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The Sin of Writing
and the Rise
of Modern Hebrew
Literature

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Epilogue: Writing, Tradition, and Modernity in “Only for the Lord Alone”

by S. Y. Agnon

Since I have touched upon the topic of tales, I will say this about them. Whatever has an original, read the original and throw away the literary adaptation. And whatever does not have an original, if a poet made it, it should be treated like poetry, if a common author made it, turn your eyes away from it.

S. Y. Agnon, “Me’Atsmi El Atsmi”
 (“From Myself to Myself”)¹

S. Y. Agnon’s story “Only for the Lord Alone” (“Bilti LeHaShem Levado”) presents a daring confrontation with the dilemmas and predicaments of those who “sinned by writing” while standing on the border between tradition and modernity.² It is woven around a narrative core borrowed from a Hasidic tale, which Buber (1946, vol. 2, 496) attributes to Rabbi Yehezkel, the son of the Rabbi of Tsanz (Tarnogrod, Lublin G., R.E., 1815–1898). This is the story as it appears in Buber’s anthology *Or HaGanuz*:

¹ Agnon (1976, 262).

² Agnon’s story was first published on September 14, 1947 in *Haaretz* and was later included in the collection “Sipurim Na’im Shel Rabbi Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov” (“Graceful Stories of Rabbi Yisrael Ba’al Shem Tov”), in *Ha’Esh VeHa’Etsim (The Fire and the Wood)* (1962, 107–114). All references in this chapter are to the 1962 edition.

It is known that Rabbi Yehezkel, son of the Rabbi of Tszanz, would not speak words of Torah at his table. And because the Hasidim always asked him about this, he told them once on a Sabbath meal the following story. “A young man was taken prisoner by harmful spirits [*mazikim*], and no way to rescue him from their grasp had been found, until a tzaddik was asked to help and he did what he did. Said the harmful spirits: ‘if we have in our possession words of Torah from your rabbi, we shall be indifferent to his [the rabbi’s] deeds; but if we do not possess words of Torah from your rabbi, we will acknowledge our defeat and set the young man free.’ They searched and searched in their notebooks and found nothing, and therefore they set the young man free.”

“And now,” concluded the Rabbi, “say for yourselves, is a man permitted to speak words of Torah?” (Buber 1946, vol. 2, 496)³

In Agnon’s version, the tzaddik in the story is identified as the Magid of Zlotchov (Brody/Brod, Galicia, Poland/Austrian Empire, 1726–1786), who is known for not having left any writings behind him.⁴ This version makes writing one of its central themes, and presents a succinct and nuanced portrayal of the view that writing harbors a danger, of the resultant inhibitions in the way of those who sought to engage in writing, and of the transformation in the status of writing and writers brought about by modernization. The fantastic, nightmarish adventures of the story’s protagonist can be read as representing not only the position of the Magid of Zlotchov and of traditional Jewish society against writing, but also Agnon’s bitter and ironic confession, as a modern writer, on his engagement with the sins of writing.

“Only for the Lord Alone” tells the story of a Hasid who is journeying light-heartedly to pass the High Holidays in the company of the Magid of Zlotchov, as he does every year. While on his way, in the midst of a heavy storm, the Hasid finds himself in a forest that he has never seen before. Looking for refuge, he enters a house that he spots in the forest, only to find himself captured by demonic creatures who hold quill pens in their hands and are engrossed in feverish writing of homilies:

³ Aliza Shenhar maintains that “the naïve Hasidic root from which Agnon’s pseudo-Hasidic story evolved” is to be found in *Sefer Obel Elimelekh*, sign 123 (Shenhar 1986, 126–127).

⁴ The biographer of the Magid of Zlotchov emphasizes that he “did not write books, nor did his disciples record his teachings from his mouth” (Alfasi 2005, 218–219).

