

more. Finally the beggar cursed out the man in the bathhouse who gave him such bad advice. It was then that Rav Henzil revealed his identity and said: "I did it to teach you not to be a glutton." The tale ends with the moral: "Those at the table laughed and the guest's face was covered with shame. He changed his ways and henceforth *had faith in God*. He was satisfied with little and was always happy."

In our analysis we have obviously not exhausted all the hasidic, folkloristic and religious motifs in the ballads of Shimshon Meltzer. We have, however, pointed to the specificity of this genre of Hebrew poetry, which is nourished by a hasidic-folkloristic soil and which has been cultivated with great love and understanding by the poet.

DAVID ABERBACH

Agnon and the Need for Tradition

MOST OF THE GREAT MODERN EUROPEAN WRITERS retain at least the vestiges of a religious background, though relatively little in their works shows traditional religion to be viable. Modern Hebrew literature, in common with this literature, is largely a secular domain, part of the upheaval of beliefs and values in twentieth century culture. There is one great exception — Samuel Joseph Agnon (1888-1970), who alone among recent Hebrew writers maintained the persona of an Orthodox Jew in his writings and continued to use Hebrew as a 'holy tongue.' Nevertheless, Hebrew critics, themselves mostly secular in outlook, have persistently claimed that Agnon, too, writes from outside the tradition.¹

The question of Agnon's relation to his tradition is at the heart of a major critical debate on Agnon. On the one hand, in his heyday in the 1930's and 1940's, he was among the *avant-garde*, and personally he always gave the impression of being intellectually free and unorthodox. On the other hand, he was a practising Jew. In many of his stories he presents himself as an arch-conservative, quaintly naive and idealistic, a wise spokesman for Jewish tradition, looking askance at the modern world.² But in other stories his creativity, with its demands for

1. Recent studies of Agnon which discuss his relation to the Jewish tradition include: A.J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: a Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon*, University of California Press: Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1968; B. Hochman, *The Fiction of S.Y. Agnon*, Cornell University Press: Ithaca & London, 1970; B. Kurzweil, *Masot al S.Y. Agnon* (Essays on Agnon), Schocken: Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1970; D. Sadan, *Al S.Y. Agnon* (Essays on Agnon), Hakibbutz Hameuchad: Tel Aviv, 1973; D. Aberbach, *At the Handles of the Lock: Themes in the Fiction of S.J. Agnon*, The Littman Library and Oxford University Press, 1984.
2. Band suggests that "Perhaps Agnon's greatest achievement lies in his maintaining the illusion that the narrator is a guileless believer simply spinning

honest self-expression and individuality, was at odds with tradition as he perceived it, with its required conformity, beliefs, and fulfillment of duty. Agnon was, at times, 'of the Devil's party,' as William Blake said of Milton — and he knew it.

As an Orthodox Jew, Agnon downplayed his gift. He even suggested that he was not an original writer but a scribe, a 'sofer,' writing under divine inspiration. Ludicrously, he claimed that his main works were not his novels or short stories, but his anthologies on the High Holy Days and the giving of the Torah at Sinai.³ Similarly, he refused to acknowledge fully the influence of other European writers, even Flaubert whom as a young man he had virtually idolized for his striving after artistic perfection.⁴ He professed almost a traditional yeshiva student's reluctance to admit that he read secular literature. (When asked about a collection of Kafka's works in his bookcases, he replied that it belonged to his wife.) He insisted that the primary influences on his writings were the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, Rashi's commentary on the Torah, the later commentators on the Talmud, the great medieval Hebrew poets and rabbis, especially Maimonides.⁵ One would think that he had trained to be a rabbi, and had only accidentally been sidetracked into literature.

