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The Invisible World of S. Y. Agnon

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by Edmund Wilson

I CANNOT WRITE ABOUT THE WORK OF AGNON WITH ANY REAL AUTHORITY because I have not read him in Hebrew and know only those of his writings which have been translated into English. I can only give my impressions for what they are worth and hope that I do not misrepresent him.

The subject of Agnon's fiction, then, in such of his works as I have read, is evidently the spiritual life of the Orthodox, and usually Hasidic, Jew in an alien, often hostile, environment. The pious student of the Torah, the Talmud, the Kabbalah, the Shulhan Arukh, and the other sacred or traditional writings exists in a world which is entirely invisible to the Christians or **Arabs** among whom he lives. It is a world that is transcendent and timeless, that is subject to binding obligations and which may always be illumined by a divine light. It has its heroisms which are won by a humility that must be strictly maintained under the eye of God; and its rewards which may be quite unexpected as they may be quite inexplicable except through God's intervention. The milieux in which Agnon's characters have to play out their earthly roles—small Jewish towns in Galicia or the Jewish community in Palestine either in the pre-war Zionist days or in the present State of Israel—are likely up to a point to be presented in historically accurate, in homely or middle-class detail; but the action does not develop as the ordinary reader expects. Very strange things begin to happen, and these happenings refer themselves to causes, or to a Cause, of a different kind of reality from the adventures of a resourceless Hasid trying to raise a dowry for his daughters or the career of a Viennese scholar teaching German and Latin in Palestine. There are supernatural elements at work, but not the ghosts and good fairies and demons that one finds in conventional fiction. They are the blockings and compulsive pressures, the ecstasies and inspirations that are evidence of the granting or withholding of the favor of Divine Grace.

Agnon has been compared to Kafka, and he is said to find this annoying. But there can hardly be any question of the latter's having influenced the former. The point is that Kafka, though born earlier than Agnon, actually represents a further stage than Agnon's of the disintegration of a culture. Like Agnon, Kafka had behind him a family tradition of Hebrew learning, but he himself set out to learn Hebrew only not long before his death; born in Prague, he was at one remove from the villages like Agnon's Buczacz in which Kafka's father had once pushed a handcart; and Kafka's differences from, as well as his similarities with, Agnon provide a valuable key to Kafka. The Reb Yudel of Agnon in *The Bridal Canopy* is in a constant state of anxiety as to how he may stand with God: no matter how assiduously he studies the Talmud, how scrupulously he keeps to the Mosaic observances, he cannot know God's intentions; but he never doubts for a moment that there *is* a supreme power who is responsible for human destinies. The invisible supreme authorities who lurk above the action of *The Trial* or *The Castle* inspire the same kind of anxiety, and one cannot know *their* intentions; but one is never to have faith in their goodness or to

see any proof of their wisdom. And Kafka cannot finish his fables, he cannot determine their upshot, whereas Agnon can save the situation, in the case of a man or a woman who is deserving in the eyes of God, by contriving the occurrence of a miracle. In this way, Reb Yudel is rescued by discovering hidden treasure; the young Austrian scholar of “Betrothed” is got over the baffling obstacles to the union to which he is pledged by a semi-miraculous device which I must not explain here in order not to spoil the suspense which the author has cunningly created. (This story, with “Edo and Enam,” has just been published in a volume by Schocken Books,¹ and they provide, for anyone who wants to read Agnon, an excellent introduction to his work.) But though Agnon has loved this culture and still lives in it—it is said that he has no serious interest in politics and nowadays reads little but the Talmud—he is, it seems to me, even in Israel, forced to recognize the beginnings of that disintegration which Kafka, perhaps hardly aware of it, in a large city of mixed population, has recorded in his bewildered and desperate visions. I have seen a recent series by Agnon in which he seems to be dealing with the difficulties of continuing with the traditional Judaism in an extremely active modern society which, though all Jewish, is not a locked-in enclave but an independent state which must deal as an equal with other states. I do not have these stories by me: I read them in manuscript, and only one or two, I think, have been published, but I remember the maddening frustration and the increasing disquiet they convey. One tells of the impossibility in which the teller of the story finds himself, due to a series of seeming accidents, to get to the synagogue in order to observe Yom Kippur.² These stories do become Kafkaesque, because the characters lack the assurance that they still have relations with God and that His worship can give their lives a structure. I noted, ten years ago, on a visit to Israel, a certain impatience with Agnon on the part of the younger generation: he was always looking back, they said, keeping alive an archaic language, when they themselves had to think about the problems of enabling their new nation to live.

The stories of Agnon are full of what I take to be metaphors for the submerged, even secret, character of the culture of which he writes. The hero of “Betrothed” is a botanist who specializes in undersea plant-life. One can hardly see these plants from the surface, but when one gets them out of the water, one finds a whole unknown realm of astonishing beauty and variety; in the story called “Edo and Enam,” a language invented by a father and daughter for the purpose of

communicating between themselves without any possibility of being overheard and understood becomes the medium for hymns of a ravishing sweetness; in “Forevermore,”³ an ancient manuscript preserved in a leper hospital and now rendered almost illegible by the suppurations of the lepers' sores turns out to be a firsthand account of the destruction by the Goths of a once proud great city and becomes, for a dedicated scholar who has already spent years on a book about this city—a book which he must now discard—the subject of passionate study for all the rest of his life. To the reader without Agnon's background, a good deal of his poetic symbolism must still remain hidden and esoteric. It helps perhaps to be able to recognize references to the elements and sections of the Talmud and to know who the Hasidim are—an Orthodox Jewish sect which had something in common with the evangelistic Protestant ones and, originating in Poland in the 18th century, eventually came to comprise nearly half of Orthodox Jewry. But what makes Agnon so remarkable and an appropriate recipient of the Nobel Prize is that he is able to embody in his talmudic world so much of our common humanity, and even of our common morality, so much of ironic humor and ironic but touching pathos, that he can be read, I should think, with appreciation by anyone who knows nothing at all of it.

Those who have read Agnon in Hebrew say that his literary style cannot be appreciated by anyone who is not able so to read him. But just as anyone who has read Turgenev in Constance Garnett's clear and workmanlike prose—much the same for all her Russian authors—can see that Turgenev must have written well, even though Turgenev's rich and rather *recherché* Russian is quite different from Constance Garnett's English, so anyone with a literary sense can see that Agnon must write beautifully. These recent translations by Walter Lever, themselves so precise and limpid, can only reflect fine writing.

It seems strange that just now, toward what one would think is likely to be the end of the closed-in talmudic world, two writers should have emerged from submergence to command the attention of an audience—which includes Jewish readers, as well as non-Jewish—that does not share the beliefs of that world and which has not been conditioned by it. The other of these writers, Isaac Bashevis Singer, began by writing Hebrew as Agnon began by writing Yiddish but followed the inverse course of going on to the more popular language, and seems now not even to be sure that this more popular language will long survive. Yet he is now in translation very widely read. Though steeped in the rabbinical tradition, he requires

less effort of adjustment on the part of the non-Jewish reader than the relentlessly rabbinical Agnon. I recommend him, by the way, to the Swedes if they want to give any more prizes to the highest representatives of a culture which stems straight from the sacred books upon which we have all been brought up.

¹ *Two Tales*, Translated by Walter Lever, 236 pp., \$4.95.

² "The Orchestra," translated by Jules Harlow, COMMENTARY, October 1960.

³ Translated by Joel Blocker, COMMENTARY, August 1961.