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## The Author and his Hero

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Lea Goldberg

S. Y. Agnon's story, "Two Learned Jews who lived in Our Town" (from the collection *Samuch Venireh*—"Near and Visible"), closes with the following passage:

"In this tale I have not sought to describe a paragon, or to tell of Reb Moshe Pinhas and his jealousy; instead I have recounted the deeds of two learned Jews who lived in our town two or three generations ago, at a time when the Torah was the glory of all Israel, and all Israel went in the way of the Torah..."

On the surface, in this passage the author appears to be indicating his purpose, but why need he explain the aim of the story? Why does he say, as it were, "I did not intend it this way, but rather another way?" Why does not he leave us to draw our own conclusions! Have not we followed with bated breath the account of *the relations between two learned Jews*? Have we not known them intimately, seen the contrasts between their character, borne witness to their greatness and to the misconduct of one of them and waited impatiently, just like the people in this unnamed town, for the outcome of the conflict between them? Above all we remember the highly dramatic scene when Reb Moshe Pinhas goes off in a waggon to the town which has called him to be its Rabbi, gets down from the waggon as soon as he finds out that it is by the grace of Reb Shlomo that he has won this honour, returns home on foot, and refuses to listen to any entreaties, however persuasive and reasonable, for fear of deriving benefit

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from the man he hates. At the end of the story we see how the wisdom and Torah of both are of no avail. For Reb Shlomo, his magnanimity of spirit was fruitless; his rival is not reconciled, not even after death, and though Reb Shlomo gives way to him at his death as he had wished to do in life, Reb Moshe Pinhas does not make peace with him—"he did not want to be near him," not even in his grave. We had assumed the point of the whole story to be the "description of a paragon": Reb Shlomo made but one mistake in his life, and was unable to repair the wrong throughout a lifetime of exemplary conduct; the jealousy of Reb Moshe Pinhas, cruel as the grave, which ruined his life and the lives of his family, and blinded him to the essence of the love he studied to diligently—the verse "And thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself," especially "and thou shalt love" in every form as for example, in "and thou shalt love the Lord thy God" (quoted in the story in passing and in an entirely different connection). It is jealousy which in the end brought him to the grave.

Readers are well aware of the artfulness of Agnon's writing; his explicit statements must be approached with circumspection. Nevertheless in view of what he has said, we must go back and check our reading, and check the author. At first we may be ready to forego our own interpretation because of his faithful account of sacred learning, and in the light of what is said in Chapter 13: "Let us now lament the treachery of time. Three or four generations ago nothing was so well-beloved as the Torah, two or three generations ago the Torah began to diminish—God forbid that the Torah should diminish, rather should the enemies of Israel diminish..." we are almost ready to believe what the author says. But forthwith we change our minds and ask ourselves: if he really wished to portray the glory of the Torah and of Torah study, and of students of the Torah (even at a time when "the Torah began to diminish"! ) why draw the picture of Reb Moshe Pinhas, who, though he studied Torah assiduously all his life and though he so much regretted that in a moment of controversy he failed to interpret the law in truth and did not see the truth, yet to his dying day was unable to relent and forget his self-importance for the sake of the truth which is love. Perhaps we were right, and it is not the author who utters the final sentences in the story.

Our earlier suspicions are now strengthened: the point of the final remarks may not be to bring out the true meaning of the story, but rather

to conceal some of the interpretations. In any way, but otherwise someone else?

Reading the story is not to be identified with the final summing-up revealing sentence in town, the story-teller's lifetime of the writer travelling on the engine, what we know from his more recent stories is a waiter a long time when to drink tea "tea-lovers" drink in his story *Panin* living in secular standing and known as *Emunim* ("Betrothed" story describes the narrator's use of such a name. But the narrator tells what he heard from town, surely lived in which the word "He, not the author described is not the Reb Moshe Pinhas of the Torah."

