commentary on CD*, trans. Jacob Neusner and Zvee Zahavy (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010).

2 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Oreaḥ Naṭah Lalun*, repr. ed. (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1972), 322, henceforth *Oreaḥ*; English translation taken from Agnon, *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 373, henceforth *Guest*. The Hebrew name of the town *Šibuš* will be transliterated as Szibucz according to the usage in the official English translation.

3 Accordingly, see 2Kgs 17:6; 18:11; 1Chr 5:26. For a discussion of the biblical and later sources about the ten lost tribes, see the classical study by Adolf Neubauer, "Where Are the Ten Tribes?: I. Bible, Talmud and Midrashic Literature," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 1 (1888): 14–28. For a scholarly examination of the Assyrian strategies of deportation, see Karen Radner, "The 'Lost Tribes of Israel' in the Context of the Resettlement Programme of the Assyrian Empire," in *The Last Days of the Kingdom of Israel*, ed. Shuichi Hasegawa, Christoph Levin, and Karen Radner (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 101–24.

4 Josephus simply states that the Ten Tribes decided to remain beyond the Euphrates, but the apocryphal 2 Esdras reports that they decided to leave the lands of the heathens in order to

denied and then turned into an object of messianic expectations and hopes.[5] As for the River Sambatyon, it is first mentioned in non-Jewish sources—namely, Pliny the Elder and Josephus Flavius[6]—without connection to the Ten Tribes. It appears in the Babylonian Talmud in the context of a discussion of the Shabbat, while in the Jerusalem Talmud, it is mentioned in relation to the three lands to which the Israelites were exiled, one of which is beyond the Sambatyon. This information is reiterated in *Genesis Rabbah*.[7] Substantial additions were made during the Middle Ages, and here we come to a key point for the argument of this essay with the story recounted by Eldad the Danite (ninth century), who, when narrating the story of four of the ten lost tribes and how they are now living an independent life in their own land cultivating religious piety and military strength, is the first to make extensive reference to the *Benei Mošeh* (Sons of Moses), a Levite tribe that God secluded beyond the Sambatyon river in order to preserve their purity and righteousness.[8]

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be able to keep their statutes, so they went beyond the Euphrates to reach "another land" that was a year and a half's journey away. See Neubauer, "Where Are the Ten Tribes? I. Bible, Talmud and Midrashic Literature," 16–17 and annexed sources. For a history of the myth of the Ten Tribes, see Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002).

5 While 1 Chr 5:26 states that the tribes are exiled beyond the River Gozan "unto this day," the biblical prophets already cherished the messianic hope of their return. Accordingly, see Neubauer, "Where Are the Ten Tribes? I. Bible, Talmud and Midrashic Literature," 17–18, and Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16 and annexed sources. In the Talmud, opinions diverge—see, for example, *b. Sanh.* 110b. For a scholarly discussion of Rabbi Akivah's view as opposed to those of the other rabbis, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 2:1089 n. 56 and annexed sources.

6 For an analytical discussion of the Sambatyon in these sources, see Daniel Stein Kokin, "Toward the Source of the Sambatyon: Shabbat Discourse and the Origins of the Sabbatical River Legend," *AJS Review* 37 (2013): 1–28.

7 For a discussion of the sources about the River Sambatyon, see Max Seligsohn, "Sambation, Sanbation, Sabbation (Sambaṭyon)," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isidore Singer, 12 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnells, 1901–1906), 10:681–83, available at http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13062-sambation-sanbation-sabbation-sambatyon; Elena Loewenthal, "La storia del fiume Sambaṭion: Alcune note sulla tradizione ebraica antica e medievale," in *Biblische und judaistische Studien*, ed. Angelo Vivian (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), 651–63.

8 However, it has been argued that the Sons of Moses were first integrated in the legend of the Sambatyon in the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Exod 34:10 See John W. Etheridge, ed. and trans., *The Targums of Onkelos and Jonathan Ben Uzziel on the Pentateuch with the Fragments of the Jerusalem Targum from the Chaldee. 1: Genesis and Exodus* (London, 1862), 558–59. For Eldad the Danite's sources and modern interpretations, see Adolf Neubauer, "Where Are the Ten Tribes? II. Eldad the Danite," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 1 (1889): 95–114; Richard Gottheil and Isaac Broydé, "Eldad Ben Mahli Ha-Dani," in *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, 5:90–92 available at http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5515-eldad-ben-mahli-ha-dani, and annexed

The travels of Eldad the Danite enjoyed a renewed wave of success during the fifteenth century, when the first printed edition of the book was published (Mantua, 1480). This also led to the translation of excerpts into several languages (Latin, Arabic, and German), while scholarly editions of the sources based on collation of the manuscripts were prepared by Adolf Jellinek (1821–1893) and Abraham Epstein (1841–1918).[9]

Between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the story was also assimilated into and reinterpreted in Yiddish and modern Hebrew literature.[10] As it happens, Agnon's treatment of the Sambatyon legend has already attracted some scholarly attention: Shmuel Werses noted the combination of autobiographical references and collective issues which have historical and ideological implications in Agnon's adaptation of the legend,[11] while Hillel Weiss focused on the appraisal of the Ten Tribes as a "wonderful community" that embodies a reversal of the image of the Jewish communities who had been humiliated and persecuted in the Diaspora.[12]

Indeed, the issue of collectivity, with its ideological and historical implications, is prominent in this chapter, which I consider a metonymy for the whole novel. To be more specific, the discussion of the land beyond the Sambatyon epitomises a pivotal question raised in the novel: Where is it better to live; or, in other words, is there a place where Jews can live, if not happily, then at least in a certain peace and safety? Yet this plain, pragmatic question implies others that are profound and complicated. Where is sanctity to be found? Can

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sources; Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 2:1086–90 and annexed sources; Micha J. Perry, *Eldad's Travels: A Journey from the Lost Tribes to the Present* (London: Routledge, 2019) and annexed sources and bibliography.

9 A member of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* movement, Adolf (Aaron) Jellinek published a collection of midrashim entitled *Bet ha-Midrasch. Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der ältern jüdischen Literatur*, 6 vols. (Leipzig and Vienna, 1853–1877), which included some excerpts from the story of Eldad the Danite. Abraham Epstein published a critical edition of Eldad's travels: Epstein, ed., *Eldad ha-Dani seine Berichte über die X Stämme und deren Ritus in verschiedenen Versionen nach Handschriften und alten Drucken mit Einleitung und Anmerkungen nebst einem Excurse über die Falascha und deren Gebräuche* (Pressburg, 1891).

10 See Shmuel Werses, *From Mendele to Hazaz: Studies in the Development of Hebrew Prose* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), especially the chapter entitled "The Stories about the Ten Tribes and the Sambatyon and Their Absorption into Modern Hebrew Literature," 300–328.

11 See Werses, *From Mendele to Hazaz*, 321–28; for a specific discussion of the legend in *A Guest for the Night*, see 323–25.

12 Hillel Weiss, "The Ten Tribes, Bnei Moshe, and Bnei Rechav (Rechabites) Then and Now: Between Utopia and Dystopia in Agnon's Works" [Hebrew], *Ayin Gimel: A Journal of Agnon Studies* 2 (2012): 2.

the sanctity of Jewish life in the Diaspora be infused with new life, or is it better in the Land of Israel? And finally, what meaning should be attached to the concept of sanctity?

Agnon does not give a clear-cut answer to these questions. Instead, he suggests several possible solutions, none of which is final or permanent. In fact, a sceptical atmosphere lingers throughout the novel and also throughout the conversation that will be the subject of the latter part of this paper, where Agnon opposes Raphael's arguments against those of the protagonist-narrator and then, at a deeper level, submits traditional and folkloric sources to the scrutiny of a modern and sceptical method of examination that debunks their authority. This process entails a metaliterary and metalinguistic reflection on the value and authority of the written word, especially the written word of the sacred texts, written in the sacred language, which, while Agnon was alive, was in the process of transforming into modern Hebrew. Moreover, in light of these considerations, how valuable and authoritative could modern Hebrew literary texts be? In this reflection, scepticism plays a major role.

2 Agnon and Scepticism: Why an Old Question Matters

At the beginning of February 1938, immediately after publishing *Yamim Nora'im* (*Days of Awe*) and *Sefer Sofer we-Sippur* (*Book, Writer and Story*), Agnon found himself working on *A Guest for the Night*, which first appeared in 139 instalments in the *Haaretz* newspaper from 18 October 1938 to 7 April 1939 and was later published as a single volume.[13] *A Guest for the Night* was quickly acknowledged as central in the corpus of Agnon's works,[14] and it was also recently

13 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Yamim Nora'im* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1938); English translation: Agnon, *Days of Awe: A Treasury of Jewish Wisdom for Reflection, Repentance, and Renewal on the High Holy Days*, trans. Maurice T. Galpert, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, new ed. (New York: Schocken, 1995); Agnon, *Sefer Sofer we-Sippur* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1938; repr. Jerusalem: Schocken, 2000). For the history and context of the publication of *A Guest for the Night*, see Dan Laor, *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography* [Hebrew], new ed. (Tel Aviv: Schocken 2010), 300–313, 426, 680 n. 4. See also Laor, *Sh.Y. 'Agnon* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2008), chapter 6, "Between Trouble and Trouble," 105–34.