FAMILIAL ROOTS

Agnon's attitude towards his tradition and his art makes little sense detached from his social and religious background. Agnon was the pseudonym of Samuel Joseph Czaczkes, born into a family of furriers in the Galician town of Buczacz. His father and maternal grandfather had high hopes, later disappointed, that he would follow in the footsteps of distinguished rabbinical ancestors. Agnon's grandfather, a hard, puritanical figure, appears in various dream-like stories as the embodiment

a pious tale while he is really an accomplished artist, well in control of his subject matter." *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

3. See, for example, D. Canaani, *S.Y. Agnon Be'al Peh* (Conversations with Agnon), Hakibbutz Hameuchad: Tel Aviv, 1974, pp. 34, 96-7.
4. See Agnon's letters to S.Z. Schocken, *Ha-Aretz* 26.7.1963, p. 10, particularly the one dated 27.12.1916.
5. See S.Y. Agnon, *Me-Atzmi el Atzmi* (From Myself to Myself), Schocken: Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1976, p. 26.

of religious ideals, stirring up the narrator's guilt at being a traitor to his roots. In one such story, "Ha-Nerot" (The Candles), the grandfather casts a shadow of disapproval over the narrator's literary endeavors. The narrator finds himself in a house crowded with people, including his grandfather. Though the table is set for the Sabbath, a bookseller persists in selling books written in the language of Jewish heretics — the Samaritans. Leafing through the books, the narrator finds, to his astonishment, that he himself is the author. The grandfather's demeanor is a comment on his 'heresy': "My grandfather stood silently on the side. His black skullcap rested on the middle of his head. An other-worldly sadness dwelt upon him. White fringes of his hair curled over his sunken cheeks like silver bells whose tones are held within."⁶ Agnon's portrayal of himself as a rather naive and pious teller of tales, rather than as the sophisticated writer he is, is explicable in the light of such incidents: he must stand up to the memory of his grandfather's sorrowful and critical gaze.

Agnon's first taste of secular literature came from his mother, Esther Czaczkes. Like many Orthodox Jewish girls from wealthy families in the 19th century — and, indeed, in this century — she had been allowed to read the European classics which the men, for religious reasons, were forbidden to read. Afflicted with a heart condition, she was particularly close to her son, who was the eldest of her five children, and he grew up with an unusually strong sense of responsibility towards her. The intimate, rather troubled bond between mother and son — an important theme in Agnon's fiction⁷ — was tightened as the father was often away on business. Agnon claimed to have written his first poetry in tears at the age of seven because his father was away.

Agnon's father did not mind his son writing poetry — he himself wrote verse occasionally. But when Agnon decided during his adolescence to become a professional writer, the family was shocked. This was seen as the first stage on the road to heresy. But it was too late to stop him: his poems and short

6. *Kol Kitve S.Y. Agnon* (Collected Works), 2nd ed. (1953-62), vol. 6, p. 117. Henceforth referred to as *Kol Kitve*.
7. See D. Aberbach, "Demut ha-Em be-Khitve Agnon" (The Lost Mother in Agnon), *Moznayim*, February/March 1982, pp. 52-6. Also see *At the Handles of the Lock*, *op. cit.*

stories, mostly in Yiddish, had already begun to appear in the local Jewish press.

In 1907 Agnon was forced to leave home to evade conscription into the Austro-Hungarian army. He chose to go to Palestine where he spent the next six years, mostly in Jaffa where he led a semi-bohemian life. Here he immediately established his reputation as a gifted Hebrew writer, with stories which have not lost their appeal, such as "Agunot," from which he took his pseudonym, and the novella "Ve-Haya he-Akov le-Mishor" (And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight). During this period he had not yet abandoned his religious practices. For a time, he was a disciple of the famous Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, later the Chief Rabbi of Palestine. But during the same period, his best friend was a brooding, impetuous Russian, alienated from his tradition — the Hebrew novelist, J.C. Brenner.

GERMAN PERIOD

After his father's death in 1913, Agnon settled in Germany. During the war he led a shiftless, disorganized life. He gave up his Orthodoxy and had a number of affairs with Gentile women, which he later remembered with relish and guilt. He met Martin Buber, Gershom Scholem, and S.Z. Schocken who became his publisher. He continued to write and to consolidate his reputation as the leading Hebrew stylist. After his marriage in 1920, he moved to Homburg and by 1922 had two children.