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to conceal something, or at least to indicate the possibility of two different interpretations. Who, indeed, is the person who says "I didn't mean it this way, but otherwise?" Is it really the author, Shmuel Yosef Agnon, or someone else?

Reading the story with care, it becomes abundantly clear that the author is not to be identified completely with the narrator, or presumably with his final summing-up. Proof can be found within the story itself, in one short revealing sentence. Concerning the rich intellectual who lived in the town, the story-teller makes the following comment: "Once during the lifetime of the venerable old Rabbi of blessed memory he had seen him travelling on the second day of a festival in a waggon drawn by a steam engine, what we now call a railway-train." The same Agnon, who in one of his more recent stories (*Shira*) deftly and elegantly puts into the mouth of a waiter a long monologue in which he explains when to drink coffee and when to drink tea, when cocktails and when wine (more precisely, how "tea-lovers" drink tea, how "coffee-lovers" drink coffee, and so on), who in his story *Panim Aherot* ("Metamorphosis") describes the lives of people living in secular society in a great European city with precision, understanding and knowledge, who knows how the scholar Rechnitz in *Shevu'at Emunim* ("Betrothal") engaged in research on sea-weed and in the same story describes the death-scene of the consul's wife—does not need to annotate for himself nor for his readers the word "railway-train," or make use of such a naive expression as a "waggon drawn by a steam engine." But the narrator, the *covert hero*, the simple pure-hearted Jew, telling what he heard from his mother of two learned Jews who once lived in his town, surely lived in a world of such notions, spoke a form of Hebrew in which the word "railway-train" did not yet exist and required explanation. He, not the author, believes implicitly that the point of the events he has described is not to portray the dramatic conflict between Reb Shlomo and Reb Moshe Pinhas, but to laud the days "when all Israel went in the way of the Torah."

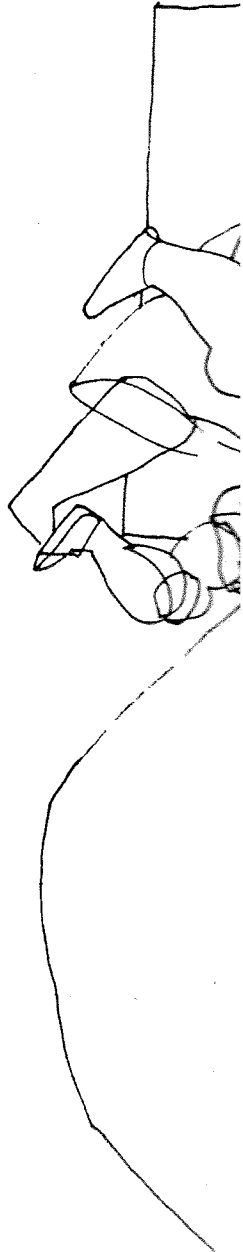
Why has Agnon adopted this method? When we speak of most of his works we use the term "stylization," assumption of a style appropriate to forms of speech and writing closer to that of Reb Nahman of Bratzlav than to that of contemporary writing, contemporary Hebrew, and realize that here there is hidden *purpose*. Stylization is used in fiction in order to

lend authenticity. If the period is a distant one, if the subject is taken from biblical times and the narrator lived through the events described, he cannot use contemporary Hebrew. He must use biblical Hebrew. But the secret of Agnon's stylization lies mainly in this introduction of a covert hero, who at one and the same time both is and is not the author, and speaks in the first person (or sometimes, as in *Tmol Shilshom*—"Only Yesterday")—uses the pronoun "we"), introducing a certain distance between the teller and the tale, enabling him both to inhabit the world described in the work and simultaneously to remain outside.

The most extreme example is undoubtedly the story, "The Fishes" with its recurrent line: "What I do not know I cannot tell." This is the comment made on Fishel's way of putting on *tefillin*: "I do not know whether he wrapped the *tefillin* seven times or nine times, and what I do not know I cannot tell." He is ignorant of this detail, yet he knows precisely what the fish thought in the depths of the river, and how afraid the other fish were when they saw the fish; he even knows the poem the fish composed "when he sang a lament for himself," and he (Agnon) translates it "into our language, more or less as follows" . . . in the metre and rhyme-scheme, of course, appropriate to a poem composed by a fish.