He saw there some creatures in the form of people, whose ears were long and reached down below their feet, to the earth and underneath it, and each and every one of them held a clerk's quill in his hand, and thick notebooks lay before him, and the pages of the notebooks were made of skins that no tanner's hand had worked. And strange sounds croaked and rose from the earth, and came and sat at the top of every quill and shrieked from there, and the quills raced urgent and hassled over the notebooks and screeches emanated from them.

[...]

One of the creatures extended his head from his notebook and waved his arms to and fro like a man drowning in deep water. And if what the Hasid observed was true, both of the hands of this one, as well as those of all his companions, were left hands, yet they were as swift as seventy-seven hands. (Agnon 1962a, 108–109)

Every single feature of the demonic creatures indicates that they are deeply entrenched in the world of impurity: their long ears “hear what is below the earth and are sealed [...] from hearing words of truth” (Agnon 1962a, 109); the pages of their notebooks are made of untanned leather, and a stench emanates from them; strange noises rise from the earth and sit on top of their quills; screeches come out of their mouths; all their hands are left hands; and they are dubbed “*hitsonim*” (lit. externals, alien beings, demons).⁵ Once the Hasid realizes all of this, he understands that “he has come to a place that is not good” (Agnon 1962a, 109) and tries to run off, but all the walls of the house are sealed and there is no escape. Only after he promises the *hitsonim* that he would return to their house in thirty days does he manage to find the door and to flee from their grip.

The Hasid arrives at the Magid's court in time, but it is in the much-awaited refuge of the *tzaddik* that he suffers the gravest humiliation, no less painful than he had experienced in the hands of the *hitsonim*:

⁵ The term *hitsonim*, which denotes demons and forces of impurity, also alludes to the Maskilim. In Agnon's *Hakhtmasat Kala* (*The Bridal Canopy*), for example, the narrator tells of Reb Yudel, who went to the home of the Maskil Heshel and was “fearful that he might find himself in the company of the *hitsonim* who are called fools, who cling to a person to trip him up with words of jesting” (Agnon 1960b, 64–65). As for writing with left hands, according to the Halakhot of writing Torah scrolls, tefillin, and mezuzot, one “must write them with his right hand, and if he writes them with his left hand they are invalid” (Gantzfried 1961, sign 7, fol. 5b). Indeed, under certain circumstances, writing with the left hand does not invalidate the written text (Gantzfried 1961, sign 7, fol. 6a), but the depiction of the *hitsonim* as creatures with two left hands testifies to the impurity of their writing.

After the morning prayers, the Hasid went to be greeted by his rabbi, and his rabbi did not greet him. The Hasid stood behind the Magid's door. People went in and out, some of them *ba'alei batim* [householders] and some Hasidim, and some of them town folk. The Magid greeted all of them and spoke with them, and to him alone he did not give a greeting, nor did he look at him. (Agnon 1962a, 110)

The Magid's treatment of the Hasid gradually acquires the shape of full-blown abuse:

This is how it was that day, and on the morrow, and on the morrow after the morrow, and thus on the eve of Rosh Hashana, and thus on the first night of Rosh Hashana, when all are blessed by their rabbi, and thus on both days of Rosh Hashana. And even on the eve of Yom Kippur, when the Magid's hand is extended to everyone—he did not return that Hasid's greeting. (Agnon 1962a, 111)

The Hasid is anguished and tormented by the tzaddik's rejection of him. The time of his return to the house of the ḥitsonim is steadily approaching, and the only man who is capable of helping him “does not allow him to get near” (Agnon 1962a, 111). Desolate and dispirited, he wanders tearfully among the crowd of Hasidim, interpreting the rabbi's estrangement as a punishment for a sin of which he is unaware. At the very last moment, on the day before the Hasid must return to the demons' house, the Magid summons him and relates to him, with severe countenance, what his sin is and the reason for his punishment:

Do you know what that house is? It is not a good house. It is the dwelling place of impurity, and the ḥitsonim sit there and write down every single homily that the preachers preach to demonstrate their sharp wit and knowledge, to strut before the disciples and to exalt themselves among the people. Similarly, they write there the words of the preachers who castigate others and do not castigate themselves first. And what caused you to end up there? The sermons you are so eager about. And even on the first night of *seliḥot* [penitential prayers said before and on Yom Kippur], when a Jew must prepare his heart for repentance, you took pleasure in them. (Agnon 1962a, 111–112)

From this reproach, we can glean that the sin for which the Hasid was punished twice—first by being captured by the ḥitsonim and second by being rejected by the Magid—is the sin of enjoying the tales and proverbs

of the preachers, “for the enjoyment of something that is not entirely for the sake of Heaven deserves punishment” (Agnon 1962a, 114). This revelation, which opens the Hasid’s eyes, sheds new light on the beginning of the story. Now we discover that the light-hearted, elated, and harmonious description of the Hasid’s departure to his rabbi’s court is, in fact, an account of the protagonist’s fatal flaw, his hamartia, the shameful disposition for which he must be punished. We re-read:

When he left his town, the sky was full of stars and the earth rejoiced, and he, too, was happy, like a Hasid going to greet his rabbi from whom he learned the Torah and fear of Heaven. And as he was walking, he quavered his voice with moral remonstrances he had heard during the month of Elul from the preachers and remonstrators and sermonizers.

That Hasid is walking along and sweetening his way with a sad melody, like a preacher standing on the pulpit and addressing the congregation. Sometimes he is benevolent to the audience, calling them dear brothers, and sometimes he threatens them and calls them fools and simpletons. And he did not notice, that Hasid, that when he stretched out his right hand reproachfully, the sack with his prayer shawl and his tefillin that he had taken with him fell down. (Agnon 1962a, 108)

Not without a pinch of humor, the Hasid’s sin is attributed, among other things, to his pretension to be like one of the preachers. However, his innocent and laughable behavior proves to be disastrous: the enthusiastic waving of his arms, as if he were a preacher, is what causes his prayer shawl and tefillin to slip from his hands, and this symbolic loss leads to his losing his way, which in turn leads to his falling into the hands of the *hitsonim*. For all these failings, the Magid reproves him with harsh words and without a hint of compassion, but as is the case with preachers, who sometimes show kindness to their audience, the Magid of Zlotchov, too, concludes with a note of consolation, showing the Hasid the way out of his entanglement:

You promised those creatures that you would return to them [...] and you are obliged to return to them as you told them. But be not afraid of them, rather tell them, I am among the people of the Magid of Zlotchov, and they will surely mock you and me, but do not heed their mockery but rather tell them: if you find a single *dibur* [utterance, speech, saying] that left the mouth of the Magid that was not for the sake of Heaven, you are

free to do with me as you wish, but if not, leave me alone and I will go on my way.

And the Rabbi of Zlotchov said, I trust in the grace of the Blessed One, that they will not find in their notebooks a single dibur of mine that left my mouth not for in the sake of Heaven, for every sermon that I give and every dibur that I utter is only for the Lord alone. Go forth in peace, and may the Lord help us to serve Him with a whole heart, without exterior motives [kavanot *hitsoniyot*]. (Agnon 1962a, 112)

Of course, the Hasid obeys his rabbi's command and thereby obtains his freedom. Upon arriving at the demons' house, he proves to them that they have never heard the name of the Magid of Zlotchov, for his sermons have never been put into writing and there is no trace of them in the demons' notebooks. And so the demons set the Hasid free:

They [the *hitsonim*] brought their notebooks and checked and did not find in them neither the name of the Magid of Zlotchov nor any dibur of his. They checked again and did not find neither his name nor any dibur of his, and needless to say, nor any homily of his. They were bewildered and perplexed, for even those whose deeds are all for the sake of Heaven, sometimes a dibur slips from their mouth that is not wholly for the sake of the Blessed One, that is to say, they pilfer a little bit of it for themselves.

But we, Hasidim sons of Hasidim, [...] we are not surprised that they did not find in those notebooks any dibur of the Magid of Zlotchov, for we know that every single dibur that had left his mouth was only for the Lord alone. He, of whom no record remained in those notebooks.

