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AGNON'S ART
OF INDIRECTION

Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon

BY

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CHAPTER SEVEN

THE WEB of BIBLICAL ALLUSION

Agnon's scriptural and talmudic resonances and nuances, his historical and textual layers, his allusive and elusive echoings and patternings, are so marvelously multiform, dense, and imbricated that he is daunting even to the most sophisticated Hebrew readers.

—Cynthia Ozick
"Agnon's Antagonisms"

In several places in this book, most notably in our discussion of Shmuel Yosef's dream of the raven in *Thus Far*, we have had occasion to comment on Agnon's linguistic allusions to the classic texts of Jewish tradition, and sometimes even to some non-Jewish works. On the whole, however, the first six chapters of this study have been more concerned with other aspects of Agnon's art of indirection, especially in showing how dreams, hallucinations, and free association in Agnon's fiction act as thematically dense junctions in which multiple threads of character development are brought together. In this seventh and final chapter, we shall be concerned exclusively with examining how the multiplicity of meaning so integral to Agnon's style, which makes it difficult for his readers to retrace a situation, utterance, motif, or even the plot of his narratives without sensing that the concealed exceeds the revealed, owes much to the linguistically allusive dimension of his stories, hidden in which are elements whose importance is often greater than that of more visible surface features.

The connotative riches of Hebrew, a language encompassing three thousand years of literary creativity and a great network of intertextual commentaries and references, have been used for fictional purposes by many modern Hebrew authors, but by none with the narrative cunning of Agnon. Intertextual allusions in Agnon's work create complex layers of meaning through their evocation, often by means of a single word or brief phrase, of entire passages from antecedent texts. They are, however, commonly overlooked not only by readers of his work in translation, which cannot possibly reproduce such effects, but also by many Hebrew readers, who lack the traditional Jewish education needed to follow the recondite hints of Agnon's language. Even those readers who make the effort, aided by dictionaries, concordances, and so on, to trace Agnon's many literary allusions to their source often miss the subtleties, narrative implications, and

parody that contribute to the tension between the explicit and implicit which is the essence of his artistry.

Most of Agnon's fictional works are composed of all the many linguistic strata of Hebrew, from the Bible and on through the Mishnah, the Talmud, the midrash, the prayerbook, the medieval Hebrew poets, the rabbinic commentaries, and the Hasidic tales of Eastern Europe. Only two are quarried exclusively from what the Israeli writer Amos Oz has called the Hebrew language's "biblical bedrock."¹ One of these is the novella *In the Prime of Her Life*, which was the subject of our last chapter; the other is the collection *Tales of Poland*,² a short story from which called "The Dance of Death, or the Lovely and Pleasant" will be the focus of the present chapter.³ By means of this story I hope to show how Agnon's extraordinarily subtle use of the Hebrew tradition of intertextuality can endow a narrative with a hidden meaning, a meaning even which is a contradiction of the apparent surface meaning. Thus, allusion performs a function analogous to dream-imagery in opening unsuspected perspectives through a strategy of indirection.

Before examining "The Dance of Death," however, I would first like to say a few more words about the use of biblical language in *In the Prime of Her Life*. I have contended that the critical consensus that this novella ends on a note of desired consummation is mistaken, and that the real theme of *In the Prime of Her Life* (as of all Agnon's love stories) is not fulfilled but disappointed love. What I wish to do now is demonstrate how this claim can be substantiated by a close reading of two biblical allusions that, occurring in a passage at the beginning of the novella, harbor within themselves the covert content of the entire work.

As I have pointed out, Agnon had obvious mimetic reasons for composing *In the Prime of Her Life* entirely in biblical Hebrew, for his narrator Tirtza Mintz is a woman of a traditional Orthodox Jewish upbringing who has been schooled in the Bible but not in Rabbinics. A closer reading of the story, however, reveals that purely aesthetic considerations determined the choice of its language too. The laconic style of biblical prose, which mutes emotive voices and screens dramatic feelings, fits the solemnly tempered tone and melancholy atmosphere of the novella. The grim mood of the

¹ Amos Oz, "Thoughts on the Hebrew Language," in *Under This Blazing Light* [Heb.] (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Hapoalim, 1979), p. 26.

² S.Y. Agnon, *Sipurei Polin* [Tales of Poland], in *'Elu ve-'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 349-502.