Actually it is in this story that the character of the story-teller is most complex. On the one hand it is the same simple Jew talking innocently of matters capable of bearing an interpretation which is not in the least simple. On the other, it is an introduction to any essay or book on the method of a creative artist. "When an artist wishes to draw a particular shape, he keeps his eye off everything in the world except what he wishes to draw; everything immediately vanishes except that shape, and since it then sees itself alone in the world it strains and grows and rises and expands and fills the whole world."

It is this blurring of the character of the story-teller, assuming consecutively one aspect and then another within a story which is not over-long, this elusive identity which occasionally deceives and beguiles, since Agnon is certainly in one sense telling us his story in his own name, which allows the author to be at one and the same time both inside and outside the tale. It is a method which can enrich the content of the work, allow



movement from one sphere to another, show a character from different points of view, reveal ambiguity, open up the different possibilities inherent in a situation, build a bridge between incompatibles, show reality nakedly whilst at the same time making it an embodiment of the ideal, and also reveal the aspirations of the author in the midst of his struggle with reality.

The world of Agnon is a world of contradiction and paradox. Agnon aspires after perfection, but he does not want, cannot accept, perfection as single-faceted. Instead he strives towards a marriage of opposites. There is in the artist something of the clown that Agnon describes in his story *Laila min Haleilot* ("One night"—from the book *Ad Hena*—"Hitherto"):

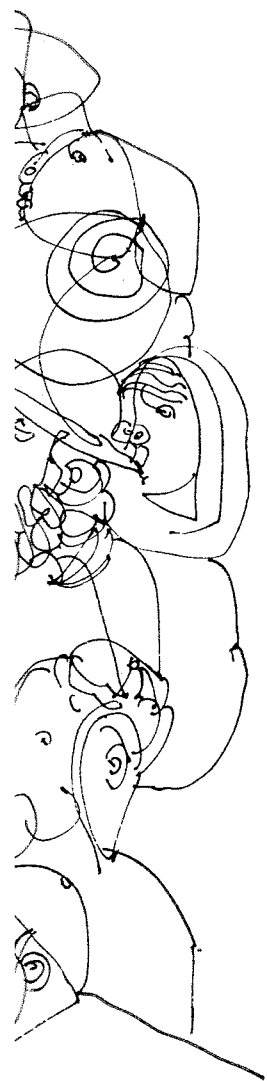
"I went to the home of the hotel employees and saw servants sitting like lords, holding their paunches with laughter. A small, wrinkled, handsome man was standing on the stage doing conjuring tricks and talking as he conjured. When they were merry his voice was sad and when they were sad his voice was merry."

It is worth noticing first of all the contradictions he points out here, and the way they are interwoven: "servants sitting like lords," "small, *wrinkled, handsome* man," "when they were merry" (i.e. the tricks) "his voice was sad, and when they were sad his voice was merry." This is a recurrent theme in the works of Agnon. Take for example *Oreah Nata Lalun*—"Wayfarer Stopped for the Night"—end of chapter 3:

"My face may have looked happy, but my heart was not happy. And it struck me there was something similar that I had not felt for many years, a happy heart with a face that does not share its happiness."

This is the function of the artist—to portray contraries at one and the same time, knowingly or unknowingly, out of a profound apprehension of the world which is not limited to consciousness, as Agnon himself goes on to explain: "I do not know whether intentionally or unintentionally" . . . and then comes a highly significant sentence which sums up Agnon's whole perception of the world and way of writing: "To my eyes great art is when a man creates happiness with a sad voice, sadness with a happy voice."