The Hasid departed on his way, happy and glad-hearted. (Agnon 1962a, 114)

Upon reading this conclusion, it becomes clear that the moral of the story is to be found not only in its explicit messages. At the core of the story we find not only the overt condemnation of the preachers who "in their heart of hearts seek to exhibit their might in legends and fables" (Agnon 1962a, 114), and not only the prohibition on taking pleasure in the beauty of these fables (Shenhar 1986, 127–129, 133–135). No less significant is the role played by writing—as opposed to speaking—both in the Hasid's sin and in his punishment. The Magid, whose "every single dibur [...] was only for the Lord alone," presents writing first and foremost as a touchstone for identifying speech (dibur) that is not for the sake of Heaven: the very act of putting speech in writing testifies that it

is driven by “exterior motives,” and the written sermon, in itself, is an incriminating evidence against the boastful people who give sermons for their own sake. Writing, according to the Magid, preserves that which has no truth in it; it removes the sermon from the possession of the one who delivers it, and enables “external” forces to appropriate it and desecrate it. Consequently, writing proves to be part of the sin, and refraining from writing part of the rectification. In the end, the protagonist is redeemed by the impeccable figure of the Magid, none of whose sayings was put in writing and recorded in the *ḥitsonim*’s notebooks. Had the Hasid not been liberated from the *ḥitsonim* by virtue of his rabbi, he would have been imprisoned in their sealed house, would have learned their craft, and would have gradually assumed their demonic form; like them, he would have heard with his elongated ears sermons from the underworld, like them he would have written the sermons down in the putrid leather notebooks with two left hands, and, most likely, like them he would have cursed and reviled, saying “Blast those sermonizers. I have seen an end to every purpose, and there is no end to windy words [Job 16:3]” (Agnon 1962a, 109).

In the view of the Magid and of the narrator, who seeks to glorify his image,⁶ the egocentric urge to tell a story for no higher purpose, and the deriving of aesthetic enjoyment from the beauty of the descriptions and the attractiveness of the plot, are sinful, and writing only exacerbates the dangers of this sin.⁷ This is because by writing, one risks falling prey to the *ḥitsonim*, that is, one risks losing control of one’s stories—of their language, their contents, and their addressees. This is likely the reason for the confidence of the *ḥitsonim*—among them, presumably, readers of external books (*sfarim ḥitsoniyim*) and students of external wisdoms (*ḥokhmot ḥitsoniyot*)—that “anyone who enters their place never leaves them again” (Agnon 1962a, 113). The use that the *ḥitsonim* make of

⁶ On hagiography in the context of the story in question, see Shenhar (1986, 117). On Jewish hagiographic literature in general and on the Hasidic hagiographic story, see, e.g., Dan (1975), Gries (2000, 85–94).

⁷ Rabbi Yitṣhak of Skvyra is quoted as commenting on the seductiveness of reading stories that attract the heart and on the dangers inherent in them: “Whoever wishes to study such books, should only learn from the stories written by the disciples of the Besht, and by their disciples, for they did not stray even one single point from the line of truth [...] When you hear how I praise the books of the disciples of the Besht, do not assume to deal with them all day long [...] the main thing should be the study of the Talmud, and only for an hour or so study these stories” (Zikernik and Nig’al 1994, 37).

writing—whether to parody tzaddikim or to take aesthetic pleasure—is desecrating and corrupting, and this is precisely the sin from which Agnon’s protagonist is saved, as he sets out “on his way, happy and glad-hearted. Happy for being rid of the *hitsonim* and glad-hearted for being blessed in adhering to a holy and pure rabbi, whose every single *dibur* is only for the Lord alone” (Agnon 1962a, 114).

