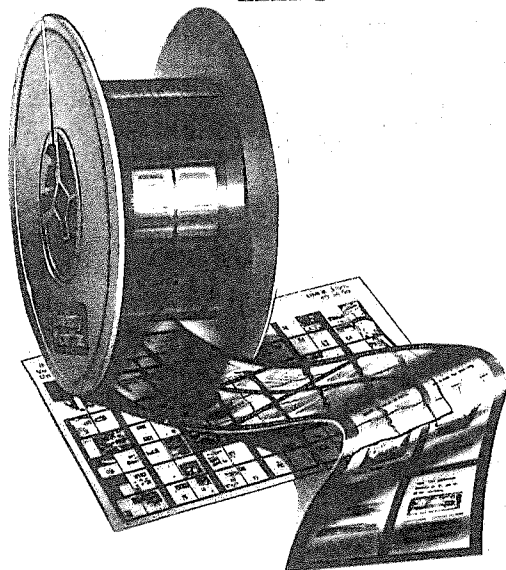


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**LAMBS IN THEIR MOTHER'S PASTURE:  
LATENT CONTENT IN AGNON'S  
IN THE PRIME OF HER LIFE\***

Nitza Ben-Dov  
Princeton University

Agnon, a master in the art of dissimulation, always sought to conceal more than he revealed in the unfolding of his narratives. To this end, he turned at times to the world of dreams, a world that speaks in symbolic language but one that, when properly interpreted, unveils the protagonists' inner secrets and also illuminates other hidden layers in the artistic work. This study explores the thematic and structural function of the dream in Agnon's psychological fiction as it operates in his novel *In the Prime of Her Life*.<sup>1</sup> I will attempt to show how a psychoanalytic approach to his use of contradictions, disguises, and substitutions can reverse or significantly alter the understanding of the manifest level of the text. The second of two dreams dreamt by Tirtza, the heroine of the novel, will serve as the point of departure for my discussion.

*In the Prime of Her Life* recounts the tale of the young Tirtza Mintz, orphaned when her mother, Leah, dies in "the prime of her life." The girl is raised by her father, Mintz, and is on occasion the guest of her mother's childhood friend, Mintshi Gottlieb. She gradually learns the details of her mother's youthful love for Akaviah Mazal, a writer and historian, and eventually comes to love and marry him.

The conclusion of the novel seems enigmatic: Tirtza has married the man she loves and, to all appearances, this is a dream come true. Yet the story ends on a note of melancholy. One might assume that this is due to the obvious flaws in Tirtza's marriage to a man who, old enough to be her father, had once courted her late mother. Most critics, however, ignore the melancholy, and at least one maintains that once the marriage has taken place the problems attendant upon it are resolved—making *In the Prime of Her Life* unique among Agnon's stories because it depicts the fulfillment of love rather than

\* Translated by Goldie Wachsman.

<sup>1</sup> S. Y. Agnon, *In the Prime of Her Life*, trans. Gabriel Levin, in *Eight Great Hebrew Short Novels*, ed. Alan Lechuk and Gershon Shaked (New York, 1983): 165-217, hereafter cited in the text as PHL; Hebrew original, S. Y. Agnon, על פסח דמנעל'ל ברמי' ימיה, (Tel Aviv, 1966): 5-54.

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the pain of unrequited love.<sup>2</sup> I argue that the melancholy ending of the work cannot be disregarded and that the key to comprehending Tirtza's troubled soul is to be found in one of her dreams.

My discussion is divided into four sections. It opens with a description of the dream's manifest content, a Freudian term that refers to its images, voices, and actions, as remembered and understood by the dreamer. The second section seeks to uncover the latent content of the dream, its real meaning, by relating manifest elements to episodes in Tirtza's waking life. The manifest content, in other words, constitutes a condensed and distorted version of Tirtza's life experiences. Her dream, in which key episodes as well as minor episodes are fused, enables us to realize both the links between seemingly unrelated events and the intrinsic significance of these events. The third section explores how the dream eventually serves to trigger the process of Tirtza's awakening—her disillusionment, insight, and resignation to the realities of life. This is a process that is typical of the development and maturation of Agnon's protagonists. Finally, in the last section, I argue that *In the Prime of Her Life*, despite its unique qualities,<sup>3</sup> adheres to the Agnonian paradigm of unrequited love.