I have already pointed out elsewhere that Agnon's perception of the world is very close to that of the writers of the Romantic period; not by chance does he love so much the story of Peter Schlemiel by Chamisso, which treats of a man and his shadow, of spiritual unity and duality.



Perhaps the subject under discussion can be summed up in the words of Friedrich Schlegel in *Ideen und Fragmente*. "An idea is a concept that has reached perfection by way of irony, a complete synthesis of total opposites, a constant cycle of warring notions which incessantly renews itself."

And here is another of his definitions of Romantic poetry (equally applicable to prose): "... and yet it (Romantic art) can hover between the describer and the described, freed from all contact, real or ideal, in the middle, on wings of lyric reflection, able to recreate again and again projections of that image as though in an infinity of mirrors. It is capable of fashioning the greatest, most exalted form not only by turning outwards from within but also inwards from without."

The idea of the infinity of mirrors multiplying the "reflection" to infinity is one of those which Agnon uses time and again. The character seen through his own eyes, through the eyes of the covert hero who tells the story, through the eyes of the people who take part in the story, and even through the eyes, as it were, of the Creator Who made man whole and full of contradictions, is the source of all that is profound and complex in his stories, apparently composed so simply and artlessly. Sometimes this "mirror" is used allegorically, and made manifest to the reader. Such is the case with the cloak in "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night," chapter 13.

"I compared my cloak with its reflection in the mirror, and it was really thus, for I saw the people of the town beside it. The whole town is dressed in rags and through the rags I see the wearers. As long as a man is properly dressed he is only partly visible, as soon as his clothes are torn he is seen for what he is. Clothes are wont to deceive when they cover the body; only rags reveal the body, and not only the body but also the soul. The flesh that peeps through the tatters resembles sometimes the hand of a pauper begging for charity, sometimes the hand of a pauper who has despaired of charity. And I see not only the wearer of the rags but also myself, whether my heart is kind and I pity the man . . ."

So through his cloak are seen the rags of the townsfolk, and through the rags of the townsfolk he sees himself wrapped in a cloak, and when the soul of the pauper is revealed by his rags, it is not only the soul of the pauper; on the contrary, it serves as an image for the soul of the beholder—"and I see not only the wearer of the rags but also myself"—

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and so there is no end to the reflections and no end to the mirrors. As for the hovering "in the middle, between the describer and the described," this is achieved by a superb irony which mediates between the opposites—this is the "great art when man creates happiness with a sad voice, sadness with a happy voice." For joy and sadness, changing places within us, in our lives, pursuing each other, in the words of Plato "as though sprung from one head"\* (delight and sorrow) surely they have an absolute existence as objective facts in the life of man, essentially present at every moment of time.

Laughter and tears are very close in the works of Agnon, not after the style of that "laughter on the brink of tears" we find in the works of Gogol, for example, where laughter is primarily the twin of fear; nor is it bitter irony, a derisive curl of the lip, but rather a true mirror revealing all sides of the same object, with all its contradictions. Rarely I think have we laughed as much as when we read Agnon's novel *Tmol Shilshom* ("Only Yesterday")—and yet at the same time we feel all the sorrow, all the lack of a way out, all the tragedy in the hero and his acts. In modern European literature I know of no other book which so organically combines these two poles of our world of moods, unless it be the novel of the Italian writer from Trieste (part Italian, part German, part Jew, part Christian) Italo Svevo *La Coscienza di Zeno* ("Zeno's Confessions")—known to few and also, I am certain, unread by Agnon. At first it gives the impression of treating human life flippantly, but latent is a profound sadness, manifest in all its greatness in the final pages, after the death of one of the heroes, Guido, whom nobody loves: there the following lines occur—"I suffer certain pains, but they have no importance in the light of my great health . . . pain and love and even life itself cannot be considered illness, since they are suffering . . ." and later, when he thinks of the man who is taking his place in the world: "Who can cure us of lack of air and shortage of space? Merely to think of these things I suffocate . . ."