On the face of it, Agnon’s story appears to be faithful to the spirit and moral of the Hasidic tale. In several different ways, it warns and re-warns against the sins of satisfying one’s pride and deriving one’s pleasure by means of a story, and it demonstrates that those who succumb to these sins are liable to fall into the hands of evil powers. It is no wonder that the story has sometimes been interpreted as a critique of false and vain preachers, which lacks any hint of satire or anti-Hasidic pathos (Shenhar 1986, 128, 134–145). However, a closer look at the story reveals that in fact, and quite similarly to the *hitsonim*, Agnon appropriates the Hasidic story for himself and, in an act of aesthetization, charges it with an ironic, subversive meaning.⁸ By putting the story in writing and by adapting it as an autonomous work of art, Agnon violates the commandments of the Hasidic tale and does precisely what it condemns and forbids. Whereas according to the Hasidic story, the aspiration to write is an expression of deplorable pride, and the touchstone of things that are said for the sake of Heaven is that they “refuse to be written,” Agnon sets out to put the story in writing and to force on it his own personality, language, style, and ironic outlook. Despite the double prohibition on deriving aesthetic pleasure from the story—both as a writer and as a reader—Agnon polishes the Hasidic story with an artist’s hand and addresses it to the modern reader, who will read it mainly, if not only, for the sake of intellectual and aesthetic pleasure. Hence, by the very act of rewriting the Hasidic tale, Agnon changes it from top to bottom. Contrary to his sources, which require one to eschew egocentric preoccupation with the “self,” Agnon focuses the heart of the story on his own writing, as a signifier of the transformation in the status of writing with the advent of modernity. Thereby

⁸ No less charged and subversive is Agnon’s treatment of the language of the Hasidic story, which he dubs “Talmud leshon Ivri” after the grammar book by this name authored by Ben-Ze’ev (Agnon 2000, 138–140). On Agnon’s emendations and their linguistic and ideological significance, see Dalmatzky-Fischler and Parush (2020, 299–333). For another example of Agnon’s subversive adaptation of Hasidic stories, see Mark (2009, 62–79).

the story tacitly examines Agnon's own place in the rich tradition of narrators and writers from whom he drew inspiration, and marks the distance between him and the preachers with their legends and fables, as well as between his writing as an artist-writer and the writing of the scribe, who commits the tzaddik's dibur to paper.

THE STATUS OF WRITING IN AGNON'S WORK: TORN BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY

The double commitment to Jewish tradition on the one hand and to modern literary writing on the other hand, and the quandary of the writer who is torn between these two obligations, is evident throughout Agnon's corpus. It finds clear expression in the composition and hierarchy of Agnon's genre repertoire, and in his constant to and fro between different writing personas, along the continuum stretching between the writer as a scribe and the writer as a creator-artist. The ironic tension between these personas is expressed in the ways that Agnon chose to present his craft: from copying, correcting, and editing, through documenting and rewriting, and ending with artistic writing. Agnon's division of his creative energies between anthologies and original literary works, and the incursion of one into the other, sometimes appear to reflect an almost desperate effort to alleviate feelings of guilt, or at least to give both personas their due. Traces of these efforts are conspicuous in the introductions to his anthologies and pseudo-documentary works, where an apologetic tone for the very act of writing is accompanied by attempts to justify this writing in the terms and values of traditional Jewish discourse.⁹ Thus, for example, the introduction to the anthology *Atem Re'item (Present at Sinai)* opens with the words: "Not with haughty eyes nor with a proud spirit did I approach the work of making a book about Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah" (Agnon 2003, 19). Contradictory positions of humility and pride, which threaten to cancel one another out, characterize Agnon's attitude toward the craft of writing, copying, and compiling the works of preceding generations. One cannot avoid discerning how the heavy responsibility placed on Agnon's shoulders, as a writer who is destined, or perhaps doomed, to serve as a witness and to save from

⁹ Dan Laor views these apologies as evidence of Agnon's dilemmas, considerations, and decisions with regard to the composition of the canonical body of his work (Laor 1995, 24–25).

oblivion an entire historical, cultural, and literary tradition, is interwoven with a no less forceful sense of greatness and an urge to press his own personal mark on that entire tradition.¹⁰

