

YEHUDA AMICHAÏ, the celebrated Israeli poet and novelist, is now visiting the U. S. His novel *Not of This Time, Not of This Place*, will be published in English translation in the near future.

## Notes on Agnon

By YEHUDA AMICHAÏ

1.

I was in Greenwich Village when I first heard that Agnon had been awarded the Nobel Prize. A group of us were comfortably sprawled in our chairs like film directors. Several priests of the L.S.D. cult had been invited over to discuss the drug and the problems of the world in general. Our surroundings were pleasantly and appropriately artistic. The discussion was in full swing when someone came up to congratulate me on Agnon's receipt of the prize. I hadn't known about it. The conversation in the room kept returning to the subject of freedom. Tremendous freedom was possible with the help of L.S.D. I thought of Yitzhak Kummer, the hero of one of Agnon's novels, who could never have become the hero of a book had he been able to free himself of his sense of guilt and ties to the past.

2.

The division of the prize between S. Y. Agnon and Nellie Sachs caused considerable surprise and disappointment and lent itself to various interpretations. Confusing, too, was the way the adjectives "Jewish," "Hebrew," and "Israeli" were applied to the two prize-winners. The appearance of these terms in the *New York Times*, for instance, was in the best tradition of that assimilationist Jewish intellectualism whose confidence is shaken by the very notion

of a single Jewish people. I myself consider the division of the prize to be a positive achievement. True, the specifically Hebrew and Israeli elements in Agnon's fiction were somewhat de-emphasized by the broadly Jewish and German character of the work of Nellie Sachs, but this was more than compensated for by the important recognition that an entity such as the Jewish people really does exist.

3.

The reaction to the news in Israel was typical of the country. At the present moment I happen to be in New York, but somehow I picture the way Israelis celebrated the event as similar to the spontaneous rejoicing that broke out when the U.N. partition decision was announced in November 1947. Such spontaneous outbursts are characteristic of many small nations and are the product of much genuine and intense human warmth, though they are apt to induce an ironic smile in the beholder. According to some Israelis the true winner of the award was the Jewish people itself. Religious Jews, on the other hand, claimed that it was the Jewish religion that was being honored, while cultural Zionists considered the prize a vindication of their position. And all this in spite of the fact that during the many years in which Agnon had failed to win the

prize it was commonly held in Israel that the award was really semi-political in nature anyway! (Next year, incidentally, I confidently expect that the prize will go to an Arab.) Typically Israeli, too, was the way journalists and public figures began to celebrate the event several days before the official announcement in Sweden. (According to one theory, it was because of Stockholm's displeasure over this undue haste that Agnon was made to share the prize with Nellie Sachs.) In any case, the rejoicing was like a Jewish wedding, with much feasting, noise, confusion, and tears of joy. As a crowning touch, a minor scandal was created when the religious parties violently attacked the government radio station for broadcasting an interview with Agnon, a religious author, on the Sabbath—a broadcast to which he himself had not objected. In short, the entire prize-giving resembled nothing so much as a good-natured satire on Israeli society the like of which no one but Agnon himself could have written. Amid the commotion the main point was all but forgotten, namely, that a talented author was finally being honored by the world for his ability to portray the realities within him and around him in his books.

4.

Such confirmation of Agnon's stature, however, was not really needed. Agnon is the greatest living Hebrew writer and in recent years he has been accorded his full share of honor and recognition by the Israeli public. His stories are studied and read even in elementary schools, to say nothing of high schools and universities, and his works can be found in the majority of Israeli homes. True, they are not always read there, but their very presence on the shelves bears witness to the naive but universal recognition that, along with Bialik,

Agnon is one of the two most important classics of modern Hebrew literature. Indeed, by now Agnon has become an institution in himself. His remarks and witticisms are quoted in the newspapers. The true measure of his greatness, however, lies in the fact that his stories are liked *even though* they are compulsory reading in the school system. Despite his difficult and archaic language, his books speak directly to the most modern spirits. It would be difficult indeed to think of another country where a writer in so archaic a style could attain such popularity. It seems inevitable that much of Agnon's special flavor will be lost in the various translations of his books that are now sure to appear all over the world.

5.

I have spoken about Agnon's unique role in Israeli cultural life, and I will now say a few words about the place where he lives. Agnon's home is his castle, to paraphrase the English expression. It stands behind a row of dark cypresses at one end of Talpiyot, a quarter in southeastern Jerusalem that has been largely untouched by the hand of progress. In appearance, with its grated windows, the house really resembles a fort. The ground in Talpiot has been steadily sinking for years, and cracks have begun to appear in the walls and floors of many of the houses. It is a strangely symbolic setting for our author's home. The border with Jordan is not far away. Beyond a ravine, in no-man's land, stands the United Nations Command Post. Across the quiet street is the *Pension Kronberg*, a building of curious angles and jutting corners named after the architect, now deceased, who designed it. No one window resembles another and the white stucco walls remind one of the Arab houses of North Africa. For the most part, however, their whiteness is under-

stated by the dark windows and brightly-painted doors, and partly concealed by the many trees, shrubs and flowers that surround the house. In summer the *pension* serves as a gathering place for intellectual German Jews, a class widely represented in Agnon's stories. Further up the street, literally right on the border, is the luxurious *Hotel Ganei Yehudah* with its gardens, swimming pool, trim lawns, sports cars, tourists and beautiful women. Agnon has nothing against the latter, but on several occasions he has requested the municipality to bar the street to traffic. It is probable that this petition for silence will now finally be granted.