Anyone familiar with the development of Svevo, however, knows that in everything he wrote can be traced the influence of the writer he loved most in his youth—Jean-Paul Richter, the Romantic writer. And it is Jean-Paul whose view of life, in my opinion, is closest to that of Agnon.

\* *Phaedo*.

"With Jean-Paul," writes Rene Wellek,\* "humour becomes a peculiar form of the comic in which the philosophy of toleration, a serious conception of the world is implied: an insight into its contradictions and a forgiveness for its follies."

In Jean-Paul's novel *Flegeljahre* ("Urchin Years"), he portrays the soul of man and the human condition in the person of twin brothers, Walt and Vult, one wise, the other simple. Simplicity is also wholeness. But in this world of ours, where man has eaten of the Tree of Knowledge, innocence can no longer go free, radiant with glory as in the Garden of Eden. From the moment that Adam and Eve saw that they were naked, they were ashamed and "hid themselves from the presence of the Lord," since presumably they saw not only their physical nakedness but also their spiritual nakedness, and at that moment they were given a sign that they would have both Cain and Abel. From that time the wise have beheld the innocent with adoration and irony, the innocent have beheld the wise with veneration and love and fear. Walt beholds what he has failed to attain—covering for his physical and spiritual nakedness, in the mirror of Vult; Vult sees his lost paradise in the mirror of his innocent brother Walt. In the twenty-ninth chapter, where Jean-Paul recounts the conversation of the brothers about art (Walt is a poet, Vult a musician), Walt's attitude to art is all innocence, all feeling, all faith, and he speaks of the great sun which shines alike upon lovers and upon the battlefield: "Yet every man may see it and draw it towards him, as though it lights but this stage alone, and accompanies just his joy and sorrow; almost I would say, that just as we turn to God as though to our own God, so the whole world stands and prays to God . . ."

Vult, who knows that art is not created by feeling and divine inspiration alone, but by work and action, replies: "All right, take the sun, but let not the river of paradise turn the millstone of your art alone. If you are allowed to mix your likeness and your moods with music, you will be their slave and not their creator."

Even if what we have here is, as it were, a theoretical discussion, it is a debate between two opposed worlds, which cannot come to terms precise-

\* Rene Wellek: *A History of Modern Criticism*, Vol. 2, The Romantic Age. Yale University Press, 1955.

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\* My italics—Lea



ly because they are opposed and yet know, and in some way feel, that they complement each other; consequently, at the end of the debate, which has also been concerned with practical issues (questions of inheritance), Vult leaves his brother in haste, but puts his trust, "his world and his strength" in the innocent ideas of his gentle brother.

"Walt said good night affectionately, but did not embrace him, and looked at him *with love and sorrow*.\*

They live in each other's light, in each other's likeness. And since they are twin brothers they are both unity and duality, both wholeness and division.

Agnon sometimes describes himself as though he were both innocent and wise, both Walt and Vult. Here, for example, is "Wayfarer Stopped for the Night," chapter 6: "The Holy One, Blessed be He, places a shade upon my eyes so that I cannot see His creatures in their wrongdoing. And when He removes the shade from my eyes, they see what no other eye descries" . . . When the shade is on his eyes he is innocent, and more good; when the Holy One removes the shade from his eyes, he sees people in their wrongdoing, he is clever, and more wise. Generally he sees "what no other eye descries"—people in their wrongdoing—but in himself and in others he loves and prefers not to see people in their wrongdoing. So he listens with fear and trembling (yet, sometimes, also in agreement) to the irreligious remarks of Daniel Bach, and admires the innocent faith of his father Shlomo the Cantor; yet he himself knows that *only in the book of Job and not in life, here on earth* is there any reward for a man who takes another wife and begets other children to replace those who have been taken from him. He knows this just as Daniel Bach knows it, but Daniel Bach loves his father with all his heart, and old Shlomo the Cantor, though he is distressed by his son's remarks, loves him as his own soul, perhaps as an unrecognized part of his soul. In "Only Yesterday," the hero, "our comrade Yitzhak," is the innocent. And the story-teller, the covert hero, who uses the pronoun "we," speaking apparently in all innocence when he utters the concluding remarks—"and we shall tell the deeds of our brothers and sisters, children of God, living with God, working the land of Israel to the greater glory of God"—appears to be