14 Nonetheless, the scholarly debate about which is the most important novel in Agnon's literary production still continues: see Dan Miron, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon's Transaction with the Novel," *Prooftexts* 7 (1987): 3. Gershon Shaked considers this novel to be the pinnacle of Agnon's artistic abilities: see Shaked, *The Narrative Art of S.Y. Agnon* [Hebrew] (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim, 1976), 228; see also Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon: A Revolutionary Traditionalist*, trans. Jeffrey M. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 137.

confirmed to be among the reasons why he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1966.[15] Furthermore, during the 2000s, the novel has enjoyed a new wave of critical interest, with scholars focusing on the issues of literary modernism, Jewish modernity, nationalism and intertextuality with the Bible.[16]

Both individual and national historical tragedies are reflected and echoed in the text like a game of shifting mirrors. Autobiographically speaking, the plot of the novel was inspired by a brief visit Agnon paid to his hometown of Buczacz after Arab rioters destroyed his house in the Talpiot neighbourhood of Jerusalem on 23 and 24 August 1929.[17] Traumatised by the second destruction of his home—the first being the fire that had destroyed his house in Bad Homburg on 6 June 1924[18]—and unable to face the ordeal of reorganising his entire life once again, he decided to travel to Leipzig in Germany in order to work on the proofreading of his works that were about to be published there by the Schocken publishing house. After finishing the proofreading, Agnon left Germany on 10 August 1930 and headed to Buczacz, where he arrived on 13 August. He spent a week there, during which time the inhabitants of the

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15 See Dan Laor, "War of the Words: The Intrigues Behind Israel's First Nobel Prize Win," *Haaretz*, 23 January 2017, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/culture/the-intrigues-behind-s-y-agnon-s-nobel-prize-win-1.5489331. See also Gershom Scholem, "S.Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?" in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis: Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser, new ed. (Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2012), 112: "*A Guest for the Night*, the excellent translation of which into German undoubtedly played a great part in the decision of the Nobel Prize Committee." Scholem's essay was delivered as a lecture on 30 May 1967 and was published in both English (in December 1967) and German (in 1970). Furthermore, in the wake of the enthusiasm awoken by the Nobel Prize, *A Guest for the Night* was the first of Agnon's novels to receive French and English translations.

16 Uri Cohen, "Agnon's Modernity: Death and Modernism in S.Y. Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*," *Modernism/Modernity* 13 (2006): 657–71; Ruth Wisse, "A Farewell to Poland," in Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Literature and Culture* (New York: The Free Press, 2008), 163–89; Mikhal Arbell, "Messianism and Crisis of the National Identity in Agnon's Works: *Oreaḥ natah Lalun*, 'Ha-mikhtav,' and 'Ha-siman'" [Hebrew], in *Times of Change: Jewish Literatures in the Modern Era—Essays in Honor of Dan Miron*, ed. Mikhal Arbel, Michael Gluzman and Gideon Nevo (Sde Boker: Ben-Gurion Research Institute, 2008), 173–208; Sheila E. Jelen, "Salvage Poetics: S.Y. Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 7, no. 1 (2014): 187–99; Yael Halevi-Wise, "Agnon's Conversation with Jeremiah in *A Guest for the Night*: 'Aginut in an Age of National Modernization," *AJS Review* 38 (2014): 395–416; Shirli Sela-Levavi, "'As He Had Betrayed the Land, So He Betrayed His Betrothed': Erotic Love, Nationalism, and Authorship in *A Guest for the Night*," *Hebrew Studies* 58 (2017): 382–400; Riki Ophir, "'If I Could Burn the Space': On Homelessness and the Collapse of Subjectivity in S.Y. Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18 (2019): 92–107.

17 See Laor, *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography*, 208ff.

18 See Laor, *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography*, 160–68.

town organised a celebration for their fellow citizen who had left as a young man and returned as a reputed and renowned Hebrew writer.[19] In *A Guest for the Night*, this one-week visit is turned into a year-long stay. In a similar move, the Arab pogrom of 1929 had its grim European counterpart in the violence of the First World War and the war between Poland and Soviet Russia—Buczacz being on the front line in both wars—and in the pogroms that the Jewish population of the city, and indeed of the whole of Galicia, had had to endure immediately after the war.[20] These two past and yet recent tragedies are paralleled and mirrored in the two historical tragedies that were befalling the Jews while Agnon was writing and publishing *A Guest for the Night*: namely, the 1936 to 1938 Arab revolt in Mandatory Palestine and the tragic escalation of Nazism in Europe. The atmosphere of increasing pessimism that lingers in the novel is therefore not surprising,[21] and it was echoed in the first critical reactions, appreciations, and evaluations of *A Guest for the Night*, which date back to 1939 and which almost entirely focused on a reading of the novel as an elegy for the agonising world of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe whose history was about to come to an end. Although hardly anyone would have been able to fathom the devastation of the Shoah, which was still being prepared by the Nazis, the word used by the first reviewers such as Rabbi Binyamin was either *shoah*, to be understood in the general sense of "catastrophe," or *ḥurban*, "destruction."[22] In an essay published in 1970, Gershom Scholem still labelled *A Guest for the Night* the most melancholy of Agnon's works.[23]

This feeling of impending historical catastrophe was not only rooted in the dramatic unfolding of events in Europe, but also in the intellectual, literary,

19 Laor, *S.Y. Agnon: A Biography*, 221–35. He left for Germany on 23 February 1930 and stayed in Leipzig from 5 March until the end of July 1930.

20 Accordingly, see Omer Bartov, *Anatomy of a Genocide: The Life and Death of a Town Called Buczacz* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), chapter 2, "Enemies at their Pleasure," 37–81; Nicolas Werth, *Le cimetière de l'espérance: Essais sur l'histoire de l'Union Soviétique, 1914–1991* (Paris: Perrin, 2019), chapter 5, "1918–1921. Les pogroms des guerres civiles russes," 109–26. See also Elissa Bemporad and Thomas Chopard, eds., *The Pogroms of the Russian Civil War at 100: New Trends, New Sources* (= *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of Fondazione CDEC* 15 [August 2019]); Bemporad, *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms, and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

21 See Laor, *S.Y. Agnon*, 312–14. Stephen Katz's study of the evolution of the text from manuscript to printed version testifies to Agnon's increasingly pessimistic vision (see Katz, "Evolution and Development of S.Y. Agnon's *'Ôrēaḥ nāṭā lālûn*, 1938–1939," *Hebrew Annual Review* 11 [1987]: 185–205; Katz, *The Centrifugal Novel: S.Y. Agnon's Poetics of Composition* [London: Associated University Presses, 1999], chapter 2 "From 'Becoming' to 'Being': *A Guest for the Night* in the Making," 36–57).

22 Accordingly, see Laor, *S.Y. Agnon*, 324–25 and annexed bibliography.

23 Scholem, "S.Y. Agnon," 112.

and metaliterary debates of the 1930s, when the novel was conceived and published. While European Jewry was on the wane, many questions arose concerning the Zionist enterprise in the Land of Israel and "the issue of continuity versus revolutionary innovation."[24] Incidentally, this very same decade was also the point when Barukh Kurzweil and Dov Sadan laid the foundations for the scholarly criticism and interpretation of Agnon's works.[25]

This is not the appropriate context to enter into the details of the discussion, and it will suffice here to recapitulate the main points of the argument. Kurzweil was looking for continuity, possibly historical and causal continuity, between past and present, old and new,[26] and from this point of view, it is not surprising that he took *A Guest for the Night* as an example and model of the irretrievable loss of the past; namely, the loss of the world of the fathers,[27] an interpretation that remained influential at least until the 1960s.[28]

I shall dwell briefly on Dov Sadan's interpretation of Agnon, which is of greater interest for the purposes of this essay. In fact, instead of pointing out radical oppositions—old vs. new, tradition vs. modernity, religion vs.

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24 Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 204.

25 Dan Miron, *Le médecin imaginaire—Studies in Classical Jewish Fiction* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995), 165. For an overview of criticism of Agnon in both Hebrew and English, see Shmuel Werses, "Trends and Methods in the Study of Sh.Y. Agnon's Works" [Hebrew], *Newsletter* (*World Union of Jewish Studies*) 29 (1989): 5–28; Anne Golomb Hoffman, "Agnon for All Seasons: Recent Trends in the Criticism," *Prooftexts* 11 (1991): 80–96; Nurith Govrin, "New Directions in the Study of Agnon" [Hebrew], *Ayin Gimel: A Journal of Agnon Studies* 1 (2011): 1–19.

26 For a discussion of how Kurzweil's conception of Judaism influenced his critical reading of Hebrew literature, see Miron, *From Continuity*, 235–42.

27 Kurzweil frankly acknowledged that he had read the novel when he first arrived in the Land of Israel after the war and the Shoah and that he had immediately felt that it was "the greatest artistic expression of the tragedy of European Jews" and therefore the tragedy of the loss of the world of the fathers: see Kurzweil, *Essays on the Stories of Sh.Y. Agnon* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Schocken 1966), 5, 56, and 312. For a discussion of Kurzweil's interpretation of Agnon's works, see Miron, *From Continuity*, 233. On Kurzweil's first experience of reading *A Guest for the Night*, see also James S. Diamond, *Barukh Kurzweil and Modern Hebrew Literature* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 11 and 15–16.