### I. TIRTZA'S DREAM: THE MANIFEST CONTENT

The novel reaches a climax toward its end, when Tirtza, no longer able to contain her emotions, reveals her love to Akaviah Mazal and is rebuffed by him. She returns home from the forest, feverish and "shaking in every limb." In her extreme physical and mental agitation she searches frantically for a match to dispel the darkness in her room. At last, slipping into bed, she relinquishes her hold on waking reality and lapses into fitful sleep, entering the zone of visions and dreams. These events are, in a sense, the incubative phases of her dream, which is described below.

I lay on the bed and covered myself, yet I imagined myself to be still walking about. I walked for a good many hours. Where to? Lo and behold, an old woman stood by the road waiting for me to ask her the way. Is she not the old woman I first saw a month ago when one bright day I ventured out of town? The old woman opened her mouth. "Here she is," she said. "I barely

recognized you, are you not Leah's daughter?" "Are you not Leah's daughter?" the old woman exclaimed while snuffing tobacco. She chattered on though and did not let me answer a word. I nodded my head that indeed I was Leah's daughter. The old woman went on and said, "Did I not say you are Leah's daughter, while you swept by me as though it did not matter a straw. The lambs are ignorant of the pastures where their mothers grazed." The old woman sniffed a second time and continued, "Did I not nurse your mother with the milk of my breasts?" I knew this to be a dream, yet I was astounded: my mother had never nursed at the breast of a foreign woman, how dare the old woman claim she nursed my mother. I had not seen the old woman for a great many days, nor had I thought of her, and this gave me further cause for surprise. Why then had she suddenly accosted me in my dream? Wondrous are the ways of the dream and who knows its paths.

My father's footsteps startled me awake (PHL, p. 208).

The dream opens on a note of disorientation and indeterminacy of time and direction: "I walked for a good many hours. Where to?" Having lost her way, Tirtza focuses then on an old woman standing "by the road," waiting for Tirtza to "ask her the way." Tirtza's recognition of the old woman occurs in two stages: First, she is simply "an old woman"—a stranger; then Tirtza "recognizes" her as "the old woman"—the one she had met before—recalling an incident earlier in the story. She had at that time ventured out to the edge of town "when lo, there stood before me an old woman, waiting so it seemed, for me to ask her the way" (PHL, p. 195). No words are exchanged by the two and no explanation is offered regarding the old woman's intent.

In the dream, by contrast, the old woman and Tirtza interact. The old woman assumes an active role. She snuffs tobacco and chatters incessantly. Her monologue contains three significant statements: she identifies Tirtza as "Leah's daughter," chastises her for passing her by, and finally testifies to having nursed Tirtza's mother. Tirtza is passive. She fails to utter a single word and does no more than nod her head in assent after the old woman repeatedly asks her if she is Leah's daughter.

Who is this old woman? What is the significance of her reappearance in a dream so soon after Tirtza's confession of love to Akaviah Mazal? I would argue that the answers are to be found in identifying the old woman as the distorted reflection of someone else in the story, someone about whom Tirtza has negative feelings. Her dream allows her to project otherwise suppressed emotions, first as astonishment ("I knew this to be a dream, yet I was astounded"), then as indignation ("My mother had never nursed at the breast of a foreign woman"), and finally as resentment ("How dare the old woman claim she nursed my mother"; "Why than had she suddenly accosted me in my dream?").

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Band, in *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley, 1968): 118, writes on *In the Prime of Her Life*, "Here, for the first time and one of the few times in Agnon's career, love is fulfilled and is victorious in the face of what, on the surface, seem to be insuperable forces."

<sup>3</sup> On a unique quality of *In The Prime of Her Life* not discussed here, the biblical language of the novel, see the preface to my article, "Biblical Allusions in Agnon's *Dance of Death: A Study in Intertextual Discernance*," *Modern Judaism* 7 (Oct. 1987): 272-274.

## II. TIRTZA'S DREAM: THE LATENT CONTENT

### The Old Woman

Freud viewed the censorship of dreams as the principal cause of their peculiarity, complexity, and obscurity. He regarded the very existence of baffling dream elements as evidence of the dreamer's suppressed thoughts. In Tirtza's dream, the true identity of the old woman has been censored, but we know some things about her: she stands by the road, snuffs tobacco, and chatters continuously. We sense, too, that Tirtza finds the old woman disturbing and threatening, although in her hasty "recognition" and repudiation of the old woman she is deflected from further contemplation of the woman's true identity ("wondrous are the ways of the dream and who knows its paths"). But that which Tirtza, in her subjectivity and resistance, cannot, or will not, comprehend can be fathomed by means of close analysis of the clues in the text. These clues suggest that it is Mintshi Gottlieb who stands as the reality behind the camouflaged elements of Tirtza's dream. For it is Mintshi Gottlieb who guides Tirtza and who serves as an agent of distortion in the girl's life by sending her out onto the wrong path.