³ S.Y. Agnon, "Meholat hamavet—'O—hane'chavim vehane'imim," in *'Elu ve-'elu* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken Books, 1972), pp. 356-358.

story's opening; the growth of its heroine in the shadow of her mother Leah's premature death; the girl's love for Akavia Mazal, Leah's first and only romance; Leah's chronic illness which Tirtza reenacts in the form of acute lovesickness; Tirtza's ultimate marriage to Akavia, a man far beyond her years, who spends his days recording local history and unearthing ancient tombs; and finally, the death wish with which the story ends as Tirtza, now pregnant, feels her unborn child quicken in her womb—all of these are effectively captured by the use of scriptural language.

The very first encounter between Tirtza and Akavia illustrates the quiet power of biblical allusion in this complex love story. At the end of their year of mourning for Tirtza's mother, Tirtza and her father take a walk together to Akavia's home, which is located at the edge of town. Akavia, a scholar-poet and antiquarian, has been asked to compose the epitaph for Leah's tombstone. Tirtza narrates:

At that time my father stopped saying the mourner's prayer. And he came to me and said, "Come, let us go see to a tombstone for our mother." And I put on my hat and gloves and said, "Here I am, father." . . . We took a long route around the town. My father put his hand in mine and said, "Let us go this way."

As we reached the end of the town, lo, there was an old woman digging in her yard. And my father greeted her and said, "Please tell us, good woman, is Mr. Mazal here?" And the woman set aside the spade with which she had been digging and answered, "Yes, sir, Mr. Mazal is at home." And my father put his arm in mine and said, "Come, my daughter, let us go in."⁴

To the Hebrew reader who knows his Bible, this description immediately brings to mind two scriptural episodes: the binding of Isaac and Saul's quest for his father's asses. We are alerted to the first of these the moment Tirtza says *hineni*, "Here I am," which is Abraham's response to God when he is called upon to sacrifice Isaac. Subsequently, this scene from Genesis is suggested several more times in the course of the passage, as in the long, circuitous walk Tirtza and her father take (Abraham and Isaac walk for three days to reach the place of Isaac's sacrifice) and in the frequent use of the verb "to go," as when Mr. Mintz, using a grammatically archaic form, tells Tirtza, "Let us go this way" (*nelkha-na shama*, a clear echo of Abraham's *nelkha ad koh*, "We will go yonder"). By using such language Agnon intimates that Tirtza, like the biblical Isaac, will passively undergo an extraordinary ordeal at the hands of her elders, who will sacrifice her upon

⁴ *In the Prime of Her Life*, trans. Gabriel Levin, in *Eight Great Hebrew Short Novels*, ed. Alan Lechuk and Gershon Shaked (New York: Meridian Books, 1983), pp. 170-171.

the altar of their own emotional needs.

The second biblical allusion in this episode is implicit in Mr. Mintz's query, "Is Mr. Mazal here?" the unusual Hebrew phrasing of which *ha-yesh ba-zeh mar Mazal?* occurs only once in the Bible. This is in I Samuel 9:11, where Saul and his servant, who are seeking the prophet Samuel in order to inquire about Saul's father's lost asses, ask some maidens they meet at a well, "Is the seer here?" (*ha-yesh ba-zeh haro'eh*). In the Bible, of course, especially in the Book of Genesis, an encounter between a young man and a maiden at a well is a frequent prelude to betrothal, and there is thus a special significance in Tirtza's encounter being with an old woman.⁵ The age of Mazal's servant presages Tirtza's future romance with a man twice her years and implies that her fate will be radically different both from that of Saul, who sets out in search of his father's asses and discovers a kingdom, and from that of the Patriarchs, who discover youthful love at a well. Unlike them, Tirtza is entering an aged world of excavated antiquities, an eccentric realm over which there hovers a spirit of death.

In the Bible itself, these two episodes have no verbal or thematic relationship. Even in Agnon's tale, they function in opposite ways. Tirtza and her father's walk to Akavia's home directly parallels the biblical story of the binding of Isaac and thus takes on a mythic or epic quality. In contrast, the story of Saul's search for the asses that results in his unexpected elevation to the monarchy is inverted in *In The Prime of Her Life*: whereas Tirtza thinks she is setting out on a romantic adventure when she goes to meet Akavia Mazal, her mother's youthful love, she is in fact taking a first step toward entrapment in a mundane, oppressive marriage. The Saul allusion, therefore, is ironic; it contrasts the destiny of Agnon's characters with those of the great heroes of the Bible. As we shall see in *In The Prime of Her Life*, part of the difficulty in interpreting Agnon's allusive language lies precisely in deciding when it is "mythic" and when "ironic," when it reinforces certain apparent meanings or implications in the text and when it undermines them. In addition to the many other kinds of indeterminacy in Agnon's fiction that have been discussed in these pages, this one too must be taken into account in any close reading.