28 See, for example, Simon Halkin, *Modern Hebrew Literature: Trends and Values* (New York: Schocken, 1950), 115–16; Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 283–84. Harold Fisch, while acknowledging the disintegration of the old world, also considers that "past and present can still somehow be brought together" in the novel; see Fisch, *S.Y. Agnon* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1975), 51; Shaked, *Shmuel Yosef Agnon*, 141. See also Judith Romney Wegner, "*A Guest for the Night*: Epitaph on the Perished Hopes of Haskalah," in *Tradition and Trauma: Studies in the Fiction of S.J. Agnon*, ed. David Patterson and Glenda Abramson (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 117.

secularism—Sadan highlighted how in Agnon's works, paradox and doubt about tradition are born from a world that is fully immersed in this very same tradition.[29] From 1932 to 1934, he laid the first foundations of his interpretation in two seminal articles.[30] In a later essay—published in 1980, ten years after Agnon's death—he enlarged his analysis by arguing that the protagonists of the works published between *Hakhnasat Kallah* (*The Bridal Canopy*) and "Kisui ha-dam" ("Covering the Blood") are suffering individuals characterised by atheism and doubt.[31] Among the works featuring doubt, there is also *A Guest for the Night*, "the great story that stands between" *The Bridal Canopy* and *Tmol Šilšom* (*Only Yesterday*), which expresses an awareness of a crisis that is beyond repair and that co-exists with doubt.

Sadan's analysis is built upon a comprehensive psychoanalytical interpretation of the author's relationship to the characters he portrayed in his stories. According to him, these characters are vital autobiographical evidence that allows the reader to become familiar with Agnon and his beliefs. In other words, the writer poured himself and his beliefs into some of his characters, who are wandering in a world that seems at certain moments to be governed by providence until things happen that come to contradict this belief and cast doubt and uncertainty over everything. Accordingly, the faith, certainty, and serenity of Agnon's characters is actually rooted in the very same perplexity that compels them to look for shelter in the illusion of a world of certainties that is guided by providence. Through these perplexed characters, Agnon gave his readers an overview of his spiritual world, where nothing can be held for certain.

Yet doubt as such both is and is not at the core of Sadan's analysis, since in his opinion, it is not the most relevant aspect. It is worth noting that he never uses the word "scepticism." In fact, he goes somewhat beyond the nuances that doubt allows to interpreters and is more inclined towards the clear-cut opposition between "faith and its contrary or substitute" or "atheism and its contrary or substitute," which allows interpreters to understand and outline

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29 Sadan's interpretation was influenced by psychoanalysis, especially Freud: see Miron, *From Continuity*, 252.

30 Dov Sadan, "'Im arba'at kerakhaw ha-ri'šonim" (1932) and "Mevukhah we-gilguleiha" (1934), in Sadan, *On Sh.Y. Agnon—An Essay of Study and Research* [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1967), 9–31. Like many other essays by Sadan, "Mevukhah we-gilguleiha" was also published in *Davar: Musaf le-Šabbatot we-le-Mo'adim* 9, no. 25, 12 Sivan 1934: 1–2, with a slightly different title: "Mevukhat adam we-gilguleiha." All quotations will be taken from *On Sh. Y. Agnon*. The translation from Hebrew is mine. I am especially thankful to Prof. Nurith Govrin for bringing Sadan's essays to my attention.

31 Dov Sadan, "On the Doubt That Stands In Between" [Hebrew], *Maariv*, 16 May 1980: 33 and 36.

Agnon's spiritual world. If one wished to resort to another opposition, he adds, then "certainty and doubt, confidence and uncertainty"[32] could be invoked, although in his eyes, they seem to be somewhat reductive.

Finally, the written text plays a pivotal role in Sadan's analysis, and the written text *par excellence* is the Torah. In his view, Agnon's twofold approach to the Torah stands at the core of his approach to faith and atheism, which is conveyed through either the annulation or the substitution of the sacred text[33] This remark is crucial, since it shows that Sadan was conscious that atheism—or, more reductively, doubt—finds its expression through the debunking of authority and that in Agnon's case, the first authority that stands in the line of fire is that of the sacred texts.

While the majority of scholars active from the 1970s on approached Agnon's works by focusing on the structure of the text, or on a semiotic, metaphorical, and psychoanalytical reading of it,[34] doubt and scepticism resurface in the seminal pages that Dan Miron devoted to the turn—or, more precisely, to the "far-reaching literary shift"[35]—that Agnon underwent in the mid-1930s. Influenced by Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, he saw in the mediocre, bourgeois, voluptuous, tragic Emma "the image of the human individual as such."[36] Her suicide represents the moment when the individual takes back control of his life, albeit in a destructive way. Therefore, Agnon put the idea that the human condition is fundamentally characterised by pain at the core of his works,

32 Sadan, "On the Doubt," 33.

33 Sadan, "On the Doubt," 36.

34 And in so doing they raised the issue of scepticism as something that can, in a general, intuitive way of speaking, be opposed to piety, religious belief, and/or nationalism. For example, Anne Golomb Hoffman writes that in Agnon's time, scepticism had to be counted "among the competing tendencies of modern Jewish thought" and that Agnon was aware of this, Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S.Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991), 4; see also Shaked, *The Narrative Art*; in this context, see esp. 228–78, dedicated to an analysis of *A Guest for the Night*; Naomi B. Sokoloff, "Metaphor and Metonymy in Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*," *AJS Review* 9 (1984): 97–111; Yael S. Feldman, "How Does a Convention Mean? A Semiotic Reading of Agnon's Bilingual Key-Irony in *A Guest for the Night*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 56 (1985): 251–69; Feldman, "The Latent and the Manifest: Freudianism in *A Guest for the Night*," *Prooftexts* 7 (1987): 2–39; Wegner, "*A Guest for the Night*: Epitaph on the Perished Hopes of Haskalah." In addition to this, one might also mention Amos Oz, *Šetiqat ha-Šamayim: Agnon Mištomem ʿal Elohim* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993), 18; English translation: Oz, *The Silence of Heaven: Agnon's Fear of God*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), where the author labels Agnon "that Ecclesiastes, who disguised himself in all sorts of beautiful disguises" (*Šetiqat ha-Šamayim*, 18; *Silence of Heaven*, 12).

35 Miron, *Le médecin imaginaire*, 217.

36 Miron, *Le médecin imaginaire*, 218.

turning madness and illness into something worthy of description and narration. This new vision, Miron goes on to argue, moved Agnon to set aside the traditional and pious style that dominated his earlier works in order to switch to a new poetics "based on the new consciousness of the immediacy, the compelling inescapability of pain, of suffering, of emotional chaos, of erotic desire."[37] According to Miron, this shift has its origins in historical as well as personal causes, which I have already described above,[38] yet there remains one seminal point to be discussed: the change that Agnon made when he chose to abide by a scrupulous observance of the *miṣwot* in the mid-1920s. In Miron's argument, it is precisely this renewed observance of the *miṣwot* that allowed Agnon to be intellectually and artistically free. Being an observant Jew, "he was able to allow himself not only doubt, but even atheism and mockery."[39]

Both Sadan and Miron argue in favour of the presence of doubt in Agnon's works. In Sadan's interpretation, doubt is ever-present and is the motivation that induces Agnon's characters to search for certainty, eventually religious certainty. More interestingly, and possibly in an even more provocative move, Miron argues that certainty—in this case, the certainty of the observance of the *miṣwot*—allows Agnon to think freely as an artist and to trespass the limits of doubt.

I do not wish to bring research on Agnon back to the time when his works were studied by discussing the oppositions of old vs. new, past vs. present, and tradition and faith vs. secularism. However, I think that the dialectics of certainty and doubt in Agnon's works—and, in this case, in *A Guest for the Night*—deserve an in-depth exploration that does more than simply taking into account the thematic opposition or even clash between tradition and secularism. One might, of course, begin by researching Agnon's familiarity with philosophical Jewish texts conveying the idea and strategies of Jewish scepticism and their influence on his work.[40] However, there is another parallel, or perhaps even converging direction that can be followed. I see the dialectics between certainty and doubt as being deeply rooted in Agnon's works not only as a subject, but also as a literary strategy that may have percolated into them from a non-Jewish literary source: modernism.

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37 Miron, *Le médecin imaginaire*, 219.

38 See above pages 112–113.

39 Miron, *Le médecin imaginaire*, 221.

40 Accordingly, see Giuseppe Veltri, *Alienated Wisdom: Enquiry into Jewish Philosophy and Scepticism*, Studies and Texts in Scepticism 3 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), especially part 3, "(Jewish) Scepticism," 143–280; Racheli Haliva, ed., *Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018).