Mintshi Gottlieb is first mentioned in the novel in connection with the eve of Leah's death: "That night Mintshi Gottlieb came to inquire about my mother's health. Mintshi was her close friend. As young girls they had studied together under Akaviah Mazal" (PHL, p. 169). Thus, even before being orphaned, Tirtza had associated her mother's past with Akaviah and Mintshi. A year after Leah's death, the young orphan spends the summer at Mintshi's home. During this time their relationship deepens, and Mintshi provides further revelations about the relationship between Leah's mother and Akaviah Mazal:

Mrs. Gottlieb was a diligent woman. Yet she never appeared to be busy, whether attending to her affairs at home or whether in the garden. And if she paused in the midst of her work it seemed as though the task at hand was just completed and that she had arrived to see its progress. I sought her out at least seven times a day, yet I never felt I was intruding into her affairs. During my visit at the Gottliebs', we evoked the memory of my mother, peace be with her. Mintshi then told me how Mazal had loved my mother, peace be with her, and how she had also loved him. Her father, though, had not consented to their union for he had already promised her hand in marriage to my father (PHL, p. 177).

Tirtza is a keenly observant narrator, relating many details. But, unable to piece together the discrete items so as to draw broader conclusions about

Mintshi's personality,<sup>4</sup> she remains unaware of the significance of Mintshi's "covert" diligence. Yet it is Mintshi's ability to camouflage her direct involvement in work ("she never appeared to be busy") that is the key to understanding her behavior and her influence upon Tirtza.

The seeds of Tirtza's future love for Akaviah will seem to grow naturally, but they are actually carefully nurtured by Mintshi's covert diligence. Three times, paralleling the three statements of the old woman in the dream, Mintshi imparts to Tirtza information about Akaviah and Leah in the course of her seemingly innocuous chatter. On the first occasion, noted above, Mintshi evokes the memory of the dead mother and her love for Mazal in the course of household work and gardening and thereby plants seeds in the fertile soil of Tirtza's curious mind. After this first revelation, Tirtza finds herself obsessed with her mother's past and has a "thirst to know more." She dares not ask, yet once again Mintshi volunteers information. This time Akaviah alone is the "hero" of Mintshi's chatter: "Mazal was still a young man when he arrived here. He left Vienna... He came to see the town" (PHL, p. 178). Although Leah is not mentioned at all in this second revelation, Tirtza associates Mintshi's words with her mother: Mintshi

began again to speak of my mother and Mazal ... Mintshi spoke in a low voice and a cold gust of air rose from her words. It was the very chill which I had felt upon touching my brow against the marble slab of my mother's tombstone, may she rest in peace (PHL, p. 178; emphasis added).

The connection in Tirtza's mind is obvious: Akaviah had composed the inscription for Leah's tombstone. Tirtza is thus trapped in a cycle of associations that leads from Akaviah to her mother's death and back to Akaviah.

Hypnotic tones and seeming unintentionality are most sharply etched in the third stage of revelation. Mintshi, who had before spoken in a low voice, now "shuts her eyes as though in a dream." When she starts "to wake" she fetches a diary, a copy she has made of Akaviah's memoirs (PHL, p. 178). She seems to recall the existence of the diary by accident and to give it to Tirtza on impulse. Although Tirtza is unaware of any ulterior motive, there is by now reason enough to suspect that Mintshi is quite deliberately guiding Tirtza along a path that leads to the hidden world of her parents' memories. Tirtza, like any child, enters this private world only at great risk.

<sup>4</sup> On Tirtza as a fallible narrator, see A. J. Band, "המספר הבלתי מודיען במיכאל שלי ובברמי ימיד" ("The fallible narrator in *My Michael* [a novel by Amos Oz] and *In the Prime of Her Life*"), הספריה (June 1971): 30-47.

The association of Mintshi Gottlieb with the old woman "by the road" has both concrete and metaphoric dimensions.<sup>5</sup> Mintshi's home is in fact distant, beyond the bridge on the edge of town, and Tirtza and her father meet Mintshi on the way there: "We crossed the town and arrived at the Gottliebs' ... She [Mintshi] hurried in our direction and welcomed us" (PHL, p. 176). As metaphor, the road leading toward Mintshi can be understood as a path in Tirtza's life—a path winding through the lives of her parents and into their intimate memories.