This is not the place for an extensive discussion of Agnon's handling of the tension between the restrictions imposed by the traditional view of writing and his own writing as a modern artist. Suffice it to say that Agnon often chooses to accentuate his personal marks on the texts he compiles, while at the same time illuminating the highly problematic aspects of his position as a compiler and editor. He uses the traditional discourse, with its code of oral dominance, as a medium for reflecting on the act of writing as an act that is far from self-evident. In a tone that is often apologetic, he seeks to justify and defend his writing, whether from possible criticism from the outside or from his own internal apprehensions due to the dangers of distorting the intention of the text, subverting Halakhic authority, writing not for the sake of Heaven, and, above all, committing the sin of pride. In his anthologies that assemble texts from traditional Jewish sources, as well as in literary works based on documentary or semi-documentary materials, Agnon presents his intervention in the texts written by others as inherently suspect of pride and as necessitating apology. It is no coincidence that the title "Apology" heads the brief conclusion at the end of the volume *Ha'Esh VeHa'Etsim* (*The Fire and the Wood*). In this apology, Agnon writes: "Here I will say something against myself. It is a difficult trial for a narrator who is capable of recounting what his eyes have seen to take on the task of telling tales and fables of Hasidim and the like. But I trust the few who will see the difference between my stories and those that any hand could write" (Agnon 1962b, 336).¹¹ Writing is therefore shaped by two contradictory forces, that of humility and that of pride. In the Introduction to the anthology

¹⁰ Quite possibly, Agnon's genre system responded to his ethical and psychological need to use writing for a variety of purposes, that is, to balance between the urge to write literary fiction and the commitment to writing for traditional purposes. Dov Sadan regarded this as a failed effort and wrote that "the poet, who has built such a wonderful mansion for us so that we can escape our embarrassment, has not managed to escape the embarrassment himself (ostensibly he has rescued himself from it completely in his anthologies, but in fact he has not rescued himself, but rather effaced himself, in the sense that he abandoned himself but preserved his Torah)" (Sadan 1967, 47).

¹¹ See also Agnon (1976, 74–75). It is interesting to note the similarities and differences between Agnon's apologies and the "Author's Introduction and Apology" that Dov Sadan placed at the beginning of his autobiography, *MiMeḥoz HaYaldut* (Sadan 1938, 5–6).

Yamim Nora'im (*Days of Awe*), humility receives special emphasis, when Agnon highlights his caution with regard to the inclusion of Halakhic materials in the book, and when he declares that in his editing work, he insisted on “excellent preservation” of the original intention of the texts. With a hint of feigned innocence, he notes that his correction of the language of the latter Sages (i.e., rabbinic Hebrew) is merely an aesthetic emendation meant to exalt their writing, as if a different choice of words or linguistic stratum does not entail a different intention:

What was written in Aramaic I translated into Hebrew, and what was too long I shortened, bringing only what was necessary for our purposes. And to make this book clear and accessible to everyone, so that every reader could run swiftly through it, I sometimes saw fit to change the language of the latter Sages slightly, for these holy authors—because their generation was righteous and everyone would race to hear words of Torah—did not have time to beautify their language. And even though I did not preserve their language, I insisted on excellent preservation of their intention. And the Halakhot that I brought in my book, like those of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, are not intended to teach Halakhic practice, but rather to adorn the book with Halakhot. (Agnon 1998, 5)¹²

In the foreword to a new edition of *Yamim Nora'im*, Agnon evinces even more emphatic humility when he states: “and I added nothing of my own except as a craftsman to whom silk is given to make a garment, and he adds his own threads” (Agnon 1998, 8). However, this comment may be less ingenuous than it seems at first glance, and it calls for further interpretation. On the one hand, the intervention in the text is presented as a slight aesthetic correction—a mere addition of some threads to the silk cloth of the original text; on the other hand, the use of the new threads for sewing the garment can be interpreted as an act that marks