This connection between scepticism and modernism in Agnon's works was first made by Ortsion Bartana in an essay published in 2004, and to my knowledge, he remains the only scholar to have brought it to light by arguing that "the Agnon school entails staying within the boundaries of methodical doubt."[41] This methodical doubt is unleashed "toward the human way of life as it is."[42] This application of doubt makes Agnon a modernist, and as such, he "gives his scepticism psychological expression."[43] In Bartana's formulation, scepticism becomes the modern and modernist aspect of Agnon's works, but it remains confined to the psychological sphere that concerns both the characters' passions and their instincts and drives, whether conscious and unconscious. According to Bartana, Judaism remains the answer to this psychological scepticism. Scepticism, therefore, has only a minor effect on Judaism.[44]

I would suggest that the connection between scepticism and modernism is precisely the reason why it is worth dwelling on the question of how sceptical modernist literature is. Furthermore, it seems beneficial to discuss the interrelatedness of modernism and scepticism in general before approaching Agnon's works, particularly *A Guest for the Night*. What is at stake here is not only—or, to put it better, not simply—the "old-fashioned" opposition between faith and its contrary or between doubt and certainty, but rather the positioning of Agnon in the modernist literary current that is in turn characterised by uncertainty and doubt about reality and the subject.

3 Modernism and Scepticism

"I never see the whole of anything."[45] So wrote Montaigne in the *Essays* that he composed and published in different augmented editions between 1580 and 1588. With this oxymoronic formulation, he dismissed whatever aspiration and claims metaphysical reason could put forward to confirm its ability to know the totality of reality. Montaigne was able to do so also, though not exclusively, because he was able to resort to the strategies made available to

41 Ortsion Bartana, "The Brenner School and the Agnon School in Hebrew Literature of the Twentieth Century," *Hebrew Studies* 45 (2004): 51. In fact, the essay draws a comparison between Brenner's radical doubt and Agnon's methodical, yet partial doubt.

42 Bartana, "The Brenner School," 61.

43 Bartana, "The Brenner School," 61.

44 Bartana, "The Brenner School," 60–61.

45 Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, book 1, chapter 50, "De Democritus et Eraclitus"; English translation in Montaigne, *Essays*, trans. J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1993), 130.

him by philosophical scepticism.[46] During the Renaissance, as can be particularly observed in the *Essays*, sceptical arguments were unleashed against every form of authority, especially religious authority, introducing what has classically been labelled *la crise de la conscience européenne*.[47]

Modernity, understood as a liberation from and even a revolt against the principle of authority, is stirred by the sensation, or perhaps even the vertigo, of uncertainty and doubt. Knowledge cannot be eternal and fixed, but only temporary and in perpetual change. Therefore, the new modern world as Montaigne saw and experienced it "seemed immense, boundless, incomprehensible. The need to orient oneself in it seemed hard to satisfy and yet urgent."[48] According to Erich Auerbach, Montaigne described a historical and cultural process "which began in the sixteenth century, [and] continued through the nineteenth at an even faster tempo."[49] Yet the issue of the continuity of this process appears to be somewhat problematic. The modernity project reached its height during the Enlightenment, which laid its foundations in the autonomy of the critical subject being dependent on reason. Most of all,

46 Conceived by Pyrrho in the fourth century BC and formulated by Sextus Empiricus during the Hellenistic age, scepticism resurfaced during the last part of the fifteenth century in the Medicis' Florence, especially in Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's *Examen vanitatis doctrinae gentium et veritatis christianae disciplinae* (s.l., 1520). See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1960), chapter 2, "The Revival of Skepticism," 17–43; Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), chapter 2, "The Revival of Greek Scepticism in the Sixteenth Century," 17–43; Luciano Floridi, *Sextus Empiricus: The Transmission and Recovery of Pyrrhonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Gianfrancesco became acquainted with Pyrrhonian scepticism through the Jewish philosopher Ḥasdai Crescas's *The Light of the Lord*; see David Harari, "Who Was the Learned Jew That Made Known Ḥasdai Crescas' *The Light of the Lord* to Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola?" [Hebrew], *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 14 (1998): 257–69; Mauro Zonta, "The Influence of Hasdai Crescas's Philosophy on Some Aspects of Sixteenth-Century Philosophy and Science," in *Religious Confessions and the Sciences in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Jürgen Hel and Annette Winkelmann (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 71–78. For the history of Greek scepticism in general, see Anthony Arthur Long and David Neil Sedley, eds., *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Richard Bett, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Scepticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

47 Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne*, new ed. (Paris: Fayard, 1961).

48 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask with an introduction by Edward Said, 50th anniversary ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 310.

49 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 549.

embedded in the concept of modernity is the idea of progress, in the sense of a confidence in the constant improvement of human life.[50]

There are certainly many different definitions of modernism, and the debate continues as to its life-span and the features that differentiate it from post-modernism.[51] For the sake of the current argument and taking into account the circumstance that this discussion focuses on modernism in the specific cultural context of a Jewish author writing in modern Hebrew, I would understand modernism as a literary movement in a dialectical relationship with modernisation.[52] This movement parallels, reacts, and interacts with modernity while focusing on human consciousness and on the different ways the subject represents reality, which cast aside mimetic representations and simultaneously point to a crisis of the subject,[53] whose autonomy, rationality, and reliability are in doubt.[54] Indeed, modernism in the arts can be seen as a vehicle for a crisis mentality pointing towards a "bourgeois culture's growing dissatisfaction with itself."[55] The crisis of the bourgeois subject implies the awareness that the age of bourgeois humanism is at an end and is perhaps about to face an impending catastrophe.[56] Modernity has failed to deliver what it promised.[57] The crisis of the subject and the constant changes and fluctuations in reality turn doubt into a double-edged instrument: on the one side, it is an instrument of criticism unleashed against the modernity project; on the other, it allows the subject to apprehend the changing modern reality, at least temporarily.

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50 See Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 4: "Above all modernity is characterized by the view that human life after the political and intellectual revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is fundamentally better than before, and most likely will, thanks to such revolutions, be better still."

51 See Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), especially chapter 1, "The Making of Modernist Paradigms," 8–49. See also Astradur Eysteinsson and Vivian Liska, "Approaching Modernism," in *Modernism*, ed. Astradur Eysteninsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 1:1–8.

52 See Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, repr. ed. (London: Penguin, 1988), 16.

53 I am therefore leaving aside the aesthetic appraisal of modernism focused on "ahistorical formal authority"; see Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, 12–24 and 26–30.

54 For a discussion of the concept of the modern subject and its discontents, see Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, especially chapter 2, "Modernity and Modernism," 16–44.

55 Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 31.

56 This feeling, Auerbach argues, is already present in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, a novel which, incidentally, Agnon greatly admired. See Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 547.

57 See Pippin, *Modernism*, chapter 3, "Idealism and Modernity," 45–77.

During the Renaissance, sceptical arguments and strategies were used against the old Thomistic system of knowledge and values in order to give birth and shape to modernity. Between the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, the sensation of uncertainty and doubt percolated into the modernist literary movement: one need only think of Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*, where the author ceaselessly complains about the waning of the "Golden Age of Security" that followed the First World War.

Among the first scholars to focus on the issue of uncertainty and doubt in the works of twentieth-century writers, Erich Auerbach deserves a special mention, because in "The Brown Stocking," the last chapter of his much-celebrated study of the representation of reality in Western literature, he highlights many features of those texts that can also be traced in Agnon's works, as I will show below. The features that Auerbach sketched out were later identified and discussed by Douwe Fokkema, who approached the issue of modernism using the concept of group code or sociocode, understood as "the code designated by a group of writers often belonging to a particular generation, literary movement or current and acknowledged by their contemporary and later readers."[58] Erich Auerbach argued that the acceleration in the changes that had already begun in the sixteenth century meant that the writers of the twentieth century no longer had any reliable criteria that would allow them to organise reality or to describe a historical period or a character's life-span with any degree of reliability. Therefore, they focused on fragments of reality and on brief specific moments in their characters' lives, hoping "to report [them] with reasonable completeness." This implies a reduction of the plot; in other words, not very much happens in modernist novels. As Fokkema puts it: "With respect to the relation between text and author it is a Modernist convention to consider *the text as not being definite*."[59] The text is characterised by a tenuous plot or by the resort to "arbitrary intrigues—often borrowed from the available stock of myths," strategies that aim at expressing "provisionality, both at the level of the sentence and of the text."[60]

Action is secondary when compared with the relevance of a single fragment. At the same time, even the report of a single fragment remains temporary, since "there is always going on within us a process of formulation and interpretation whose subject matter is our own self."[61] The opposition between reality

58 Douwe Fokkema, *Literary History, Modernism and Postmodernism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1983), 11.