This technique of compound scriptural allusion is commonly used by Agnon in his *Tales of Poland*, a slim, early volume that has been commonly considered by critics to be little more than a minor exercise in the literary recasting of Jewish folk materials. In the following analysis of one of these

⁵ On this biblical convention, see Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), pp. 51–62.

tales, "The Dance of Death," a story only four pages long, I hope to show how Agnon's choice of specific biblical allusions is always deliberate and thematically significant; how even small and seemingly inconsequential markers whose significance appears to be localized are part of a larger design; how this design interweaves these components so that a coherent and surprising interpretation of the text is made possible; finally, how, even when such coherence is achieved, the many-sided indeterminacy that is, as we have seen, characteristic of Agnon's work, is preserved and even intensified.

At first glance, "The Dance of Death" has a strong thematic resemblance to apparently similar stories in the literature of the 19th-century Hebrew revival which make use of Jewish martyrological materials both to immortalize Jewish suffering at the hands of a cruelly anti-Semitic world and to challenge traditional Jewish assumptions of a benevolent Providence that guides Jewish fate. A careful stylistic analysis of "The Dance of Death," however, demonstrates how far removed in fact it is from such stories, whose thematics it restates for its own deeply ambivalent ends. In Agnon's tale, the center of gravity is subtly shifted from questioning the reliability of Providence to questioning the reliability of the Jewish soul itself. The many binary relationships that exist in "The Dance of Death"—Gentile and Jew, Jew and God, human responsibility and human passion, law-giving and law-receiving, life and death, sin and punishment, retribution and atonement, man and woman, daughter and father, individual and community, rich and poor, Jewish past and Jewish future—can support various readings of the text, of which that suggested here is only one of many possibilities. Moreover, "The Dance of Death" was written by Agnon in several versions, including an original Yiddish one called *Der Toyntantz*.⁶ In each of these versions the focus shifts slightly, but I believe that the "deep" meaning is the same in all of them, and it is this meaning, as it is most acutely revealed through the use of biblical language, that concerns me in the last version examined here.⁷

⁶ For a summary of the various versions of this story, see Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 27, 48–49, 477.

⁷ The *Tales of Poland* have commonly been considered by critics to be folkloristic stories in which Agnon portrayed the traditional life of Polish Jewry with a nostalgic love bordering on reverence. See, for example, A. Barash's short piece on the book in *Hedim* (1926), pp. 112–113. I should mention here, however, that this naive assumption has already been challenged by Arna Golan, who published an article on Agnon's use of biblical language in "The Dance of Death," *Molad* 4 (February 1972), pp. 513–523. As I was not aware of this article when I originally wrote the present chapter, it would appear significant that we have

Agnon apparently composed his *Tales of Poland* in biblical language in order to stress the antiquity and consolidation of the Jewish community in Poland and to suffuse it with a glow of nostalgia in which fantasy and history coalesce.⁸ Moreover, as in *In the Prime of Her Life*, the biblical language of these tales fits the romantic and morbid aspects of the themes of unrequited love, desperate yearning, and tragic death that permeate them. In the case of "The Dance of Death, or Lovely and Pleasant" we already know from the story's title and accompanying epigraph from II Samuel 1:23 ("Lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in death were not divided") that we are dealing with a story heavily steeped in scriptural allusions. On the surface, these allusions seem to do little more than Judaize what is essentially a brief gothic romance. The story begins with a short introductory passage in which the narrator describes a peculiar local phenomenon:

On the edge of Poland, on the outskirts of a small town, there stands a very old synagogue. Beside this synagogue is a stone mound some four cubits high, sprouting with blood-red grass. Weddings are not held there. The voices of joyous grooms are not heard there. And none of the priestly descendants of Aaron tread upon that mound unto this day. ('*Elu ve-'elu*, p. 356)