In 1924 a fire wrecked his home destroying a valuable library and manuscripts. Soon after, Agnon returned to Palestine, deciding in the course of his journey to return to Orthodox Judaism. In a letter to Schocken he confessed that he lacked peace of mind. Disillusioned with European culture, he felt that he ought to live permanently among Orthodox Jews. A few days later he made his decision: "If a man is privileged to live in the Land of Israel, he should observe the *mitzvot* and continue in the way of his ancestors."⁸

Until his death in 1970, Agnon lived with his family in Jerusalem and dedicated himself to his art. To casual acquaintances

8. A.M. Habermann, "Sihot im S.Y. Agnon" (Conversations with Agnon), *Ha-Doar* 8 Tevet 1976, p. 91.

he seemed no more than an inconspicuous Orthodox Jew, short, compact, quizzical; each day he prayed three times and studied a portion of the Talmud. Yet he was outstanding among Hebrew writers not only in depicting the joy of communal observance, of piety and study, but also the crisis of faith, the disillusionment and guilt at having proven a renegade to his tradition. For all Agnon's apparent ambivalence to Orthodoxy, no writer has recreated with greater insight the religious life of Eastern European Jews (particularly in the novels *Hakhmasat Kallah* [The Bridal Canopy] and *Oreah Natah la-Lun* [A Guest for the Night]), or, with the possible exceptions of Mendele Mokher Sefarim and C.N. Bialik, has made better use of biblical, talmudic, and later rabbinic idiom. (Bialik said that Agnon wrote the way Hasidim ought to write, if only they knew how.) Some of Agnon's most ardent disciples were convinced that by reading him one virtually fulfilled one's duty to study the Torah. Indeed, this was the impression Agnon was aiming at: in one of his stories, "Im Kenisat ha-Yom" (At the Outset of the Day), the narrator finds that an original scroll of his is placed in a synagogue ark alongside of Torah scrolls.

Most critics in Israel and abroad agree with the verdict of Edmund Wilson who, on reading Agnon in translation proclaimed him a genius of the first order, and helped him to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1966. They admire and envy his pruned, lucid, inimitable style, his psychological sharpness, his gifts for satire and understatement, his encyclopedic knowledge of traditional Jewish texts and customs, his utter devotion to his art.

'DARKER TRUTHS'

Still, the grace and accomplishment of Agnon's prose hide disquieting truths about the man and his art. The debate over his religious affinities has served to gloss over some of the darker truths in his writings. In trying to redress the balance, some critics have accused Agnon of dishonesty towards his material, of aestheticizing his characters' emotions, of making them passive types, emotionally stifled, immersed in fantasy, annoyingly indecisive and malleable.⁹ Yet, these critics have shown

9. See in particular Hochman, *op. cit.*

insensitivity in failing to recognize fully how obsessive and involuntary these characteristics are, and how distasteful to Agnon himself. According to Dov Sadan, who for many years was Agnon's private secretary, Agnon detested his creations. He would have liked to create a totally different type of character and was dismayed to find that all his major creations were, to a large extent, projections of himself.¹⁰

A few of Agnon's friends, including Gershom Scholem, saw behind his masks and his superficial gregariousness. In 1948 Scholem wrote of Agnon as a lonely, tormented man who felt himself to be cut off from others:

Looking back at the years that I have had the privilege of knowing him, I feel that he is encompassed by enormous spiritual loneliness, though to all appearances he is everybody's friend. Sometimes I wonder if he hasn't set up something of the theatrical or of the circus show as a blind to his loneliness . . . Some of us who have insight would say that he becomes involved with people and even exaggerates his links with them in order that they might leave him alone . . . Not knowing how to get rid of you, he walks with you, pouring out his inner thoughts. You feel, despite his haste in greeting everyone, that his heart isn't in it. Approachable as he is, at the same time he distances himself from people and ignores them.¹¹

Agnon's need for distance was particularly evident in his marital life. When in 1924 Agnon left his wife and children and went to Palestine, he hoped that they would follow later on. Agnon's wife wrote to him during this year-long separation, confessing her doubts that the marriage would last. In a letter of August 1925, she suggested that when she and the children arrived in Palestine, they should live apart: "A life closer together — so I understand your feelings — will bring no good to either of us."¹² Not that she failed to love him deeply. But during the entire five years of their marriage, she wrote, "you have not budged from your reservations towards me. In your heart of hearts you still feel yourself to be deprived . . ."¹³

10. Personal communication to the author, Dov Sadan.

11. *Devarim be-Go* (Essays), Am Oved: Tel Aviv, 1975, p. 465. Reprinted from *Ha-Aretz* 13.8.1948.