## 6.

Before visiting Agnon, one must first call on the telephone (this, of course, would be taken for granted in America). It is answered by his wife, a true helpmate to her husband, who conducts the conversation efficiently and kindly. Agnon has many would-be callers, as is only natural for a famous figure whom the public is curious to view within the four walls of his home. He has many commentators, too, who interpret his writings as though they were Holy Writ, finding endless significances in each word and even in each letter. Agnon undoubtedly enjoys all this, and yet now and then his small, bright eyes will flicker with a trace of scorn for these exegetical undertakings. The disputes among his critics at times resemble the passionate pilpulistic debates of *yeshivah* students. Having mentioned Agnon's small, ironic eyes, I should also remark on his handwriting, in which there is irony too, for it looks like a stenographer's shorthand and can only be decoded by his wife and a few intimate disciples. A handwriting expert would certainly have a field day with it.

## 7.

Everywhere and at all times Agnon lives and creates in two different worlds. He lives in the new city of Jerusalem and in the old. He lives in Galicia, where he was born, and in Germany, where he made his first acquaintance with Western culture. In relation to the Holy Land, however, he treats both of these places as a single antipode. Even after the State of Israel was created, Agnon remained loyal to the Palestine of the 1910's and 20's and 30's. He lives in a religious world and in a secular world at the same time. The leaders of Israel's religious parties have tried more than once to employ him in their service, but this tells us more about the limited mentality of politicians than it does about Agnon and his work. An ironic individual in the highest sense is above being yoked to the petty interests of party politics. And Agnon without his irony would not be Agnon.

## 8.

Agnon is fond of answering questions by telling a story in reply. This is an old Jewish habit and it is the essential method of his art. He uses the story within a story as a playful sidestep, both a decoy and a riddle at once. Sometimes it is impossible for the reader (and perhaps for the author as well) to distinguish the parable from its application. In his more recent work, however, Agnon has revealed a tendency toward greater clarity and directness. His treatment of erotic situations typifies the attitude of the *yeshivah* student, and therein lies its unique charm, but lately he has made an attempt to deal more boldly with male-female relationships. It is to be hoped that his novel *Shirah*, several chapters of which have already been serialized, will soon be published in its entirety. There is a rumor that Agnon has

written several works which are being kept in a safe-deposit box because they might prove embarrassing to a number of living people. One is reminded by such gossip of a class of adult readers who are careful to hide a certain type of literature in secret drawers.

## 9.

During the recent municipal election campaigns in Israel, Agnon abandoned his tradition of political neutrality to publish an appeal on behalf of the incumbent mayor of Jerusalem, Mr. Ish-Shalom, in which he went to the length of calling the latter God's choice for mayor of the Holy City (Ish-Shalom himself is not an observant Jew.) When asked why he did this, Agnon replied that Ish-Shalom was a quiet, unambitious man, and that Jerusalem would be better governed by an unassuming person like him, who would introduce no sweeping changes, than by his opponent, Teddy Kollek, the present mayor, a man with a reputation as an aggressive innovator who "knows how to get things done."

## 10.

Having touched on Agnon's attitude toward politics and politicians, I shall briefly refer to one of the satirical tales in his collection *Sefer ha-Medinah* ("The Book of the State"). The story concerns a fictional country on the verge of bankruptcy. In vain its rulers search for a new means of raising revenue. Finally they hit upon the one thing that has yet to be taxed: walking canes. No sooner is the tax enacted, however, than the people begin to evade it by using umbrellas instead. A supplementary law is now enacted making umbrellas subject to the same tax as walking sticks. But the people evade this too, and with the exception of the crippled and very old they begin walk-

ing without anything in their hands. A third law is now passed requiring every citizen to carry a cane whether he needs one or not. The story continues in the same roguish but satirical vein. For today's citizen, this satire, written twenty years ago, reads like a prophecy.

## 11.

Agnon is the bridge over which Jewish literature and experience pass from Europe to Israel. Unlike Bialik, who stopped writing poetry when he came to Palestine, Agnon was able to make the transition as an artist without difficulty.

Agnon is an organic author. His writing is always with him, even when he doesn't write. His books are like lighted houses seen by night: the windows are open and full of intimate life, yet they remain somehow alien, mysterious and melancholy. Agnon doesn't have to go looking for subjects. Some authors, for example, will decide to write a novel about Yemenites and will spend months living among Yemenites in order to gather material. Others choose to write on a particular historical era; one finds them in the libraries, reading up on the period. Not so Agnon. The world he lives in has been organically assimilated by him. His books give the Israeli reader a sense of limitless space that little Israel itself does not have.

When Agnon writes about the past he does so not out of nostalgia, but because being an organic author he cannot help it. His heroes are those who live in the present with their faces turned to look back. It is this that makes them modern heroes.

Let us wish that Agnon lives to a ripe old age, so that he will some day be able to write about our own times too, right down to the year in which he was presented with the Nobel Prize.