The tale is an explanation of this phenomenon. A lovely, chaste bride and her groom, a young man of surpassing erudition and piety, stand one day beneath a wedding canopy outside the main synagogue of the city. Suddenly, the festive ceremony is disrupted by the appearance of a man on horseback, identified as the local Count. As the Count reaches the canopy, the bride's exquisite beauty unleashes a paroxysm of desire within him. He brandishes his sword, strikes the groom a mortal blow, kidnaps the bride, and rides off with her to his castle. In order to "arouse the wrath of vengeance," the townspeople bury the groom, enshrouded in his blood-stained nuptial raiment (*kittel*), at the site of the canopy. Subsequently, in the castle, the bride's life is also cut short: one day when the Count is out hunting, she vividly recalls the scene of her wedding day, asks her ladies-in-waiting to dress her in her wedding gown, and thus adorned, she dies. The Count returns to find her lifeless and buries her in a Christian grave on Christian ground. But the lovely and pleasant bride and groom, torn asunder on their wedding day, reunite and embrace after death. Every day of the year, "in the secret of the

arrived independently at complementary if different conclusions. Golan too questions the assumed folkloristic naïveté of the stories in *Tales of Poland* and demonstrates that "The Dance of Death" has a covert dimension of sin, retribution, and atonement that has been ignored in the past.

⁸See Dov Fruchtmann, "*Polin: Sippurei pele*" [Poland: Fables] [Heb.] (M.A. diss., Tel Aviv University, 1973).

night," the bride's grave opens and "a veiled woman arises . . . [and] with anguished steps she walks toward the Great Synagogue. Then from his grave rises the dead groom whose blood was spilled beneath the canopy. In the secret of the night he stretches forth his arms, draws his bride to his heart, and together they dance the dance of death." "Therefore," the narrator concludes, "the priests do not tread on that mound and weddings are not held there unto this day."⁹

And so, "lovely and pleasant in their lives," the groom and his bride are, like Saul and his son Jonathan in David's lament, not divided in death. True, the analogy is inexact, since the bride and groom of "The Dance of Death" do not die on the same day like Saul and Jonathan; yet this discrepancy is resolvable, since the abducted bride is likened to a dead person. The townspeople mourn over her no less than over the groom, and the words used to describe her abduction—"and the bride was not there, for the Count had taken [*lakah*] her"—are those used for the death of Enoch in the Bible: "And Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). In a similar vein, alluding to the Book of Job, the narrator comments: "What could they [the wedding guests] do? The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away. They had not come to a wedding feast but to accompany the dead on their last journey." Further on in the text too, the bride's death in the castle is identified with the groom's at the wedding: like the groom in his *kittel*, she breathes her last in her white wedding gown, and the Count's arrival at that exact moment in his blood-drenched hunting garb brings to mind the murder beneath the wedding canopy.

If, however, one continues to pursue the analogy suggested by the story's epigraph, it becomes problematical. Saul and Jonathan, the Bible tells us, were "lovely and pleasant in their lives," whereas the bride and groom of our story are parties to an arranged match who hardly know each other up

⁹ It might be pertinent to mention that the origins of this story may be bound up with the ancient custom of the *jus primae noctis*. This would cast light not only on the background to the tale itself but also on certain unexplained features within it, such as the sudden and unheralded appearance of the Count at the wedding ceremony (whether or not our proposed reading of Agnon's version in respect of this matter is valid). The widespread belief in this custom, familiar especially as the mediaeval *droit du seigneur*, is illuminating, whether, when and to what extent, it was actually practiced. There are halachic and aggadic references to it as the right of the "perfect" (*tafsar*, e.g., Talm. Bab., Ketubot 3b). The belief that this privilege was exercised during the Middle Ages gained currency in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Thus Agnon may have drawn not only upon his knowledge of romantic folklore and Gothic literary motifs but on his familiarity with the Talmudic discussions and midrashic commentaries pertaining to the *jus primae noctis*. For further information on this privilege from biblical times onward, see I.L. Rabinowitz, "The Study of a Midrash," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 58 (1967-1968), pp. 152-160.

to the moment of their wedding. Indeed, Agnon's narrative clearly implies that the match may not even have been to the bride's liking: it has been arranged, we are told, by her father, a wealthy and distinguished member of the community, who found his daughter "a man *after his own heart*" (emphasis added). At the very least, this seems to mean that the bride was not consulted about the match; at the most, that she was unhappy with the husband chosen for her.