12. *Esterlein Yakirati* (Letters to Esther Agnon), Schocken: Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1983, p. 122.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Agnon's acquaintances were generally agreed that his writings constitute the fullest biography of the man. His detachment from others, as observed by Scholem, frequently emerges in his fiction. One of his most bizarre stories, "Ha-Rofe u-Gerushato" (The Doctor's Divorce), was written in the late 1930's, when Agnon and his wife, according to Scholem, were on the threshold of divorce.¹⁴

In this story, set in post-World War One Vienna, a doctor is besieged on his wedding night by thoughts of his wife's former lover. From then on he slowly goes mad, seizing every chance to remind her of her 'sin' and making her life a hell. He is filled with suppressed and unexplained anger at her. What love he has for her is sadistically provoked by the suffering which he inflicts on her and by his consequent remorse. The story reaches a climax when the lover, who is never named, enters his hospital for treatment. As in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Chillingworth, Hester Prynne's former husband, becomes the doctor of Dimmesdale whom he suspects, rightly, of fathering Hester's child, the patient is treated with exquisite, malicious care. He has hardly a clue that the doctor is seething with rage at him. The doctor's wife (a nurse in his hospital) is not so fortunate. His sadism wears her down until she finally asks for a divorce. However, after the separation he is still childishly bound to her. At night in bed — so the story ends — he lifts his arms out and calls to her, "Nurse, nurse, come to me!"

KAFKAESQUE THEMES

For about fifty years, Agnon's stories have been compared with those of Kafka,¹⁵ but it is not generally recognized that the most significant parallels are found not only in Kafka's fiction but also in his autobiographical writings. The problems faced by Kafka in his letters and diaries, particularly those relating to authority and women, are similar to those depicted in Agnon's stories. The psychological dynamics of the marriage in "The Doctor's Divorce" and in other stories by Agnon are

14. Personal communication to the author, Gershom Scholem and Mrs. Scholem.

15. See, for example, H. Barzel, *Bein Agnon le-Kafka* (Agnon and Kafka: A Comparative Study), Bar-Ilan University Press: Tel Aviv, 1972.

illuminated in Kafka's letters, for instance the one of 8 July 1913 to Felice Bauer. Debating with himself whether to marry Felice, Kafka confessed his fears of destroying her and his need for distance from her:

Can you not see by now that if disaster — yours, your disaster, Felice — is to be averted, I have to remain locked up within myself . . . If need be, I can live as I am, my rage turned inward, tormenting only by letter, but as soon as we lived together I would become a dangerous lunatic fit to be burned alive.¹⁶

Two days later he wrote:

I have a definite feeling that through marriage, *through the union, through the dissolution* of this nothingness that I am, I shall perish, and not alone but with my wife, and that the more I love her the swifter and more terrible it will be.¹⁷

Engaged to marry Felice in 1914 (he was, in fact, engaged four times, to three women, and each time was unable to bring himself to marry), Kafka began an overly-intimate correspondence with her friend, Grete Bloch. To Grete he unburdened himself of his fears about the impending marriage. His letters show that during the seven months of his engagement, Kafka was seeking Grete's love. When Grete realized this, she was unable to let the marriage take place. The engagement was cancelled, as Kafka had probably hoped.

The Agnon hero suffers a dilemma similar to that described by Kafka for he, too, is incapable, or at least very much afraid, of loving and of being loved on equal terms with a woman. Whether conscious of it or not, he seems to look for, or even to create, circumstances in which his deeper attachments to women are likely to go unrequited or to end in failure. At any rate, he ensures satisfactory distance from his 'beloved' or wife, usually through love triangles or through his interminable work. If his methods cannot be employed or fail, he might find some excuse to effect a separation, or even to retreat into madness. The very name 'Agnon', as the author uses it, refers to those unfortunate souls who have not found their true mates.¹⁸

16. *Letters to Felice*, tr. J. Stern & E. Duckworth, Penguin Books, 1978, p. 409.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 411.