¹² In a similar spirit, Agnon writes in the Introduction to the anthology *Atem Re'item*: “Things that were needed for the matter, I copied, those that were not, I omitted. Things that were said in Aramaic, I copied into the Holy Tongue, for most people do not know Aramaic. And just as I did with *Hazal* [the Sages of the Mishnah and Talmud eras], I did with our rabbis that followed them. However, *as to our latter Sages, I pursued the matter and not the language*” (Agnon 2003, 19). Agnon does not mention the possibility that the omission of ornamentation in the works of the latter Sages (i.e., in the rabbinic language) was ideological, and hence the “aesthetic” correction was ipso facto also a change of intention. On the ideological significance of the grammatical carelessness in the rabbinic language, see Chapter 7 above.

the garment with the craftsman's unique, personal stamp, thus turning Agnon's work into "a new book full of the old, garnered from the Written and the Oral Torah" (Agnon 1998, 8).¹³ This latter interpretation is also suggested by the central metaphor in the Introduction to the collection of stories *Korot Bateinu* (*The Beams of Our House*). In this Introduction, Agnon likens his method of copying the works of his ancestors to the work of "a son who has inherited from his forefathers broken vessels, and he repairs them" (Agnon 1998, 24).

Yet when Agnon sets out to tell of the *hidushim* that the MaHaRSHA (Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer HaLevi Eidels; Kazimierz, Poland, 1555–1631) shared with his grandfather, Rabbi Shmuel, he hints at difficulties that he obfuscates elsewhere. On this occasion, he returns to the topic of the relationship between language and content, and takes note of the dangers of writing and of the inevitable distortion that is entailed by changing the wording and by placing spoken discourse in writing: "And many more wonderful and vast things the Gaon told his grandfather, but I do not remember the language, and because I do not remember the language I shall not present the matter, for every true *hidush* [new insight] has to do with language, and if one changes the language, one changes the matter" (Agnon 1998, 42).¹⁴ The requirement implied by this statement is for complete fidelity to the language and wording of the speaker, at least when it comes to the writing of *Halakhot* and *hidushim* that were delivered orally. Indeed, it is possible to read this statement as an ironic excuse for the decision to exclude the words of the MaHaRSHA from the story. Nevertheless, one cannot fail to notice the import attributed to the language that the writer uses as he commits spoken discourse to paper. The assertion that "every true *hidush* has to do with language" necessarily assigns full responsibility for the written text to the writer-transcriber. The pretention to present new insights, to create new worlds, and to place one's "self" at the center is entirely the fault (or the merit) of the writer, his fault according to traditional values, and his merit according

¹³ This interpretation is also consistent with Agnon's comment, quoted above, on his adaptation of the stories of the Besht: "I trust the few who will see the difference between my stories and those that any hand could write" (Agnon 1962b, 336).

¹⁴ It should be noted, in this context, that Rabbi Shmuel met the MaHarSHA when the latter had been making his way from Italy to Poland, possibly in search of a chest of hidden manuscripts by Rabbi Yosef, and possibly in order to establish a printing house there.

to modern notions of the writer as an artist—hence Agnon’s apologies for amending the manuscripts of his forefathers and for bringing them to print. As he writes in the “Rosh Milin” (“Preface”) to *Korot Bateinnu*:

During all these years, the manuscripts have been kept with me as I had copied them, and it did not occur to me to publish them or even to show them. Now, after all that the enemies have done to us [...] says I, I will pay homage to my ancestors with these writings that they wrote for themselves. [...] And if one would say, this was done only to take pride, this pride is nothing but humiliation. Such forefathers had we, and what of us? What are we, and what are our lives? (Agnon 1962c, 24)