Agnon's inversion of the analogy with David's lament does not end here. Its greatest irony, when the lament is read in the light of our story, lies in David's plaint, "Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights; who put on ornaments of gold upon your apparel." This clashes with the story in that the bride has dressed for her wedding in a plain white dress because she has been forbidden anything fancier by the laws of the Jewish community of Poland. The community has put a ban on expensive wedding clothes because they "consume the wealth of Israel," that is, lead to competitiveness that poorer families can ill afford. Indeed, on the story's overt level, this decree, or rather, the bride's father's opposition to it, may well be what brings on the tragedy. Because the father is annoyed that he cannot parade his wealth at the wedding, he petitions the authorities to waive the ban especially for him—and his hubris in doing so, it is hinted, which persists after his request is rejected (even under the wedding canopy, we are told, "he was clearly unhappy with the ban on [fine] clothing"), is punished by Heaven with the Count's frightful deed. The bride's entire family is so obsessed with the matter that when the Count is first galloping toward them in the distance their initial reaction is, "Look, the head of state [that is, of the Jewish *kehillah*] has sent us a special messenger to allow us to wear silk clothing." (Oddly, only the bride seems unperturbed by the prohibition.) Immediately, however, a darker note is struck by the words "a man on horseback," literally, "a rider on a horse," which evoke the phrase in the "Song of Sea" (Exodus 15:1) used to describe the Egyptian cavalry in pursuit of the fleeing Israelites. Indeed this is not a bearer of good tidings but a menacing figure who will transform the wedding day into one of everlasting woe. In another moment the groom's blood-stained robe will present the family's materialistic concern with fine clothing in a different perspective.

If the father and his guests are not at first aware of the approaching horseman's identity, is there anyone who is? Let us look closely at the passage describing his approach:

Then the groom took the wedding ring, and the groom put the ring on the finger of the bride and said, "Behold, thou are sanctified unto me," and all the guests and all those assembled cried, "Mazal tov!" And the groom broke a

glass in memory of the Temple, and the marriage contract was read, and the women . . . struck up a dance. And they took two braided breads and clapped them against each other while one woman cried, "O groom like a king," and another answered, "O bride gracious and beautiful," and everyone called out, "Mazal tov, mazal tov!" The bride lowered her pure eyes to the ground. Who was riding on his horse? Like the shadow of a great rock, so his shadow fell between her and the groom. (*'Elu ve-'elu*, pp. 357–358)

We have seen before how in Agnon's works a few seemingly innocent words can contain a clue that leads us to revise our reading of an entire text. Such are the sentences, "Who was riding on his horse? Like the shadow of a great rock, so his shadow fell between her and the groom." In whose mind or minds do these thoughts take place? If in everyone's, they are not particularly significant. But we must pay attention to the fact that between them and "everyone" ("everyone called out, 'Mazal tov, mazal tov!'") another consciousness, the bride's, has been interposed ("The bride lowered her pure eyes to the ground"). The reaction to the horseman, then, would seem to be hers alone—and if it is, we are being told something of the utmost importance: unlike the rest of the gathering, the bride has an inkling of who the mysterious rider is and of what his arrival portends. Why else indeed would she perceive his shadow as falling "between her and the groom?" (That this is her subjective perception and not that of the guests is further demonstrated by the fact that she and the groom are standing so close together that there would be no room for an actual shadow to be cast between them even if the rider—as does not seem to be the case—had halted his mount directly in front of them.)

It is at this point that Agnon's use of biblical allusion is revealed in its full artistry. The phrase "the shadow of a great rock" has a decidedly ominous ring to it and would seem to be no more than a reflection of the bride's dark premonition that something terrible is about to happen—*unless* we happen to know its origin. This is Isaiah 32:1–2, in which we read: "Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in judgment. And a man shall be as a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place; as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land." For Isaiah, who is speaking about a sun-ravaged countryside where shade is a boon, "the shadow of a great rock" is not something to be feared. It is a *positive and protective image*, no less than "a covert from the tempest" or "water in a dry place." With this observation we are compelled to reassess "The Dance of Death" in its entirety.

Therefore, if the biblical allusion here is context-incorporating—and we have seen that in Agnon it invariably is—its clear implication is that the bride *welcomes* the approaching horseman, who is for her "a prince ruling in judgment" come to rescue her from an unwanted marriage to a husband

chosen by her father against her will. Her "pure eyes," it now appears, have not been lowered to the ground in modesty at hearing herself praised with the ritual phrase of "bride gracious and beautiful," but rather in the knowledge of what is about to take place, for her abduction is something that she and the Count have planned together.

Once aroused, our suspicions concerning the bride's relations with the Count prior to her wedding deepen when we realize that the sentence describing her abduction, "The bride was not there because the Count had taken her," can admit alternate interpretations. Overtly, this allusion to the biblical verse that tells of Enoch's unusual and preternatural death¹⁰ seems aptly to represent the unique situation of the abducted bride as one who hovers between life and death threatened by both corporeal and spiritual annihilation. But we must also remember that before his death, the Book of Genesis tells us, Enoch "walked with God," that is, was especially intimate with Him. Read contextually, therefore, is not our story implicitly informing us that, before being "taken" by him, the bride's relationship to the Count was of a similar nature?