18. See Aberbach, *At the Handles of the Lock*, *op. cit.*

MOTHER IMAGE

A salient feature of Agnon's major works is the hero's inability to rid himself of the maternal presence in his involvements with women. The mother is still alive within him, arousing his dependence and rage. In his attachments to women he is governed by emotions and attitudes other than sexual desire. He might be drawn to a woman because of her baking, or out of sympathy for her, fears for her health, the desire to free her from shame, or because of a childhood oath, or a certain dominance on her part to which his passive nature submits, or perhaps because he associates her with religious purity. He is not attracted to a woman for her own sake, but because of the infiltration of the mother's image which at the same time, causes sexual inhibition and paralyzed anger.

The fullest portrait of the Agnon hero, the causes and disastrous effects of his incestuous ties, is found in the novel ironically entitled *Sippur Pashut* (A Simple Story), first published in 1934, and set in early 20th century Buczacz (in his stories Agnon calls it Shabbush). This novel, Agnon's most remarkable psychological study, clarifies many of his other works. The hero, sixteen-year-old Hirshl Horowitz, is first attracted to Blumah, an orphaned cousin who lives with his family, by her baking. Her cakes remind him of his mother who, for her part, is alarmed at the idea of his being in love with a girl without money or social status. She wants him to marry Mina, the daughter of a wealthy merchant.

Hirshl remains passive, clinging to the impossible hope that Blumah will stand up to his mother, take the initiative that he should take, and be the active partner as his mother has been. Naturally, Blumah does not comply. Both he and Blumah are deeply frustrated and angry, but they do not tell one another. Hirshl idealizes Blumah as a kind of asexual mother forbidden to him (her name, with its similarity to the Hebrew *balum*, 'closed', suggests this). His idealization might indicate the way he would like to see his mother, without ambivalence: in thinking of her in this way, he keeps a firmer grip on his sanity. Mina, who later becomes the target for his suppressed violence, is the one to whom his darker feelings towards his mother are evident.

Hirshl's passivity with Blumah is traced to the fact that his

mother has never given him love which encourages independence. She has failed, Agnon shows with great subtlety and understanding, to respond to her son's emotional needs. She is more interested in what is 'seemly' ('Tzimlich' is, in fact, Mina's family name) than in what is best for Hirshl. As she has not loved her son, he remains dependent on her, and she can handle him virtually like a piece of wax. Eventually, she manipulates him into marrying Mina.

TROUBLED MARRIAGE

The marriage is initially a disaster. Hirshl, tormented by rage at his mother which, owing to his dependence on her, he has never been able to express, displaces it in his imagination onto Mina. She senses it and is horrified, and she accuses him of wanting her to die. Hirshl denies her accusation, knowing full well that she is right, but powerless to control his feelings. He has no way of handling his rage other than turning it on himself. He develops an insane fear of slaughtering roosters, a reflection of his fear of emasculation (or of having been emasculated) and of committing an act of violence, not only against Mina but also against himself. The narrator tells us:

A man is not in control when angry. Suddenly he could get up and kill all the roosters in the world. Hirshl did well to hide his knife at night.¹⁹

He goes mad, and when discovered raving in the fields near Buczacz, he pleads pathetically, "Don't slaughter me, I'm not a rooster."²⁰

At the end of the novel, after extended treatment in an asylum, Hirshl recovers his sanity and learns to live with his wife who, in the meanwhile, has given birth to a son. Still, he has not been fully purged of thoughts, perhaps wishes, of her death, or of yearning for Blumah:

Hirshl thought, 'If Mina were to die, Blumah might marry me.' God forbid that he wanted his wife to die, but what does a widower do if he does not remarry? As he didn't know anyone apart

19. *Kol Kitve*, vol. 3, p. 201.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 218.

from Blumah, he decided on her. If she would not marry him for love, she would consent out of pity.²¹

With extraordinary verbal sadism, he even calls his son 'my orphan' — and in Mina's hearing — as if his fantasy of Mina's death has been fulfilled.

Hirshl's 'solution' to his emotional entrapment by his mother is to displace her image onto Mina, now that her maternal instincts are aroused, and to take his son's place in her affections. Far from being troubled when the son, who is ill, is taken to recuperate with Mina's parents, his first genuine desire for his wife is aroused precisely on the night when the baby is taken away.