Other details in the dream also have specific referents in the narrative. The old woman twice snuffs tobacco, which in a double sense leads us to the Gottliebs' home, an estate that also houses a perfume factory. Mr. Gottlieb, a perfumer, must preserve his olfactory sense; to this end Mintshi prepares bland, unspiced dishes, a fact duly noted by Tirtza (PHL, p. 177). Moreover, upon their arrival to the Gottliebs', Tirtza and her father join their hosts in the garden for supper and their conversation revolves about smoking and tobacco (PHL, p. 176). That fateful day of arrival provides the context for the revelations that follow.

### The Dream and the Three Encounters

Thus far, we have identified the insidious Mintshi Gottlieb with the vaguely threatening figure in Tirtza's dream. Henceforth, we will note, point for point, the dream's precise analogues to Tirtza's three encounters with Mintshi during the summer she visited with her. For just as the dream images of the old woman's presence on the road and her tobacco snuffing are refractions of specific events, so each of her statements intensifies a certain aspect of Tirtza's extended sojourn in the Gottlieb residence. We will see how the stuff of Tirtza's dream—fleeting hints, fragments of phrases, personal memories, and incidental thoughts—recalls forgotten episodes and imbues them with a new significance.

In the dream, the old woman is at first hesitant, then insistent: "Are you not Leah's daughter ... you must be Leah's daughter (הלא בַּח לֵאָה אִתָּךְ) ... did I not say you are Leah's daughter." This progression is indicative of the way Tirtza is initiated into the secrets of her mother's world by Mintshi Gottlieb. Mintshi's seemingly random first revelations about Leah and the men who

surrounded her ("Mintshi then told me how *Mazal* had loved my mother ... *Her father*, though, had not consented to their union for he had already promised her in marriage to *my father*") are distilled in the alembic of Tirtza's mind into three words: בַּח לֵאָה אִתָּךְ ("you are Leah's daughter"). The old woman's repetition of the words "are you not Leah's daughter?" and Tirtza's silent affirmation, "Indeed I was Leah's daughter," reinforce the influence most fundamental to Tirtza's sense of identity: that she is Leah's daughter. The dream has eliminated extraneous material and targeted only that which is relevant to Tirtza's inner world. The dream reduces reality to its essence, intensifying images, people, meanings, and words. Although not only Mintshi Gottlieb formed Tirtza's self-image as "Leah's daughter," the cumulative effect of adults and their utterances is personified in the dream by an old woman who refuses to identify Tirtza by her given name. The *causa causans* of events that governs Tirtza's life is tersely rendered in the affirmation: "I nodded my head that *indeed*, I was Leah's daughter" (emphasis added). Tirtza, by her nonverbal, passive acquiescence, accepts this outside insistence on who she is as incontrovertible fact. Mintshi's insinuations produce a kind of tropistic response: Tirtza, like a sapling, grows in the direction Mintshi has imposed. The signs of that response pervade the novel. Here we will focus on a brief but revealing scene that underscores the interaction between Mintshi and Tirtza and that is condensed in the dream as the triple saying, "you are Leah's daughter."

During one of her many visits to the Gottliebs', a full year after the extended summer visit, Tirtza finds herself alone with Mintshi in the garden. Although Tirtza has arrived at a particularly hectic moment, Mintshi, in the midst of a party, leaves her other guests to talk privately with Tirtza.

After the meal Mintshi walked out with me to the garden. She had been restless while sitting with her sister-in-law and now she looked back upon earlier times. "Bender," she called out, and a small dog leaped toward her. I almost took fright. Mintshi patted his head with love and said, "Bender, Bender, Bender my son." Although I dislike dogs, I ran my hand over his coat and patted him. The dog looked at me with a worried look and then barked in approval. I embraced Mintshi and she kissed me (PHL, p. 202).

Tirtza overcomes her instinctive fear and dislike of dogs (the Hebrew uses "hatred"), adapting herself to her hostess' predilections. Wordlessly, Tirtza, who would if alone recoil from the dog, forces herself to pat the dog as if she liked it. Having made this show of affection, a performance that meets with Bender's and Mintshi's approval, she feels a sense of release and embraces Mintshi, who then kisses her. This is an act of unspoken yet profound communication. Tirtza's submission and subsequent complicity are a clear reminder of her wordless acquiescence — the affirmative nod — in the

<sup>5</sup> Gideon Shunami, in his article "גבורים בכבלי כפיליהם" ("Heroes Imprisoned by Their Doubles"), על, *המשמר* (2 August 1968), appreciates the importance of Mintshi Gottlieb in *In the Prime of Her Life*. Nonetheless, he overlooks Tirtza's dream and remained oblivious to Mintshi Gottlieb's ill-fated influence.

dream to the old woman's insistence that she is "Leah's daughter." The dog's peculiar name, Bender, בענף, which means "twisted" or "perverted," and his nickname, "my son," signal Mintshi's ability to twist and pervert emotions in unnatural directions.