A Jewish bride who, before her wedding, has an illicit romance with a Christian Count and connives with him to be snatched from under the wedding canopy—not only does such a reading of "A Dance of Death" seem improbably subversive even for Agnon, an author incorrigibly fond of inverting the surface meaning of his own narratives, it also seems irreconcilable with the rest of the story. For if, contrary to all appearances, the first half of "The Dance of Death" is not about violated innocence but rather about sexual defilement and treachery, what are we to make of the story's second half, which tells us that the bride and groom are eternally united in death? How can such a union be possible if the proposed reconstruction of affairs up to the wedding drama is correct?

The answer, as a close reading will reveal, is that "The Dance of Death" is a story not only of concealed crime, but also of concealed repentance. If one reads the story on its overt level, of course, there is no need for the bride to repent because she has done nothing wrong. Read for its allusive content, however, its concise account of her penitence is once again full of surprises.

That the bride of "The Dance of Death" *does* repent after being taken to the Count's castle can be shown by a comparison of two passages, the one cited above describing her abduction and a second in which, before her

¹⁰ This verse—which tells that "Enoch walked with God" and is taken by God but conspicuously omits the word "death," implying a kind of mystical union between Enoch and God—has generated a great deal of esoteric mystical literature. The Enochic literature includes several apocryphal or pseudoepigraphical books.

death in the castle, she remembers this scene. It is noteworthy that in her recollected version most of the particulars—the wedding ring, the breaking of the glass, the reading of the marriage contract, the dancing women—are missing. At this remove from the event only the significant details are recalled:

She remembered the days of her youth, her wedding day when she stood to the right of the groom near the Great Synagogue. A rider gallops on his horse, gallops toward the canopy. The best men clap hands and sing, "O groom like a king" and the bridesmaids clap loaves of braided breads and sing, "O bride gracious and beautiful." And everyone assembled calls out, "Mazal tov." Who rides on his horse, his shadow weighing on her heart like a great rock? The canopy trembles over her head and its poles fall to the ground. And with that she collapsed, for her heart was stricken. ('*Elu ve-'elu*, p. 359)

Let us begin by considering the opening phrase of this passage, "She remembered the days of her youth" (*va-tizkor ne'ureha*). Since there is a linguistic allusion here to Jeremiah 2:2, "Thus saith the Lord, I remember the kindness of thy youth [*zakharti hesed ne'urayikh*], the love of thy espousals," there is surely significance in the fact that the word "kindness" is missing from the bride's recollection. Unlike the God of Jeremiah, who lovingly remembers His relationship with Israel in the desert, compared to a period of betrothal, the bride has no fond memories of the period of her own betrothal, which was forced upon her by her father. Now, however, reliving the day of her wedding, her perspective has changed radically. No longer does the shadow of the Count lie shelteringly *between* her and the groom; rather, it now weighs *on her heart*, transforming the Count himself, the "great rock," from a protective to a crushingly burdensome presence. Nor, it would seem, can she bear to remember the moment of lowering her "pure" eyes, which is also not mentioned. Indeed, no one but she knows how impure she has been—nor was her impurity ever greater than at the very moment she appeared to be modestly looking at the ground. "She remembered the days of her youth": the God of Jeremiah is willing to forgive Israel its transgressions, but can she be forgiven?

"And she collapsed, for her heart was stricken"—a logical conclusion to a painful process of recollection. Plainly put, the bride dies from extreme physical and emotional exhaustion. Here too, however, a complex of biblical allusions calls this simple reading into question. The pivotal sentences announcing the bride's death are borrowed from a passage in the Book of Samuel that describes the death of the high priest Eli and his sons. More precisely, the account of the bride's death parallels that of Eli's daughter-in-law, the wife of his son Phineas, who dies in childbirth upon learning of the capture of the Ark of God by the Philistines and of the death of her husband

and his father. Occurring in both the biblical account and Agnon's tale, the Hebrew verb *va-tikhr'a*, "And she collapsed," has the root *k.r. 'a*, which possesses the primary meaning of kneeling or going down on one's knees, but can also signify going into labor. Here are the two texts, first the modern and then the ancient:

And she collapsed [*va-tikhr'a*] for her heart was stricken. And as she lay dying, the women attending her said, "Thy Lord has returned from the hunt." She did not answer or give heed. And she said, "Let them bring my wedding gown that I wore when I first came hither." And they brought her the wedding gown that she wore when she came to the castle. (*'Elu ve-'elu*, p. 359)