59 Fokkema, *Literary History*, 15 (emphasis in original).

60 Fokkema, *Literary History*, 16.

61 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 549.

in its totality and the fragment also implies the opposition between "'exterior' and 'interior' time,"[62] or, to put it more clearly, "an insignificant exterior occurrence releases ideas and chains of ideas which cut loose from the present of the exterior occurrence and range freely through the depths of time."[63] The external reality the author represents as a well-founded fact is not the main point, but only an occasion, and "the stress is placed entirely on what the occasion releases, things which are not seen directly but by reflection, which are not tied to the present of the framing occurrence which releases them."[64] In Fokkema's formulation, "the Modernist preference for hypothesis forbids any sort of law-like explanation of human behavior as was common in Realism."[65] This point concerns the relationship between the text and the surrounding reality that is henceforth based on epistemological doubt, and here Fokkema's words deserve to be quoted in full:

> In Modernism the relation between text and represented world is characterized by the convention of *epistemological doubt*. There is no pretension that the text indeed describes the world it aims to describe, not that the explanations it gives are more than approximation of truth. With regard to the organization of the text this implies a preference for the continuing flow of the stream-of-consciousness, which never aims at a definite result and even less at general validity.[66]

The points Auerbach and Fokkema made about reality underscore the modern subject's ability to be critical of it, yet they also introduce the other fundamental feature of modernism: the crisis of the subject. A subject who can no longer grasp or describe reality is logically a subject who has lost his ability to be autonomous and to found himself on reason. Accordingly, "the writer as a narrator of objective facts has almost completely vanished; almost everything stated appears by way of reflection in the consciousness of the dramatis personae."[67] This, of course, is a reference to the stream of consciousness. The facts are subjected to the character's personal point of view, temporary interpretation, and momentary feeling. The author cannot even guarantee that they are the true facts, since he/she looks at the characters "not with knowing

62 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 538.
63 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 540.
64 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 541.
65 Fokkema, *Literary History*, 16.
66 Fokkema, *Literary History*, 16 (emphasis in original).
67 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 534.

but with doubting and questioning eyes."[68] Therefore, the author represents himself/herself as "someone who doubts, wonders, hesitates as though the truth about her [or his] characters were not better known to her [or him] than it is to them or to the reader."[69] In Fokkema's formulation, the modernist writer "does not try to be complete and lacks the certainty that would make him attempt to discover the laws governing human existence. [...] He is an intellectual who never gives up thinking, even if he knows that the results of his deliberations can be only provisional."[70] Therefore, a literary text cannot convey the truth about the world: "The major convention of Modernism with regard to the composition of literary texts is the selection of hypothetical constructions expressing uncertainty and provisionality."[71]

Finally, Fokkema focuses on the relationship between text and code: "It is a Modernist convention to resort to *metalingual comment*, that is, to discuss the codes used, either in the text itself or on other occasions."[72] Here, he places great emphasis on Nietzsche's concept of *Sprachskepsis*, which "disclaimed the possibility of the adequate use of language."[73]

While shaping his literary persona, Agnon denied any connection to modernist authors[74] and tried to present himself "as a figure on the margins of [Jewish] tradition,"[75] which, he claimed, was his sole source of inspiration. In so doing, he played down the impact of European literature on his work, especially where modernism is concerned. Yet his modernism has been acknowledged by many scholars and he has thus been ranked "with the major modernists of this [twentieth] century."[76] His works have been connected to

68 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 535.

69 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 535.

70 Fokkema, *Literary History*, 13–14, and see 11–12 for a definition of sociocode.

71 Fokkema, *Literary History*, 15.

72 Fokkema, *Literary History*, 17.

73 Fokkema, *Literary History*, 18.

74 Agnon, quoted in Gershon Shaked, "After the Fall: Nostalgia and the Treatment of Authority in the Works of Kafka and Agnon, Two Habsburgian Writers," *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and History of Ideas* 2, no. 1 (2004): 97.

75 Alan L. Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman, "Agnon as Modernist: The Contours of a Career," in Alan L. Mintz, *Translating Israel: Contemporary Hebrew Literature and its Reception in America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 84. This is consistent with Agnon's later statement that the Bible was his primary source of inspiration, since he learnt how to combine letters from it. See Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "Banquet Speech," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography Volume 329: Nobel Prize Laureates in Literature. Part 1: Agnon—Eucken* (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2007), 18.

76 Hoffman, *Between Exile*, 1; see also Mintz and Hoffman, "Agnon as Modernist," where the authors suggest that Agnon's modernism also consists in his turning his own life and biography into a narrative construction, and Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon*, 164, where

modernism from various points of view. In the case of *A Guest for the Night*, the modernist influence is confirmed by the sense of death lingering in its pages[77] and by the recurrent motif of the crisis of masculine erotic desire being connected to the crisis of artistic creation.[78] Nitza Ben-Dov has pinpointed the connection between Agnon's modernism and his manipulation of Jewish sources to create a nuanced prose that expresses scepticism.[79]

Finally, if modernism is the expression of the awareness of crisis, then Gabriel Moked's interpretation undeniably situates Agnon in the literary landscape of modernist literature. According to him, Agnon's modernism is to be found in the suspension of his literary representation between the civic humanist dimension and the traditional religious foundation, along with the consciousness that both of them are being shattered.[80] The awareness of crisis, one of the features of modernism, be it the crisis of the traditional Jewish world or the crisis of Jewish modernity, entails a crisis of authority, casting doubt over the way in which reality is perceived and described and over the authoritativeness of the subject who describes it.

I would suggest that we consider Agnon's doubt to be literary, and above all philosophical,[81] and as such, it entails a method and a strategy. The main target of doubt is authority, and in *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon attempts if not to debunk it completely, then at least to strip it of its foundations and reliability, particularly in its religious form. He juxtaposes descriptions and interpretations of reality that cast shadows of doubt and uncertainty upon each other in a way that recalls a strategy drawn from the Pyrrhonian sceptical system:

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the author interprets *A Guest for the Night* against the background of European modernism, especially Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka, and argues that Agnon was the foremost Hebrew modernist during the 1930s.

77 Cohen, "Agnon's Modernity."

78 See Shachar Pinsker, *Literary Passports: The Making of Modernist Hebrew Fiction in Europe* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 226–36.

79 Nitza Ben Dov, *Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 5.

80 From this point of view, Moked counts Agnon among the ten greatest prose writers of the twentieth century and at the same time as the only one of them who was able to express the genius of the Hebrew language and the Jewish tradition: see Gabriel Moked, "Between 'Ido and Inam' and 'Forevermore'" [Hebrew], *'Akhshaw* 25–28 (1973): 77–93; quotations from the essay are taken from the reprint in Moked, *Šivḥei 'Adi'el 'Amzeh* [The Praises of Adiel Amzeh: "Forevermore" and "Ido and Inam" by Sh.Y. Agnon] (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1989), 11–34, here 15.

81 Indeed, Bartana is only too right when he says that the philosophical side of Agnon's writing has not been widely appreciated in Hebrew literature (Bartana, "The Brenner School," 67).

"opposing to every proposition an equal proposition."[82] Furthermore, in my opinion, he goes far beyond the linguistic challenge described by Ben Dov, fathoming his own *Sprachskepsis* that entails a reflection on modern Hebrew and the literature produced in it. In fact, if the authority—and in some sense also the sanctity—of traditional texts is found wanting, then what is the value of the modern, secular written word in a Hebrew literary text? The doubt that Agnon expresses does not involve the possibility of using language to formulate a trustworthy description of reality so much as it involves the question of the status, and eventually the sanctity, of modern Hebrew language and literature.

Finally, the awareness of crisis that lingers throughout *A Guest for the Night* stems from the problem of evil that continually befalls the Jews at both a collective and an individual level. The characters of the Bach family I shall discuss below are a paradigm of this problem.

4 The Dialogue between the Protagonist-Narrator and Raphael

"Beyond the River Sambatyon" is chapter 57 of *A Guest for the Night*, and it is ideally placed in the second part of the book. In the first part, the protagonist-narrator strives to convince himself and to persuade both his fellow citizens and his readers that he belongs in Szibucz. In the second part, after becoming conscious of his belonging to the Land of Israel and explicitly formulating it, he can begin to make arrangements to return there and join his family. Nonetheless, he continues to study in the Beit Midrash, and on his way there one early spring day, he happens to walk past Daniel Bach's house and sees his son, young Raphael, lying in the sun. He stops to talk to the child and they start a discussion comparing the warmth of the sun in Szibucz and its warmth in the Land of Israel that takes up the protagonist-narrator's own remarks at the beginning of the novel: "I said to myself: these people are accustomed to the cold, but I, who have come from the Land of Israel—where one ray of the sun is stronger than the whole of the sun we see here—I cannot stand the cold, and surely I must make me a coat."[83]

Obviously, for him, the climate in Szibucz has become too cold to bear in comparison with the warmth of the Land of Israel. Raphael seems to assume so too:

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82 Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, trans. Robert Gregg Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 1.6.12.

83 *Oreaḥ*, 49; *Guest*, 54.