The second of the old woman's statements, "the lambs are ignorant of the pastures where their mothers grazed," conveys metaphorical content. The influential figure who insists that Tirtza is none other than "Leah's daughter" also intimates that Tirtza—the "lamb"—must go back and graze in her mother's pasture. Understood as a parallel to the second phase of Mintshi's revelation, the pasture to which Tirtza is being recalled must deal mainly with Akaviah (remember that Akaviah alone was mentioned in Mintshi's second revelation). In this regard, the old woman's implied imperative recalls the biblical injunction forbidding a shepherd to encroach with his herd upon the stranger's field—לרעה בשרה זרים. Thus Tirtza is encouraged to encroach, or trespass, on another's territory.

Finally, in the third statement that astounds Tirtza, the old woman demonstrates, "Did I not nurse your mother with the milk of my breasts?" To fathom the meaning of this statement and relate it to the love story of Leah and Akaviah, we should again look to a parallel among Mintshi's threefold revelations: This last declaration is Tirtza's dream association with Akaviah's memoir, which was given when Mintshi "shuts her eyes as though in a dream."

But what is the link between Leah's infancy and Akaviah's memoir? The answer lies in a progression: with each succeeding statement the old woman reaches closer to the core of Tirtza's being. She begins by identifying Tirtza as a daughter, Leah's daughter, reaches further back in time by referring to the pasture where Tirtza's mother grazed, and finally arrives at the point of origin: She, the old woman, not Leah's natural mother, had suckled Leah. Paralleling this point, the last phase of Mintshi's "covert diligence" involves her transmission of a copy of Akaviah's memoirs—an intimate *primary* source, the nurturing milk itself.

In the dream, Tirtza categorically rejects the old woman's claim: "My mother had never nursed at the breast of a *foreign* woman, how dare the old woman claim she nursed my mother" (emphasis added). The inauthenticity of the old woman's claim is mirrored in reality: the memoir is not an original document but a copy. Akaviah's other writings, by contrast, were authentic love poems transmitted intact and in their original form to a private and exclusive addressee: Tirtza's mother. Mintz, hoping to publish the poems in Leah's memory, had approached Akaviah to see if he had a copy, for Leah had burned them before she died. The answer was no; he had never made one

since he had written the poems "for her" (PHL, pp. 172-173), implying that to have copied them would have been a sign of less than sincere love. By analogy, then, just as the "milk of foreign breasts" is not the milk of the true (natural) mother, so the memoir produced (copied) by Mintshi is not the true text—it may be selective and possibly even counterfeit. The road traveled by Tirtza after reading the dubious source ultimately leads her astray. She attempts to complete a journey that was aborted before she was born, a journey that, like the love poems, cannot be repeated. Tirtza's effort to recreate the past by living her mother's life ends in misfortune, both for herself and for Akaviah.

Tirtza's repudiation of the old woman in the dream, her intuition that the old woman is lying, is based on personal memories that predate the grafting of "foreign" memories onto her mind. We must note here that the story *In the Prime of Her Life* is actually Tirtza's memoir, the retrospective chronicle of her life following her mother's death, composed while she is in a state of melancholy and unrest after her marriage to Akaviah and after having conceived his child. The reader learns this crucial fact, however, only at the end of the work, which closes: "so ended the chronicles of Tirtza" (PHL, p. 216). Within this memoir Akaviah's memoir is inserted as a lengthy and autonomous citation, an interpolation that ruptures the flow of the larger work. This deliberate interpolation serves an important thematic and structural function. For the textual patchwork is a palpable manifestation of the problematic elements in Tirtza's inner world. In a sense, Tirtza's inability or reluctance to put Akaviah's diary into her own words is an external sign that she has never digested it; that it is, indeed, a foreign element that cannot be assimilated. Tirtza's dream of repudiating the authenticity of the old woman's assertion that she delivered the nurturing milk is a symbolic manifestation of her unacknowledged uncertainty concerning the authenticity of Akaviah's chronicles as copied by Mintshi Gottlieb.

Tirtza's dream, which occurs while she is still at the critical crossroad of her life, might have served as a warning, a premonition of disaster, urging her to pull back or to follow a different road. Instead she shakes off her dream with the thought, "wondrous are the ways of the dream and who knows its paths," and thereby disregards its message. The narrative, however, transcends the narrator's naivete and fallibility and affords true insight into her troubled soul and unconscious fears.