The problems underlying Agnon's stories are spelled out with rare clarity and force in *A Simple Story*. Parental manipulation of the hero as an object rather than as an individual, and a failure to love him for himself alone, lead to a sense of incoherence, a dislocation between his fantasy life and the outer world, and to painful difficulties in the hero's attachments to others. Here it is relevant to mention that this was Kafka's dilemma also, as his "Letter to His Father" shows. In the letter, Kafka insists time and again that his father's overbearing nature has stifled his self-assertiveness, leaving him frozen in the filial state, unable to launch out into life, remaining dependent on his family. The nightmarish quandaries of Kafka's creations, such as Joseph K., when trying to deal with authority or to create new ties, point to the problem with the father. Kafka goes so far as to confess that "My writing was all about you."

PARENTAL YOKE

The Agnon hero lives in constant terror of being swallowed up by the spectre of parental authority. For this reason, like a child struggling to gain independence, he is always breaking away from what he is at the same time holding on to. His fundamental state, in his actions as well as in his relationships, is one of transition from one goal which has not yet been reached, to another. In *A Simple Story*, for example, Hirshl is tortured by his excessive proximity to or his distance from his wife:

21. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

This closeness angered him most. He quarreled with Mina in his heart: didn't she feel that this closeness was bad for them? Yet, when she was distant from him he fumed.²²

A dream of Kafka's in which he visits Felice in Berlin illustrates a similar desire to remain in transition towards involvement with a woman without ever reaching the destination:

In Berlin, through the streets to her house, calm and happy in the knowledge that though I haven't arrived at her house yet, a slight possibility of doing so exists.²³

Not having been treated as having an inherent value of his own, the hero treats others in the same way. His cold self-absorption is a means by which he keeps his distance from others and avoids being hurt — and hurting. (In one of Agnon's most grotesque stories, "Ha-Adonit v'ha-Rokhel" [The Lady and the Peddler], a woman who is trying literally to devour the hero's flesh, is put off by the coldness of his blood.) His secretiveness and the air of mystery which frequently surrounds him also hold anxiety at bay. In his "Letter to His Father," Kafka writes, similarly, of his coldness and indifference as a way of survival. To Milena Jesenská he explained his cold self-sufficiency as a sign of excessive dependence:

And that is why I, in a sense, am independent of you: just because the dependency reaches beyond all bounds.²⁴

The depersonalization of the Agnon hero as a result of overbearing family control is expressed in his fantasies, dreams and nightmares of bodily distortion or violence. In these moments of dissociation, the hero is literally 'not himself.' Parts of him cease to feel or come apart from the rest of him. He has fantasies of physical and psychological splitting: the hand comes apart from the arm, the head is detached from the shoulders, the body expands or shrinks as in *Alice in Wonderland*, or even vanishes by being absorbed or eaten.

In *A Simple Story*, for example, Hirshl's breakdown includes a sense of physical numbness. Kneading a piece of wax in his hand, he drops the wax but continues to knead his hand:

22. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

23. *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. M. Brod, Penguin Books, 13.2.1913, p. 258.

24. *Letters to Milena*, tr. T. & J. Stern, Secker & Warburg: London, 1953, p. 194.

When he felt this he was frightened. He had kneaded himself without feeling. Perhaps his fingers had lost their sense of touch. Perhaps he had died.²⁵

More obviously than most of Agnon's heroes, Hirshl has not been brought up to feel his own worth. In madness, his body reacts by losing physical sensation. His depersonalization — or, more accurately, his not having become a whole person — is evident in his persistent feeling of inferiority, physical as well as emotional. He has been led to feel that in order to satisfy his parents, especially his mother, and to avoid being hurt, he must retain child-like smallness. This he does by marrying Mina. He illustrates his sense of filial inferiority in the asylum by drawing a picture of himself and his father:

Hirshl should have drawn a picture of his wife and son, but as he was small in his own eyes, he drew a picture of his father to show himself how big father was and how small he was.²⁶