> I asked him if he felt warm. "I am warm," the child replied, "are you warm too?" "It is the same sun," I said, "and just as it warms the one so it warms the other, if you are warm why should I not feel warm?" "Because you are from the Land of Israel," the child answered, "and the sun in the Land of Israel is twice as warm; I'm sure the whole sun here is not enough for you." "Men have a way of getting accustomed," said I. "I thought anyone who had been there would feel cold here," said Raphael.[84]

This brief, conventional conversation reveals the main subjects of the following discussion and their treatment. The reason for this appears to be that the protagonist-narrator seems to want to minimise the differences between the two places. Furthermore, his answer contradicts the real feelings he expresses shortly after he arrives in Szibucz, when he feels he needs a new coat because he cannot stand the cold. However, it is even more important to highlight that the beginning of the conversation anticipates its main subject: a comparison between two places, in this case, the Land of Israel and Szibucz. Raphael seems to raise some doubts about the actual possibility of becoming accustomed, as if the two places are essentially different. When the protagonist-narrator asks him why he thinks so, the child has no clear-cut explanation, and he therefore switches to another, though similar, subject:

> "Where is it more beautiful, there or there?" "What do you mean, Raphael, what do you mean by 'there or there'? Or perhaps you meant to ask about there or here, meaning in the Land of Israel or in Szibucz." Said Raphael, "Yesterday I read in a book about the River Sambatyon and the Ten Tribes and the Sons of Moses, and I ask where is it more beautiful, there or in the Land of Israel?"[85]

From these lines arises the real subject of the conversation: the proper location of utopia, with two possible options—the Land of Israel or the land beyond the River Sambatyon. As is well known, Agnon was committed to Zionism,[86] and still more to the Land of Israel. However, the entire corpus of his literary production deals with a ceaseless coming and going to and from a Land of Israel that is both heavenly and sometimes harshly earthly.

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84 *Oreaḥ*, 321–22; *Guest*, 372–73.

85 *Oreaḥ*, 322; *Guest*, 373.

86 For a synthetic overview of Agnon's commitment to Zionism, see Miron, *From Continuity*, 234–33, where the author underscores that Agnon considered Zionism "the only form of a tenable Jewish messianism."

This discussion is built on different perceptions of different spaces. Interestingly enough, the Sambatyon itself is not the utopia. The real utopia is the land beyond it, which is here understood as a place created and shaped by a "utopian imagination and imaginative geography";[87] as such, it is not "a geographical space,"[88] but the product of a hermeneutic effort. The land beyond the Sambatyon is a "mental space where figures of imaginative power play out a story that cannot be realized in the present."[89] This story has everything to do with the trauma of the loss of political independence and military force. The land beyond the Sambatyon is a utopia compared to the Diaspora, where the Jews had no political autonomy or military power and were actually incapable of protecting themselves; it is a utopian space endowed with political and military meaning. The Sambatyon is the *limes* separating the land where some chosen individuals live; namely, the Ten Tribes and the Sons of Moses, who were brought there by the hand of God. In order to reach it, the pious Jew must set forth on a *quête* that will test the steadfastness of his faith, like the *quête* for the Holy Grail.[90] For this reason, few elected souls have been chosen and allowed to reach it, and fewer still have been allowed to return from it. Among those who managed to return, Agnon mentions Rabbi Meir *Baʿal ha-Aqdamut* and Ḥayyim ben Moses ibn Attar, the author of the *Or ha-Ḥayyim* (*The Light of Life*).[91]

Conversely, the Land of Israel is a real geographical space that has a special status in the Jewish tradition. It is placed at the centre of the world and is the source of every spiritual happiness, and going there is a *miṣwah* for every Jew.[92] Because of their sins, the Israelites have been doomed to exile. When the Messiah comes, the exiles will be gathered there again. In the meantime, however, many Jewish pilgrims have journeyed and eventually settled there. However, it is always possible to come and go to and from the Land of Israel, as the protagonist-narrator himself has. Therefore, his answer rather speaks for itself:

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87 Giuseppe Veltri, "The East in the Story of the Lost Tribes—Creation of Geographical and Political Utopias," in *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought—Festschrift in Honor of Joseph Dan*, ed. Rachel Elior and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005,) 249, reprinted in Veltri, *Renaissance Philosophy in Jewish Garb* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 144–68.

88 Veltri, "The East in the Story of the Lost Tribes," 259.

89 Veltri, "The East in the Story of the Lost Tribes," 259.

90 However, see also the suggested comparison between the Sambatyon and the lost Excalibur in Ben-Dor Benite, *The Ten Lost Tribes: A World History*, 15.

91 Ḥayyim ben Moses ibn Attar (1696–1743), author of *Or ha-Ḥayyim* (Venice, 1742), a commentary on the Pentateuch.

92 See, for example, Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 1:7 and annexed sources.

> "You are asking something that is clear of itself," I replied; "after all, the Ten Tribes and the Sons of Moses look forward all their lives to go up to the Land of Israel, and unless the Holy One, blessed be He, had not surrounded them with the River Sambatyon, wouldn't they hurry to the Land of Israel? But all week long the River Sambatyon races rapidly and casts up stones, so that no one can pass, and on the Sabbath, when it rests, they cannot cross, because they are very pious men and observe the Sabbath. And you ask where it is more beautiful? Certainly in the Land of Israel."[93]

This answer, as so often happens throughout the novel, is compliant with the Jewish tradition. Nonetheless, Raphael's objection casts doubt upon this "orthodox" answer: "I thought […] that because they are not under the yoke of the Gentiles and the servitude of the nations, it is more beautiful there."[94] Clearly, Raphael's answer displaces the discussion from the religious field to the political one. Immediately, the protagonist-narrator tries to bring it back to the religious field: "But they do not have the joy of the Land, for there is no joy of the Land but in the Land of Israel."[95] However, once again, Raphael returns to the political and military issue:

> [Raphael]: "Are they really not under the yoke of the Gentiles?" […] "And aren't the Gentiles jealous of them?"
> [Protagonist-narrator]: "Indeed they are jealous of them; that is why the Gentiles go to war against them."
> [Raphael]: "And what did they do?"
> [Protagonist-narrator]: "They fight back."
> [Raphael]: "Like here?"
> [Protagonist-narrator]: "What do you mean, like here?"
> [Raphael]: "Like what happened here in our town, when the Gentiles came and fought each other and killed each other."[96]

Faced with this argument, the protagonist-narrator cannot but correct the child by telling him that the Ten Tribes and the Sons of Moses are too holy and pure to shed blood, so they only have special staves made of magnetic stones

93 *Oreaḥ*, 322; *Guest*, 373.
94 *Oreaḥ*, 322; *Guest*, 373.
95 *Oreaḥ*, 322; *Guest*, 373.
96 *Oreaḥ*, 322; *Guest*, 373.

that allow them to draw away their enemies' weapons and cause them to flee. In so doing, he once again withdraws to the religious field.

Despite all the attempts made by the protagonist-narrator, Raphael's interest in the land beyond the Sambatyon does not stem from a strictly religious curiosity, but rather from the historical context of the period. After all the suffering that the Jewish community of Szibucz has had to endure, the child wonders whether it is better to live in the Land of Israel or in the land beyond the Sambatyon. To fully understand Raphael's point of view, one must keep in mind that he knows that his uncle Yeruḥam, his father's brother, was killed by an Arab in the Land of Israel, despite being innocent. The child seems to be tacitly hinting at a parallel between the innocent suffering in Szibucz and the death of his innocent uncle in the kibbutz. Therefore, the land beyond the Sambatyon becomes more attractive in his eyes.

At this point, the conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Daniel Bach, Raphael's father, who tells the protagonist-narrator about a letter he has just received from his father, Reb Shlomo Bach. He had formerly been a cantor in the Szibucz synagogue, but after his son's tragic death, he decided to move to the kibbutz of Ramat Raḥel, where Yeruḥam used to live, and has successfully adapted to the new environment and lifestyle there. Daniel Bach ironically summarises the contents of the letter:

> [Daniel]: "Well, he did not mention the quarrels in his congregation in Ramat Rahel, and he didn't write about the graves of the righteous men on which he prostrated himself."
> [Protagonist-narrator]: "Then what did he write about?"
> [Daniel]: "Now I know why they disparage the Land of Israel," said Daniel Bach. "If this is what happens to an old man who has spent all his life in study and prayer, what can you expect of all the young men who do not study and pray?"[97]

When it comes to the Zionist enterprise, and especially the Kibbutzim movement, we find that Reb Shlomo Bach and the protagonist-narrator share a similar point of view:

> There are pious men in this country who have built themselves Batei Midrashot, and they boast that when our holy Messiah reveals himself he will come first to their Beit Midrash. These young men, on the other hand, do not boast that the Messiah will come to them first; they do not

97 *Oreaḥ*, 323–24; *Guest*, 375.

> mention him, but most of their thoughts are devoted to going up to the Land of Israel and cultivating the soil. I do not know which are the more worthy of love: the pious in the Diaspora who wish to trouble the Messiah to come and visit them outside of the Land of Israel, or these young men who take the trouble to go up to the Land of Israel and prepare for him.[98]

The protagonist-narrator parallels, not without a certain irony, the quest for and expectation of sanctity that the religious Jews of the Diaspora share with the pioneers. However, none of them can satisfy him completely. Although he considers that the pioneers' mission is another way of preparing the path to the Messiah from a secular point of view, he still feels obliged to point out that there remains a basic difference between his belief and the approach of the pioneers:

> The very words we use have different meanings. For instance, when I say "Gordon" I mean our great poet, Yehuda Leib Gordon, while they mean Aaron David Gordon. My generation are men of thought, whose hands are short but whose thoughts are long, while they are men of deeds, who put doing before thinking. This Gordon of mine (that is, Yehudah Leib Gordon) was a man of thought, while their Gordon (that is, Aharon David Gordon) came along and translated thought into deeds; in other words, the one carried out what the other wrote.[99]

The protagonist-narrator does not have an authoritarian approach to the different points of view. He has no problem admitting that he does not know which vision, the religious one or that of the pioneers, is correct and legitimate. By acting thus, he almost seems to want to suspend judgment, since it will be impossible to say who is right and who is wrong until the Messiah comes. In the meantime, he points out the shared aspects of the two visions. Therefore, Daniel Bach's interruption does not really suspend the discussion as much as it provides the protagonist-narrator with some new arguments, since Reb Shlomo Bach has truly been able to build himself a new life in the Land of Israel and to find there the joy that only that land can bestow, as the protagonist-narrator tells Raphael. At the same time, it is impossible to forget the irony of Daniel Bach's words, whose foundation is to be found in the violent death endured by his brother Yeruḥam.