### III. DISILLUSION, INSIGHT, AND RESIGNATION

Tirtza ignores the messages of her dream until her own unhappiness overwhelms her. Then, married, pregnant, and disillusioned, she recognizes that her marriage to Akaviah was a mistake. But until the moment of this acknowledgment it is easier for her to seize upon conventional models to explain her conduct than it is for her to recognize that, beyond the proverbial identification of daughter and mother, there is another, decidedly unromantic force that has determined her fate. As she lies ill in her delirium she yields to the seduction of reenacting her mother's lovesickness and wishfully recalls a medieval legend. Its fairy-tale denouement is a radical departure from the sad conclusion of her mother's story.

I then remembered the legend of the Baron's daughter who had loved a man from among the wretched of the land. "It shall not come about," her father had said. Hearing her father's words the maiden took ill and nearly died. And seeing that she was ill the doctors said, "The wound is grievous, there is no healing of the bruise, for she is stricken by love." *Her father had then gone forth to her lover and he had implored him to take his daughter as his wedded wife* (PHL, p. 211; emphasis added).

Surely Tirtza wishes to see as congruent with her own life the characters of the Baron's daughter, her father, and her lover and to ignore the role of Mintshi Gottlieb, the unromantic mediator whose counterpart exists neither in the fairy tale nor in her mother's love story. Identifying with her mother almost until death, Tirtza fixates on the fairy tale's happy ending as an alternative to her mother's tragic fate. Unlike her mother, she resolves not to die but to live to marry her beloved. Tirtza, whose name is a derivative of the root רצה, "to want," is determined to accomplish her will.

It would seem then that the Baron's daughter and Tirtza share identical destinies. Tirtza, like the lovesick maiden, becomes mortally ill and, once out of danger, marries her beloved. Mintz, having recognized his daughter's prolonged illness as a terrifying echo of Leah's sickness, has resigned himself to the inevitable. Like the Baron in the fairy tale, he consents to the marriage if only to save his daughter's life.

But how can we apply the idyllic fairy tale in which all the players live happily ever after to Tirtza's real-life predicament? We can begin by looking at the relationship of Akaviah and Tirtza. Is theirs really a mutual love? Judging by Akaviah's confrontation with Tirtza in the forest, one hardly concludes that he is one of the "wretched" longing to marry the "Baron's daughter." On the contrary, gently and with irreducible logic he tries to calm Tirtza following her impassioned admission of love and, further, to dissuade her, to make her understand that her infatuation is a function of her inex-

perience with men. As for Tirtza's father, the "Baron," did he forbid the marriage (following in the footsteps of Leah's father)? No. He never utters a word of opposition. When told by Tirtza of her engagement (a fabrication, since no promises of betrothal had been exchanged in the forest), her father attributes the confession to his daughter's delirium. Tirtza also assumes that her father has asked Mintshi to dissuade her from marrying Akaviah; yet her father has done no such thing. Tirtza, in other words, would prefer to see the fairy tale as analogous to her life and to that end has misrepresented the facts.

Still laboring under these delusions, she marries the man she thinks she loves and conceives his child.<sup>6</sup> In taking those steps, she believes she has broken with her mother's past. And yet a nameless melancholy and anguish soon return to cast their shadow on her life. Now married to Akaviah — who spends hours alone in his room next to the stove working on his chronicle of the history of the Jews in Tirtza's hometown—she seeks to dispel her sadness. Her own chronicle, the one we have read and that is entitled *In the Prime of Her Life*, is the evidence that she, like her husband, craves an escape from pain and finds solace in writing.

In a Proustian progression, Tirtza's self-awareness and understanding of her surroundings and of the forces that have molded her life deepen as her chronicle nears the stage that prompted her to write it.<sup>7</sup> In essence, writing her memoir while she is pregnant is Tirtza's attempt to comprehend herself, her husband, and the events that led to their unhappy union. A single episode of erotic intimacy in the novel exemplifies Tirtza's deep and final understanding of her relationship with her husband and her conscious dissociation from Mintshi. Tirtza, listless, lethargic, the unborn child quickening in her, is sitting in her husband's room, where he is accustomed to working undisturbed. Although Tirtza knows that her presence is an unwelcome disruption, she does not move.

<sup>6</sup> Tirtza married Akaviah בשבת ט"ו שבט, the Friday following the Ninth of Ab. The Ninth of Ab is the date marking the destruction of the First and Second Temples and other calamities that befell the Jewish people that day. The date of Tirtza's wedding has clear symbolic significance in that it alludes to personal destruction in her marriage to Akaviah. Her consolation (נחמה) will be sought (see the conclusion of the article) in the realm of sublimation.