CHARACTER DEPICTION

Lacking warmth and meaning, and the wholeness of equal and loving bonds with others, the Agnon hero is dogged by feelings of emptiness, uselessness, coldness, numbness, futility. (These epithets are found in descriptions and self-descriptions of him.) Most important is his conviction that life has little or no meaning. One of the striking illustrations of this sense of meaninglessness occurs in the novella "Ad Hena" (Thus Far). The narrator, convinced of the futility of his life, tells a Kafkaesque parable of a man's quest ending with his discovery of a scroll and the recounting of his journey:

In short, just as there were seven hills, one on top of the other, and seven caves, one inside the other, and the doors, steps, barrels, and boxes were all seven in number, so also there were seven scrolls. When he finally rolled out the last one, he found written clearly, 'Fool! Have you left something here that you trouble yourself to find?'²⁷

The emotional fragmentation of the Agnon hero, his sense

25. *Kol Kitve*, vol. 3, p. 214.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 235.

27. *Kol Kitve*, vol. 7, p. 51.

of futility and of being cut off from others, underlies his need for wholeness in tradition. The therapeutic function of tradition is elucidated in *A Simple Story* when Hirshl is treated by the psychiatrist Dr. Langsam. Langsam does not confront the crux of his illness, not once asking about his mother, his wife, or the woman who obsesses him. Instead, he spends hours spinning tales of the *shtetl* of his youth, putting Hirshl once again in touch with a world of order and stability in which communal unity can enable one to survive personal maladjustment. This act of healing is the essence of Agnon's art. It is an illusion, but it has the power of reality, and it salves Hirshl wounds.

Magic power, the power to make the bogus real, is possessed by the grandfather, or grandfather surrogates such as Mr. Klein in the story "Ha-Mikhtav" (The Letter), the last in the collection *Sefer ha-Ma'asim* (The Book of Deeds). At the conclusion of this story, Klein recreates the House of Study similar to that which the narrator has known in his boyhood, and lets him re-enter it:

He took hold of the cane and began to draw with it, making six marks. A house appeared, rising up like the House of Study. I tried to enter but could not find the door. The old man raised his cane and knocked twice on the wall. The wall opened and I entered.²⁸

HOPE OF RETURN

The grandfather, or grandfather substitute, despite his being harsh, unreliable and insensitive — he appears several times in *The Book of Deeds* — has this saving grace: he is the narrator's link with the lost wholeness of his childhood, with the unity of communal consciousness that has eroded, and he can miraculously transport the narrator to this world. Through this figure, disbelief is suspended, appearance becomes reality, the lost is found, the diseased becomes healthy, the unloving becomes the loving, and even the dead can come to life. The grandfather offers the narrator the hope of salvation, of recovery and of return to Torah and to Israel.

Yet, the narrator is in touch with the miraculous only if he remains a child, playing a passive, false, fragmented role. In-

28. *Kol Kitve*, vol. 6, p. 249.

sofar as he is capable of self-assertion, he is disillusioned by the grandfather-figure and what he represents and, indeed, he rejects any authority which tries to shape him for its own ends. For this reason, tradition in Agnon's world, while retaining its genuine health and beauty, is also a mask of aggression and the avoidance of confrontation. The narrator's susceptibility to breakdown largely accounts for his tendency to escape from emotion and, to some extent, to stifle and aesthetize the characters which he describes. He cannot bear very much reality.

Nevertheless, a measure of emotional falsity, detachment, and dislocation is the essence of much art. T.S. Eliot's observations on poetry in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" are true of Agnon's prose:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to escape from these things.²⁹

In view of the powerful emotional needs which in Agnon's works clearly lie behind the quest for the wholeness of tradition, it is as unfair to dismiss his traditionalism as a pose as it would be to argue that Eliot's Anglo-Catholicism was insincere.

Agnon is preoccupied with characters made weak, vulnerable, and false, primarily by imbalances and disorders within the family, but also by the clash between the old world and the new. In his stories, the crisis of faith brings to light fears and conflicts originating in family difficulties. At the same time, family troubles are a touchstone of the breakdown of tradition. There is a subtle, yet savage, war between authority and anarchy, conscience and libido, between submission and creativity, tradition and modernism. What remains may be seen as an uneasy truce, a means, largely involuntary, of shoring up fragments of the past against ruin, of adapting to a world gone a bit mad.

29. *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. F. Kermode, Faber & Faber: London, 1975, p. 43.