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98 *Oreaḥ*, 99; *Guest*, 112.

99 *Oreaḥ*, 99–100; *Guest*, 112.

After Daniel Bach leaves Raphael and the protagonist-narrator, the conversation comes to an end. The last question Raphael asks is whether any child has ever reached the River Sambatyon. The protagonist-narrator answers by telling him the story of a young man from Jerusalem who leaves for the land beyond the Sambatyon the day after his marriage. He has magic shoes that allow him to cross the river and is permitted to join the Sons of Moses because he is a pious Jew. Some years later, his son attempts to join him and arrives at the river's shore. The father tries to throw him the magic shoes, but they fall into the river. Father and son must thus remain separate. The son returns to Jerusalem, where he acquires a deep knowledge of the Torah, and the two of them will be reunited only when the Messiah comes.[100]

The protagonist-narrator's story returns to the comparison between the land beyond the Sambatyon and the Land of Israel. In the first part of the story, the sanctity of the land beyond the Sambatyon seems to be able to captivate pious Jews and even to induce them to leave Jerusalem, as happens to the young bridegroom who leaves the holy city and his wife in order to go there. Yet in the second part of the story, the land beyond the Sambatyon begins to share some similarities with the Diaspora. Its sanctity induces the bridegroom to forget his family for thirteen long years:

> Once when he knelt during the thanksgiving prayer, his shoestring broke. After the prayer he remembered this, and, remembering this remembered all that had happened to him, and that it was already thirteen years and more since he had left his wife, and if his wife had borne a son the time had come for him to fulfill the commandments. But for fear of neglecting the Torah he banished these thoughts from his heart and returned to his teaching.[101]

Like the intrinsically unholy nature of the Diaspora, the sanctity of the land beyond the Sambatyon induces man to oblivion, as the protagonist-narrator states: "It is natural for a man to forget, for exile weakens the power of memory."[102]

Furthermore, there is a parallel between the story of the protagonist-narrator, who leaves the Land of Israel and his family in order to return to the Diaspora, and the story of the bridegroom, who does the same thing in order

100 On the source of this story, see Weiss, "The Ten Tribes," 6–7.

101 *Oreaḥ*, 325; *Guest*, 377.

102 *Oreaḥ*, 324; *Guest*, 376.

to go to the land beyond the Sambatyon.[103] Another intriguing parallel can be found between the attitude of the pious Jews of the Diaspora described by the protagonist-narrator, who continue to live there in order to obey the religious precept that forbids them to go to the Land of Israel before the arrival of the Messiah, and that of the bridegroom, the Ten Tribes, and *Benei Mošeh*, who are trapped in the land beyond the Sambatyon because of the *miṣwah* that obliges them to observe Shabbat. These parallels confirm the protagonist-narrator's answer: the Land of Israel is more beautiful than the land beyond the Sambatyon, because the latter, all its sanctity notwithstanding, bears many resemblances to the Diaspora.

5 The Voice of the Author: The Wondrous Ubiquitous Child

The authorial voice that comes to cast a shadow of doubt on the previous reconstruction can be heard by identifying and analysing the cross-references to the Jewish tradition and the usage Agnon makes of them. In this case, I shall focus on the wondrous powers of Raphael Bach and on the identification of the protagonist-narrator as a guest on the basis of Jer 14:8, "O Thou hope of Israel, the Saviour thereof in time of trouble, why shouldest Thou be as a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man that turneth aside to tarry for a night?"[104] I will argue that in Agnon's novel, the "Guest" is to be identified with God. I will then progress to the ultimate question of where sanctity is to be found.

When he conceived *A Guest for the Night*, Agnon gave Daniel Bach two daughters, one of whom was intended to be paralysed.[105] Some time after the composition of the manuscript, he changed his mind and replaced the paralysed daughter with Raphael Bach, an enigmatic character who presents some interpretative problems. Because of his illness, Raphael has been understood as a sort of "symbolic objective correlative of the physical and spiritual state of this generation";[106] in other words, he is a metaphor that adds to the situation of decay and despair that reigns in Szibucz. Another possible interpretation

103 On the connection Agnon makes between the Sambatyon legend and families breaking apart in *A Guest for the Night* and his other works, see Werses, *From Mendele to Hazaz*, 63–65.

104 On the intertextual relationship between Agnon's novel and the biblical pericope, see Halevi-Wise, "Agnon's Conversation with Jeremiah in *A Guest for the Night*."

105 Katz, *The Centrifugal Novel*, 43.

106 Katz, "Evolution and Development," 188.

goes in the direction of identifying Raphael as an allegory of the author[107] or as a transfigured embodiment of the mysterious Rabbi Amnon of Mainz, and in this sense, he brings a message of hope, foreshadowing the transformation of traditional Judaism into something else through the work of the pioneers in the Land of Israel.[108]

However, it seems to me that Raphael Bach deserves a more in-depth investigation, which requires us to return to the first encounter between him and the protagonist-narrator that takes place in the winter when he comes to visit Raphael's father. The following is the first impression that Raphael makes on the protagonist-narrator:

> At first glance he looked to me like a child; at a second glance like a young man; and at the third glance neither a child nor a young man, but a heap of skin and flesh in which the Creator has fixed two aged eyes. Or perhaps the order was reversed: at first glance Raphael looked like a heap of skin and flesh—and so forth; but I do not remember clearly, because of the things that happened that night. Raphael has already reached the age of bar mitzvah, but his limbs are still not straight and his bones are weak, so most of the days he lies in bed. Everyone looks after him and he is loved by all.[109]

Raphael Bach has the characteristics of both a child and an adult, as if he could be both at the same time: he is irretrievably ill, but at the same time he bears the name of Raphael, the healing angel. He contains opposites within himself—illness and health, youth and mature age—as the protagonist-narrator immediately perceives. Scholars of the history of religions are familiar with such "beings," which are considered a manifestation of *coincidentia oppositorum*, whose main features were defined by Mircea Eliade in 1949.[110] First of all, it goes

107 Cohen, "Agnon's Modernity," 667–68.

108 Arbell, "Messianism and Crisis," 200–1.

109 *Oreaḥ*, 131; *Guest*, 149–50.

110 Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed, repr. ed. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 419. Here, Eliade mentions Nicholas of Cusa as a source for this concept and phrase and uses it in the context of what he labels the "pre-systematic thought" that preceded the birth of philosophy: see Eliade, *Mefistofele e l'androgine*, trans. Enrico Pinto, repr. ed. (Rome: Edizioni Mediterranee, 1995), 73–74 and annexed sources. His pupil Mac L. Ricketts notes that Eliade was familiar with the work of Nicholas of Cusa as early as 1934/35, when he taught a seminar about *De docta ignorantia* at the University of Bucharest: see Bryan S. Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 34. As Eliade acknowledged, *coincidentia oppositorum* played a pivotal point in his lifelong research, as he himself wrote: "The problem

beyond rational experience and understanding, and in fact, the protagonist-narrator does not understand Raphael's nature rationally: instead, he understands it intuitively as soon as he sees him. *Coincidentia oppositorum* reveals the actual structure of the divine understood as the mystery of the totality that contains all attributes in itself; it is therefore completely free and can be contradictory and paradoxical.[111] Raphael is a riddle that contains its own solution.[112]

Here, I shall focus on the specific riddle of his wondrous power of ubiquity, which he claims for himself during his first encounter with the protagonist-narrator:

> [Raphael]: "Now I know."
> [His mother]: "What do you know, my love?"
> [Raphael]: "Why all the places come to me."
> "What do you mean, all the places come to you?" Erela asked her brother.
> "They shift themselves and come to me," he replied. "And sometimes I go to them. It's not with my feet I go, I go to them with my self."[113]

Paradoxically, it is Raphael's illness that bestows these powers on him: all places come to him because his legs are weak and he cannot walk. Furthermore, he has no concept of what another place (*maqom aḥer*) can be: "What is somewhere else?" [His mother]: "A place that isn't here is somewhere else."[114] This dialogue epitomises the issue of ubiquity, turning it into a wondrous power, but it also epitomises the subject of the entire novel. *A Guest for the Night* is governed by the dialectics of being in one place, Szibucz, and aspiring to be in another, the Land of Israel, and vice versa. This subject does not only concern the protagonist-narrator and/or other characters. The major problem here is the location of sanctity.