<sup>7</sup> In *Remembrance of Things Past*, and especially in *Time Regained*, the reason why Marcel, the narrator, writes becomes clear only on the final page. Consequently, the shape of the work is circular in that the reader is essentially invited to reread Proust's opus with the insight gained at its conclusion. The final insight, the longing to recapture the past and preserve it, suffuses the entire work with certain emotive color. Agnon invites the reader to do the same in *In the Prime of Her Life*, since it is only on the final page that the reader understands why Tirtza has undertaken to write the chronicle of her life. Marcel's and Tirtza's motives for writing are, however, different. Tirtza embraces the creative enterprise as a distraction; Marcel in order to regain time. Freud, of course, would have viewed both as acts of sublimation.

I undressed in his room and I bade him arrange my clothes. And I shuddered in fear lest he approach me, for I was exceedingly ashamed. "The first three months will pass," Mrs. Gottlieb said, "and you will be well again." My husband's misfortune shocked me and gave me no rest. Was he not born to be a bachelor? Why then have I robbed him of his peace? (PHL, pp. 214-215; emphasis added).

This suggestive erotic encounter is rendered with typical Agnonian reticence and leaves a great deal unsaid. Significantly, it does not omit one salient detail: mention of Mintshi Gottlieb—an intrusive presence even during this most intimate moment—exactly as she had been in Tirtza's dream following the confession of love to Akaviah. Tirtza, naked in her husband's presence, shuddering with emotion, remembers Mintshi's observation that after the first three months, probably of pregnancy, she will be "herself" again. But at the time of writing it is clear that the three months have already passed and she is still sick at heart. Mintshi's attempt to dismiss this melancholy falls short of the insight Tirtza is fast gaining into her relationship with her husband. As he nears her naked body and as her sense of his misfortune overwhelms her, she finally grasps reality with new insight that wells from the very core of her being. Akaviah, Tirtza now realizes, is a loner, by nature a confirmed bachelor, and his uneasiness with the forced intimacy of marriage is the cause of her anguish. Having realized that she has robbed the man she loves of his essential tranquility, Tirtza concludes ruefully: "I was a snare unto Akaviah" (PHL, p. 215). This explanation also sheds light on a heretofore unsuspected aspect of Leah's relationship with Akaviah. The passage suggests that Tirtza, who married Akaviah so as to atone for an injustice done to him by Leah's father, now understands that perhaps it was Akaviah himself who may have withdrawn from marrying Leah, thereby obeying the dictates of his own heart and self-sufficient character. Perhaps in her own case she should have heeded Akaviah's own words and warning:

But what will you do the day you find the man who will really capture your heart? As for myself, I have come to the age when all I desire is peace and quiet. Think of your future, Tirtza, and concede that it is good that we part before it is too late (PHL, p. 207).

It is a supreme irony that Akaviah, who did not marry Leah, his beloved, feels compelled to marry her daughter. For him, Tirtza's illness is the turning point, a double reproach: the accusation of a spurned mother and her similarly spurned daughter. Only after the wedding does Tirtza realize that in marrying Akaviah she has wronged him. With renewed intensity, Tirtza then "longs to die" and prays that she will give birth to an "infant girl who would tend to all Akaviah's needs" after her death (PHL, p. 215). Disillusioned, seeking an antidote to her despair, Tirtza begins to write in the hope that the act of writing will grant her the serenity she has never known.

#### IV. UNREQUITED LOVE

*In the Prime of Her Life* is the only one of Agnon's stories that is related by a female narrator who is also the heroine of the tale. All of Agnon's male protagonists share a number of characteristic traits: passivity, oscillation between fantasy and reality, and a thwarted desire for love and erotic fulfillment. Their yearning ends in disappointment, which leads to a resignation bordering on despair and to sublimation, usually through an artistic enterprise. Although a cursory reading may tempt one to believe that Tirtza differs from these unhappy men, a closer reading reveals that she, too, is a passive character manipulated by others. Like many of Agnon's other protagonists, she learns to channel her frustration and disillusionment into creative enterprise. Akaviah, of course, is a passive character as well. His passivity is ultimately revealed as part of his aloneness, which he prefers to the demands and tensions of marriage.

