

Arts & Letters; Agnon, a Borgesian Invention

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I have known for quite some time that Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) was a philosemite. The Argentine writer was a lover of Franz Kafka's work, a vocal intellectual against Nazism, a fervent supporter of Israel after the Six Day War and a student of kabbala. He even wished he could read Hebrew. But a chance comment I made in "Ilan Stavans: Eight Conversations" (The University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) by Neal Sokol wound up teaching me something I didn't know. In the interview, I stated that Borges had never read work by Shmuel Yosef Agnon, the first Hebrew writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature and one of the central figures in modern Hebrew fiction. The comment prompted a Canadian friend, Carl Rosenberg, editor of Outlook, to correct my ignorance: In addition to the two widely-known lectures that Borges gave in the mid-1960s at the Instituto Cultural Argentino-Israeli in Buenos Aires — one on the Book of Job, the other on Baruch Spinoza — there was a third talk, one that remains virtually forgotten today, even to specialists. Borges delivered "On Sh. Y. Agnon" in 1967, approximately a year after Agnon, along with the German-Jewish poet Nelly Sachs, was awarded the Nobel Prize.

The lecture, which I've reconstructed here in English, opens a new vista into Borges's passion for Jewish letters. Since his death in 1970, Agnon's reputation has shrunk dramatically. His allusive and elusive style is demanding and his obsession with the breakdown of tradition is deemed too depressing by some. He bridged Yiddish and Hebrew literatures in an astounding way, but those traditions remain alienated from each other. If in the United States his oeuvre is out of fashion, in the Spanish-speaking world he is, and always has been, an absolute stranger. So the fact that Borges was familiar with "Days of Awe," "Tales of the Baal Shem Tov," and stories like "Forevermore," "Ido and Enam" and "The Whole Loaf" is proof of his sagacious, unrestricted, cosmopolitan taste. And what does the Argentine find in Agnon? A favorite device: allegory. In his eyes, the Israeli is the epitome of an itinerant, atemporal memory at the nucleus of Western civilization. His lecture, then, is not only a statement of empathy. It also shows the extent to which — little did we know! — Agnon himself is a Borgesian invention... and vice versa.

— ILAN STAVANS

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I begin with some considerations that run the risk of appearing digressive but which should take us to the essential theme: the personality and oeuvre of our great contemporary, Shmuel Yosef Agnon. My ignorance of Hebrew — ignorance which I deplore but which it's late to remedy — has forced me to judge him through "Days of Awe," about the Jewish

liturgical year, and “Contes de Jérusalem.” I’ll limit myself to the astonishment I’ve experienced in these volumes, the latter especially.

Let me ask a simple yet complex question, which is what all questions are: What is a nation? My first reaction is to offer a geographical answer, but it would be insufficient. Instead, let us envision a nation as the series of memories stored at the heart of a people. George Bernard Shaw was once asked: How much suffering is humankind able to bear? His answer was that the suffering of a single individual is enough and is also the limit. In other words, the limit might be an abstraction, although the suffering itself is real. And so, if misery is impossible to measure in collective terms, how might one define a nation?

To me, there isn’t a clearer example of a nation than Israel, whose origins are almost confused with those of the entire world, and which reaches us today after much misery and exile. A nation is made of the accumulated memory of successive generations. In itself, memory is often approached in a couple of ways: as a barren collection of dates, names and locations, and as a catalog of curiosities. But there’s another approach neither endorsed by historians nor by students of folklore: memory as experience incarnated in people. This, precisely, is what I find in Agnon.

“Contes de Jérusalem” ought to be read like one reads Dante: as a series of tales, at once tragic and humorous, and as a set of symbols. Agnon enables us to appreciate ancient Jewish tradition through a game of mirrors. In it he also invites us to recognize the role of chasidism. Unquestionably, the chasidic tales compiled by Martin Buber and, in his early years, by Agnon too, left an indelible imprint on him. For instance, “Ido and Enam,” filled with mystery, is the bizarre tale of a scholar who, in an act of revelation, sees 99 words of an unknown language. Ninety-nine are also the names of God; the Tetragrammaton, which is the hundredth one, is infallible. Indirectly, Agnon recalls in his pages the legend of the Golem, made out of sand by means of words by a kabbalist in Prague’s Jewish quarter.

I shall now refer to “The Whole Loaf,” a story about chance. It reminds me of Kafka, who is part of Jewish memory too. Agnon chronicles the infinite yet minuscule obstacles undergone by its hungry protagonist as he prepares for the Sabbath. Whereas Kafka was about the lack of hope, or else about a hope so remote it generates in us a terrible feeling of desperation, Agnon is patient: He waits because he’s a believer. Indeed, one of the right decisions the Swedish Academy made recently was not to award its Nobel Prize to a writer of sadness and despair. Instead, it honored one who, like Bernard Shaw, also a laureate, is sensitive to tragedy but knows that a joyful conclusion to the human quest isn’t altogether beyond us.

Another story in “Contes de Jérusalem” is about a country that could be any country. This one in particular is punished with a drought marked by an inexorably blue sky. Furthermore, enemies are always on the attack, the earth is barren and rivers are empty. The population is divided into two parties: On one side are the cover-headed, on the other

the naked-headed.... The two parties are ready to destroy each other. Yet there's a single individual who is beyond any affiliation. He furtively leaves the city, praying for God to send a compassionate storm to stop the destruction. When the others find out, they excommunicate him. His sin: not to have alerted the authorities to his wishes. A decision is then made to have everyone build a huge tent for protection from the storm, which must be large enough to cover the entire country. A commission is established to decide what name to give to the tent. Alternative commissions take the responsibility of studying the etymology and orthography of the chosen name. As the population wastes its energy in trivialities, God allows rain to fall — and the barren land is fertilized, just as modern Israel itself was fertilized. I hear a distant echo in Agnon's story of the Jewish tradition that says that every generation includes a total of 36 just men. By the way, this tradition was studied by Max Brod, Kafka's friend. Unacquainted with one another, these just men navigate the world and are replaced as soon as they die. Right now their dynasty redeems us.

Israel's memory is in Agnon — not an erudite but a living memory. He is known through a pseudonym; he didn't write for his own vanity. Somehow he knew he was the living memory of that admirable people to which, beyond the vicissitudes of blood, we all belong: the people of Israel.