A brief review of the scholarship on Agnon’s writing is sufficient to glean that his struggle with the tension between tradition and modernity is broadly perceived as the central theme in his literary oeuvre, which runs throughout it and, in many respects, holds its different parts together. Some scholars examine the thematic manifestations of this struggle, while others focus on linguistic, structural, or poetic manifestations; yet with all proper caution, one may say that despite differences in approach, terminology, and ideology, the leading tendency is to attribute to Agnon not only an effort to integrate tradition with modernity, but also an exceptional and unique success in this effort.¹⁵ Nonetheless, when one reviews the tension between tradition and modernity in Agnon’s work from the

¹⁵ For selected examples of such assessments, see Arbel (2006), Hagbi (2007), Hirschfeld (2011), Laor (1995), Miron (1995), Sadan (1950, 1967), G. Shaked (1973), M. Shaked (2000). By contrast, Baruch Kurzweil’s penetrating and paradoxical comments on Agnon testify to his doubts regarding Agnon’s success in uniting the poles, even partially and in a limited way. On the one hand, Kurzweil writes unequivocally: “It is impossible to interpret Agnon as a religious writer in the sense of any orthodoxy. *Agnon is a secular writer, and his efforts in recent years to deny the artistic truth, which is imminent, are a matter for psychologists; they are irrelevant to literary research*” (Kurzweil 1970, 380–381). On the other hand, he writes: “the return to the land of the fathers [the land of Israel] is also a late return, a tragic return. The incompatibility between the present and the past can be overcome by regression, which is in fact a paradoxical flight to the world of religious certainty of the forefathers. The return becomes a kind of faith within the absurd, despite acknowledgment of the incompatibility between the present and the past. This is the situation in most of Agnon’s stories. *To the realization of this painful incompatibility [...] Agnon responds with faith that in the future the incompatibility would be eliminated, and hence in any event, past, present, and future will be as one*” (Kurzweil 1959, 144).

perspective of writing—its cultural significance, status, and functions—one cannot but notice, behind the veils of irony, the rifts and the fissures that remain unattended.

The deep cultural structure that helps us understand Agnon's doubts about writing is also the key to deciphering the "sins of writing" committed by his predecessors, the writers of the Haskalah and the national revival. The inhibitions and restrictions laid in the path of writing, as well as the recurrent excuses and justifications for it, which persisted well into the twentieth century, were all part of the discourse of oral dominance. They were among the many manifestations of a deep cultural code in Jewish culture that distinguished between writing and speech, between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, and that privileged the latter over the former. While the manifestations, metamorphoses, and outcomes of this code were different from one epoch and diaspora to another, and while it sometimes lay dormant and ineffectual, its continued presence was paramount. In manifold ways and to various extents, it determined social and textual sources of authority, shaped religious, social, and cultural practices, including literacy practices, affected social institutions and hierarchies, and infused society with meanings, norms and values.

At the same time, at the conclusion of this monograph, it is important to note, once again, that this book does not mean to propose a sweeping ahistorical or trans-historical thesis regarding the attitude toward speech versus writing in Jewish society throughout the generations and across geographic locations. It does not argue, by any means, for the existence of a principled, uniform, and unchanged attitude toward writing and literature in Sephardi and Ashkenazi communities during various periods and in different areas of Europe. On the contrary, this exploration has focused on a particular society in a particular historical context, with its peculiar social and cultural circumstances. In other words, the discussion has focused on the cultural principle of oral dominance in the special circumstances of Eastern European Jewish society in the second half of the nineteenth century, and has examined the attenuation of this principle with the gradual rise in the status of the written word. It has shown that this society reached the verge of the twentieth century as a society maintaining an oral literacy culture and privileging speech over writing. It has also shown that it was within, and against, this oral culture that the foundational corpus of modern Hebrew literature emerged and took shape. The rise of the Jewish Enlightenment and the consolidation of a modern

body of literature—essays, research, and, most important, belles lettres—were marked by a revolutionary change in the significance, meanings, and uses of writing, a change that was far more dramatic than the transformations in the field of reading. Hence, it was a writing revolution, and not a reading revolution, that shook and transformed the literacy culture in nineteenth-century Eastern European Jewish society and that gave rise to modern Hebrew literature.