Mintshi Gottlieb, a secondary character, is the true driving force in the novel, the puppeteer who manipulates the main characters from behind the scenes. It is she who plants in Tirtza the seeds of remembrance, who enslaves her to the past. It is not the father but Mintshi who has ruined Tirtza's life. What could have motivated Mintshi to act as she does? Are her actions deliberate and premeditated? Had Agnon afforded us the luxury of reading her private thoughts by exposing her dreams as well, our answer would be more definitive. Instead, tantalizing hints are interspersed throughout the novel. Mintshi, like Leah, was infatuated with Akaviah. She later copied Akaviah's memoir and held onto it for seventeen years before handing it to Tirtza. Akaviah was aware of her attraction to him since in his memoir he (Mintshi?) wrote that "her heart had then beat fast, for she had the privilege of knowing me" (PHL, p. 184). But she had to watch the growing love between Leah and Akaviah from the sidelines. Perhaps for years she waited in the wings, ever watchful for a chance to reconnect with Akaviah, even from a distance. Perhaps, too, the act of copying or rewriting his memoir and holding onto it was her attempt to channel the frustration of an impossible love, her own sublimation. It is significant that Mintshi's marriage is an unhappy one and that she never bore children. Tirtza observes that "there was no joy in the Gottliebs' home" (PHL, p. 177). Could this bitter draught of unreciprocated love, loneliness, and a bad marriage have led her to devise an elaborate plan of vengeance, a trap? And who is the target of her poisoned arrow? "Leah's daughter" or Akaviah, who abandoned both Mintshi and Leah? Mintshi enters into a relationship with the unsuspecting Tirtza, through whom she successfully manipulates Akaviah. Her "tropicistic" influence on Tirtza,

whether conscious or not, brings realization—via the girl—of her own and Leah's dream of love. It is doubtful, however, that Tirtza realized her own dreams.

Tirtza's rebellion against Mintshi remains stifled, emerging only in her dreams. Her revelatory dream was the one bridge that might have led to self-knowledge and awareness. Had Tirtza only understood the message of her dream she might have chosen not to follow the road to Akaviah. Alone, unhappily married, and pregnant, Tirtza must now grapple with a bitter truth and transcend her death wish by grazing in a pasture of a different sort, one that will sustain her failing spirit and transform her despair into creative sublimation.

A SYMBOLIC PSYCHE:  
THE STRUCTURE OF MEANING IN  
A. B. YEHOShUA'S "FLOOD TIDE"

Gilead Morahg  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

"Flood Tide" has been rightly regarded as the finest among the seven stories that comprise A. B. Yehoshua's first collection of short fiction, *Death of the Old Man* (1963).<sup>1</sup> The fact that it was chosen to conclude the volume suggests that the author himself may have viewed this story as a significant point of artistic culmination.<sup>2</sup> Like all of Yehoshua's other early works, "Flood Tide" attains much of its effect from the intensity with which it simultaneously invites and frustrates interpretation. The polysemic suggestiveness of its metarealistic setting, enigmatic imagery, and cryptic development generates a strong impulse towards interpretation. But these qualities also constitute a hindrance to the interpretive effort by distancing the story from all familiar frames of reference.

In the final movement of "Flood Tide," the story's unnamed protagonist, a young prison guard who is also the narrator, makes an extraordinary appeal to his imagined audience. Locked in the prison cell in which he has been left to die, the young guard says:

Imprisonment does not scare me. I do not despair. Perhaps in here I will finally understand the laws fully. In here I will understand the importance of imprisonment to the morality of the kingdom. I am still young and need to further educate myself in the Book of Laws. A dank cell on a cold morning, can you understand what I really mean?<sup>3</sup>

The narrator's sudden appeal for understanding indicates that while his narrative is clearly intended to communicate specific meaning, his mode of

<sup>1</sup> See: Gershon Shaked, גל חדש בסיפורת העברית (A New Wave in Hebrew Narrative Fiction [Tel Aviv, 1974]), p. 130.

<sup>2</sup> The arrangement of the stories in *Death of the Old Man* does not follow the original order of their individual publication. "The Last Commander" was the last to be published among the stories included in the volume. See: Joseph Yerushalmi, *A. B. Yehoshua: Bibliography 1953-1979* (Tel Aviv, 1980), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> A. B. Yehoshua, גיאאות הים (Flood Tide), 1974 זורף עד (Till Winter 1974: A Collected Edition of Yehoshua's Short Fiction [Tel Aviv, 1975]), p. 90. This book is more readily available than מות הזקן (*Death of the Old Man* [Tel Aviv, 1962]), in which the story was originally published, and I have chosen to use it as my source of reference. All subsequent references to this book will appear in the text. An English translation of the story can be found in: A. B. Yehoshua, *Three Days and a Child* (New York, 1970), pp. 175-201. Since this translation is often flawed, I have provided my own translations.