And she collapsed [*va-tikhr'a*] and gave birth, for she was stricken with labor. And as she lay dying, the women attending her said to her, "Fear not, for thou hast brought forth a son." But she did not answer or give heed. And she named the child Ichabod [i.e., Inglorious], saying, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the Ark of God was taken and because of her father-in-law and her husband. And she said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the Ark of God is taken." (I Samuel 4:19-22)

In the Bible, Phineas's wife is a symbol of national consciousness in the wake of national destruction. Going into sudden labor when she hears the catastrophic news of the capture of the Ark and the death of her family, she finds the catastrophe of Israel even greater than her own personal calamity and—dying in childbirth—names her son Ichabod to commemorate the dishonor of her people. If we continue to regard Agnon's biblical allusions in "The Dance of Death" as contextual, must we not then infer that the bride of his tale is pregnant with the child of the Count and dies, acknowledging her disgrace, while giving birth to an adulterous son?

This possibility is less far-fetched than it may seem to be at first glance; in fact, an early story of Agnon's entitled *ha-Panas* ("The Lamp") confirms that it is precisely what he had in mind!¹¹ Written when Agnon was still in his teens, "The Lamp" is structured as a bedtime story related by a mother to her son, in the course of which he is told by her:

Once upon a time, under a marriage canopy, there was a Count who murdered a groom and stole his bride. He led her to his chambers and there he lived with her. It is said that a grandson and heir to the family converted and

¹¹*Ha-Panas* was first published in *ha-'Et* [Heb.] in 1907. It later appeared in *Molad* [Heb.] 21 (1963), pp. 64-65. Apart from this, Agnon's Yiddish version of "The Dance of Death" called *Der Toyntantz*, specifically mentions that the abducted bride has a grandson who rises with the dawn to study Torah.

studied the Torah in the old House of Study next to the Great Synagogue. And so that the convert would not walk in darkness as he went to the House of Study, a lamp was lit.

Of course, if the bride of "The Dance of Death," who is quite obviously a later version of the bride of "The Lamp," has a grandson, she has a son or daughter too! In eliminating any overt reference to such a child in "The Dance of Death," Agnon clearly did not wish to eliminate the child from the narrative, for in that case he would not have chosen to describe the death of the bride in language parallel to that concerning Phineas's wife. His intention was rather to conceal the child's existence within the covert network of meanings of "The Dance of Death," whence it may be extracted only by probing the story's pattern of biblical allusions in depth. Does Phineas's wife die from the shock of the terrible tidings or from a complication in childbirth? The Bible does not offer an unequivocal answer but rather emphasizes the coincidence of both factors. Similarly, the death of the bride in "The Dance of Death" can be seen as the result of both physical and psychological factors, a fusion so complete that it is impossible to determine which one of the two is the cause and which the result of her suffering. Do the pains of a fatal labor make her repent what she has done? Or is it rather a penitent awareness of sin that induces labor? And if the latter, does she deliberately choose death as her atonement? Just as the attendants of Phineas's wife assume that the delivery of a newborn son will gladden their stricken mistress, so the abducted bride's ladies-in-waiting assume the news of the Count's return will gladden her, but the recognition that she has sullied the honor of Israel renders her, like Phineas's wife, oblivious to their message of consolation.

The conclusion to "The Dance of Death" develops the parallel with the biblical story of Eli even further by means of an additional linguistic allusion. The last sentence of the tale—"Therefore the sons of Aaron do not tread on this mound of stones, nor is the wedding canopy placed upon it unto this day"—returns us to its beginning, in which the narrator tells us that he is going to explain why, on a certain mound of stones, weddings are never performed and "the priestly descendants of Aaron do not tread." Of course, since according to Jewish law priests are forbidden to have contact with the dead or even to enter a cemetery, the presence of the groom's grave under the mound is enough to explain this prohibition. It is not, however, the only explanation. On the concealed level of biblical allusion there is a second one, which is suggested by yet another verse in the Book of Samuel's account of Eli's death. After the Holy Ark has been captured by the Philistines and triumphantly displayed in the temple of their god Dagon, Dagon's idol miraculously falls down before it—in grieving commemoration

of which, the Bible tells us, the priests of Dagon do not "tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day" (I Samuel 5:5). The allusion to this verse in "The Dance of Death" would appear to suggest that in Agnon's story too the desecrated spot is avoided because the enormity of the misfortune that took place there cannot be forgotten or forgiven. Despite the bride's efforts to erase the memory of her life with the Count, she can never wash away the stain of her ignominy. Just as the elders of Israel failed to foresee the consequences of their decision to bring the Ark to a war with the Philistines, so the bride had no sense of the disaster that her plot with the Count would wreak upon the innocent groom. It is a deed beyond expiation, and when she delivers a child of dishonor, she suffers, dies, and remembers her sin every night as she joins her groom in the dance of death.