As is well known, the rabbis attempted to detach the concept of sanctity from any material space in order to preserve the absolute transcendence of

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of the *coincidentia oppositorum* will fascinate me till the end of my life" (Eliade, quoted in Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, 33). However, scholars and interpreters of Eliade's thought are still struggling to achieve an understanding of this term. Rennie gives an interesting reconstruction of the formation of the concept of *coincidentia oppositorum* in Eliade's thought and work and ultimately labels it an "ontological assumption" (*Reconstructing Eliade*, 40), since it describes sacred reality as it is.

111 See a later definition in Eliade, *Mefistofele e l'androgine*, 73–75.

112 See Rennie's definition of *coincidentia oppositorum* in Rennie, *Reconstructing Eliade*, 39.

113 *Oreaḥ*, 147; *Guest*, 167–68.

114 *Oreaḥ*, 146; *Guest*, 167.

God, but also to affirm the divine omnipresence in this world.[115] In *A Guest for the Night*, there is a ceaseless fluctuating oscillation between the material worldly dimension and the transcendent one that is most clearly expressed through its language. In the whole novel, the word *maqom* plays a pivotal role from the very first pages, when the protagonist-narrator is speaking with the inhabitants of Szibucz after the Kippur service:

> We are leaving the place because He whose place is on high has left us [*meniḥim anu et meqomenu, mipnei še-ha-maqom he-niḥanu we-eino roṣeh bi-menuḥatenu*].[116]

The sentence needs to be quoted in Hebrew because even the most elegant translation is doomed to fail to retain the association between the modern Hebrew word *maqom*, "place"—in this case, Szibucz—with God's name *Maqom*. As is well known, this name stems from *Gen. Rab.* 68:9 on Gen 28:11: "And he lighted upon the place, and tarried there all night." The biblical verse refers to Jacob's journey to Paddan-Aram, where he stops to sleep and dreams of a ladder leading up to the sky. When he wakes, he concludes: "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not" (Gen 28:16). One only has to put the title of the novel, with its reference to Jer 14:8, alongside these biblical passages and God's name *Maqom* in order to understand that here, Agnon is not using these references to answer the question of the location of sanctity, but rather in order to leave it open by showing that there is no clear-cut answer.

Furthermore, with his power of ubiquity and his ignorance of the concept of elsewhere, Raphael can also be interpreted as an allusion to the idea of divine omnipresence; more specifically, as a paradoxical metaphor for the *Šekhinah*. Conceived in rabbinic sources as a name of God that was intended to bridge the gulf between divine transcendence and the world, the *Šekhinah* is the manifest and hidden presence of God in the world that signifies that God is near to the Jewish people.[117] However, rabbinic interpretations differ where the influence of human conduct on the *Šekhinah* and the mercifulness that God exerts through her are concerned. According to one view, the sins of

115 *Gen. Rab.* 68:9.

116 *Oreaḥ*, 18; *Guest*, 17.

117 For a discussion of the rabbinic concept of the *Šekhinah*, see Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: The World and Wisdom of the Rabbis of the Talmud*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 2nd enl. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), chapter 3, "The Shekhinah—The Presence of God in the World," 37–65 and annexed sources.

the Israelites caused the destruction of the Temple and the *Šekhinah*'s departure therefrom,[118] while their iniquities caused the *Šekhinah* to withdraw from Israel. If one looks back at the plot of *A Guest for the Night* with this interpretation in mind, it is possible to argue that the *Šekhinah* has abandoned Szibucz and its citizens because they have lost their faith and attend the Kippur service in the synagogue only as a matter of form. They have also abandoned the Beit Midrash and the study of the sacred texts. However, this explanation would at the same time be too simple and much too severe. In fact, the community is shaken, shocked, and in pain because of the sufferings they have experienced, and the protagonist-narrator—and through him, Agnon—cannot but be sympathetic and full of compassion. The inhabitants of Szibucz cannot simply be considered as sinners who deserve punishment. Therefore, Agnon seems to share Rabbi Akivah's more compassionate interpretation of the *Šekhinah* with the messianic implication that encourages Israel to endure the evil of the exile because the *Šekhinah* is with them and will support them until the Messiah comes and they are allowed to return to the Holy Land.[119] Furthermore, according to the school of Rabbi Ishmael, the *Šekhinah* supports the people of Israel whenever and wherever they are enslaved or in trouble.[120] Rabbi Ishmael does not provide an answer to collective and individual suffering, but, like Rabbi Akivah, he strives to provide some comfort. If the *Šekhinah* is with those who suffer, then she must necessarily be with the inhabitants of Szibucz. However, she is not to be found the synagogue, nor in the Beit Midrash, but rather in Daniel Bach's house, with Raphael, as it is written: "An invalid is different, because the Divine Presence is with him."[121] The *Šekhinah* is with Raphael and she suffers as he does.

Raphael epitomises the main issues at the core of *A Guest for the Night*: the problems of evil and innocent suffering, faith in God and His presence amid His people, and the issue of being in more than one place. Yet through him, Agnon does not provide a definite answer to these questions, but only some

118 See *b. Šabb.* 33a: "Through the crime of bloodshed the Temple was destroyed and the Shechinah departed from Israel."

119 Quoted with annexed sources in Urbach, *The Sages*, 54: "So too, it is found that wherever Israel went into exile, the *Shekhinah*, as it were, was exiled with them."

120 Quoted with annexed sources in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah as Refracted through the Generations*, ed. and trans. Gordon Tucker (New York: Continuum, 2005), 96: "You find that whenever Israel is enslaved, the *Shekhinah* is with them, as it says 'In all their troubles, God is troubled' [...]. Thus, wherever Israel is exiled, the *Shekhinah* is with them."

121 *b. Šabb.* 12b.

possible solutions, leaving the readers and interpreters in doubt and uncertainty and at the same time inspiring them to continue to look for an answer.

6 Conclusion: Where Is Sanctity to Be Found?

In the end, where is sanctity to be found? And can this sanctity provide a satisfactory answer to the problem of evil that is befalling the Jews? They had been cruelly killed in the Diaspora, leading to serious doubt being cast on the possibility of the sanctity of Jewish life in the Diaspora ever being renewed. As for the Zionist enterprise, it still (in 1939) seemed to be an acceptable and satisfactory alternative, although there too, some Jews had already been murdered by the surrounding population. The utopia of the land beyond the Sambatyon seemed to be more attractive to the Jews because it appeared to be somewhere where they could successfully protect themselves from evil, but the story that the protagonist-narrator tells Raphael at the end of their conversation seems to suggest that the land beyond the Sambatyon is a problematic fairytale.

Agnon has constructed a tangle in which each element casts a shadow of doubt upon the others. This means that ultimately, this novel can be read and understood as an inquiry about the value of the written word, be it the sacred written word or the written word of the literary text. In order to clarify this issue, I need to return to the text, very close to the end of the novel, where the protagonist-narrator incidentally reveals his profession: "Unintentionally I have mentioned that I am a writer. Originally the word denoted the scribe, who wrote the words of the Torah. But since everyone who engages in the craft of writing is called a writer, I am not afraid of arrogance in calling myself a writer."[122]

Here, being a writer (*sofer*) has become a secular occupation, when it was once endowed with sanctity and implied the obligation of ritual purity. The ironic end of the narrator's statement reflects the gap between the sanctity of the word in the past and its secularisation in the present. While in the past, he goes on to explain, the ancient Hebrew poets' inspiration came from heaven, nowadays, a writer's only source of inspiration is writing (*ktav*):

> We are like a child who dips his pen in the ink and writes what his master dictates. So long as his master's writing lies before him, his writing is beautiful, but when his master's writing is taken away, or when he changes it, it is not beautiful. The Holy One, blessed be He, made a covenant with

122 *Oreaḥ*, 419; *Guest*, 482.

> all that has been created since the first six days that is should not change its function [...], and the forms of the letters and the writing of God on the Tablets were among the things that were created at the beginning.[123]

As Agnon highlighted in his book *Sefer Sofer we-Sippur*, the Jewish tradition states that God carved the upper and lower letters and through them created the upper and lower worlds, which stand one in front of the other and in correspondence with each other.[124] Thus, Hebrew letters played an active part in the creation and organisation of the upper and lower worlds: God lives in them and they convey and transmit the sanctity of the light of the *en sof* precisely through the Torah.[125] These letters, therefore, allow the writer some contact with the sphere of sanctity and allow him to perform the act of writing that becomes a redemptive act aiming at reparation—*tiqqun*—that is mediated by the sanctity of the written word and of the Hebrew letters that constitute it. Yet the text he produces with these letters is no longer sacred in itself, since the real source of inspiration ("what the master dictates") remains unsaid and wrapped in mystery. The sanctity of the Hebrew letters is asserted and at the same time, the status of the final result—the text—is called into question, as are the statuses of modern Hebrew literature and the author as a *sofer*. He can approach sanctity by embroidering his literary texts, but he cannot attain it, nor can he define it. Perhaps Agnon's main criticism is directed precisely against certainties, as Kafka wrote: "He who does not answer the questions has passed the test."[126]

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123 *Oreaḥ*, 420; *Guest*, 483.
124 Agnon, *Sefer Sofer we-Sippur*, 115.
125 See Agnon, *Sefer Sofer we-Sippur*, 118.
126 Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes in German and English*, new. ed. (New York: Schocken, 1961), 183.

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