And yet as is always the case in Agnon's stories, every interpretation bears its own contradiction. The Book of Samuel makes clear that the national dishonor brought about by the Philistines' capture of the Ark of God is only temporary. By felling the idol of Dagon, the God of Israel manifests his supremacy; the Holy Ark is later returned to the Israelites with great pomp and ceremony and the Ashdodite priests' ritual avoidance of the threshold is in fact a tribute to the triumph of the Hebrew God. By analogy, therefore, the abduction of the bride in "The Dance of Death" and the dishonor she brings upon herself are but temporary too; although she is buried in alien soil, she arises from her grave every night to join her groom, her people, and her God. The sacred custom of the priests with respect to the site where she has both betrayed and asked forgiveness of her groom is a testament to her moral victory in casting off her sin and returning to the God of Israel.

This, then, is the key to understanding "The Dance of Death." The bride does not rise from her grave each night because she has forgotten her love for the Count and wishes to dance an erotic dance with the groom. Rather, her dance is a celebration of religious and moral triumph, a point reinforced by the story's biblical title. In the light of the great disaster of their defeat, both personal and national, whatever conflict existed between King Saul and his son Jonathan in their lifetime (and indeed, the Bible tells us that it was severe) disappears from view; they will forever be remembered as having been lovely and pleasant in life as they were in death. So, separated by murder and reunited by contrition, will the bride and groom of "The Dance of Death."

I have proposed here an interpretation of "The Dance of Death," based on a close reading of its biblical allusions, that is—I hope, at least to some readers—surprising but coherent and based upon reasonable evidence. With all this, is it "valid"?

The quotation marks around "valid" provide, I think, a large part of the answer. Obviously, if there is no such thing as "correctness" in the interpretation of literary texts in general, but only a graded plausibility of possible readings, this is even truer of Agnon, who—as we have seen in the course of this study—delights in indeterminacy and multiple significances. It is certainly possible to read "The Dance of Death" as I have proposed doing here. It is also possible, however, to read it conventionally, as the tale of an innocent Jewish bride abducted by a cruel Gentile and reunited with her husband after death. Indeed, both readings are not merely possible. *Both*, although they are to all appearances mutually exclusive, are forced upon us not only by the conflict between an overt level of the story that seems to tell us one thing and a covert level that seems to tell us the opposite, but by deliberately planted contradictions *within* the covert level itself.

In Agnon's story, immediately after the announcement of the bride's abduction, "And the bride was not because the Count had taken her," comes the sentence, "The maiden cried out [*tša'akah ha-na'arah*] and there was none to save her." Of course, if we wish to interpret "The Dance of Death" in the nonconventional manner that I have suggested, the bride's screams are to allay suspicion. The problem is that here too we have an unmistakable echo of biblical language. The allusion is to Deuteronomy 22, where we read (verses 23–26), "If a maiden that is a virgin be betrothed unto a husband and a man find her in the city and lie with her [without her crying out] . . . ye shall stone them with stones that they die; the maiden, because she cried not. . . . But if a man find a betrothed maiden in the field, and the man force her and lie with her . . . unto the maiden thou shalt do nothing . . . for . . . the betrothed maiden cried and there was none to save her."

The point of the biblical law is clear: if a betrothed young woman is violated within earshot of other people who do not hear her cry out, she is presumed guilty of having participated willingly in the act; but if she is violated "in the field," that is, out of earshot, she is presumed innocent on the assumption that she screamed and was not heard. To read this allusion intertextually, therefore, would appear to compel the conclusion that the bride of "The Dance of Death," who screamed and was heard by all the wedding guests, is innocent after all! But is it so? We have already seen that many of Agnon's biblical allusions are "inverted," that is, point not to a correspondence but to a discrepancy between the biblical situation and the situation in the modern story. How can we be sure that this is not the case here too? How can we know, for that matter, whether *any* biblical allusion in this or any other Agnon story is consonant or dissonant, a mythopoetic strengthening or an ironic undermining of the apparent meaning of the text?

Is not this an interpretive impasse into which Agnon has knowingly led us, not only in "The Dance of Death" but in all his writing?