\* My italics—Lea Goldberg.

identified with the innocence of "our comrade Yitzhak." Here is the passage we all remember so well, where Yitzhak Kummer is described sitting in a restaurant in the city of Lemberg, and seeing the waiters as though they were great fearsome princes:

"Everything that Yitzhak had pictured in his imagination was as nothing compared with the dread that now seized him. He began to shrink and shrink until there was nothing left of him but his hands, which he didn't know what to do with. One of those same princes who had been serving the guests came up to him and bowed. A miracle happened and Yitzhak began to speak."

Or the section which describes how our comrade Yitzhak sees the great city of Vienna whose main greatness in his eyes lies in the fact that:

"Perhaps here where I am standing stood Herzl . . . if it had not been for Herzl, we would be wasting our lives in exile, and not going to the Land of Israel . . ."

After this statement, reflecting the innocent's attitude to the Land of Israel and to Zionism—he has Agnon's admiration though with at least a modicum of irony, which is what makes it possible for him to use the word "Zionism" in the book without making it a slogan and meaningless propaganda—Yitzhak Kummer arrives at the Emperor's palace:

"He arrived at the Emperor's palace and saw the tall policemen, the palace guards, the footmen in red, swathed in sashes, with many buttons gleaming on their clothes."

At first sight this is no more than a description of the doorman at the entrance to the Emperor's palace. But the reader senses at once what it is in this picture that wins the heart of "our comrade Yitzhak"—the things which win the heart of a child: the red colour, as in "the footmen dressed in red," and the gleaming buttons: "with many buttons gleaming on their clothes." Thus tranquilly, objectively, the narrator tells of Yitzhak Kummer, his coming to the Land of Israel, his experiences and his sufferings there, his pure love for Sonia, his marriage, his life and his death in Meah She'arim in Jerusalem. Above all he tells of the faith of this innocent, and how he was unable to find peace of mind all the days of his life, for this world, not even the Land of Israel he believed in, is no paradise; and so he fled from the Zionist Land of Israel to that community which boasts of being closer to paradise, and found there the gate of hell.





Here, in this sequence of events, we can discern, I am convinced, the ultimate purpose of the author. We can see how behind the story-teller stands the author who, loving the hero for his innocence and purity, sees the impotence, the ridiculousness of innocence, the more ridiculous the more it touches the heart, his and ours, for we who have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge have no share of innocence but only love and irony. Similarly in "Two Learned Jews who lived in Our Town" innocence and purity represent the author's ideal, the object of all his love. One need only notice the precise, detailed description of the synagogue of the tailors (the simplest, most innocent of folk), where under each picture is an inscription explaining it in the words of the talmudic sage. "Under the leopard was written 'Be fierce as the leopard,' under the eagle was written 'swift as an eagle,' under the deer was written 'fleet as the deer'" and so on. Or the description of a day in the life

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of an old woman, the mother of Reb Moshe Pinhas: "The old woman had aged greatly but still she followed her regular routine. Every day at cockcrow she would rise from her bed, wash her hands and face in the basin near the old millstone, feed and water the chickens, and examine their nests to see if any of the hens had laid an egg. Then she would give the cat to eat. Then she would shake the straw in the mattress and say 'Yesterday you were light and today you are heavy, today you lie in the bed and I lie on you, tomorrow you will blaze like the fires of Gehinnom to burn my bones.' Having made her bed she would sit and pray." The passage reads almost like an extract from a talmudic legend, and even for the old woman, who believed in wizards and witches, we feel that her innocence can include her superstitious beliefs as a stable and integral part of her life; none of the new winds of change blowing through the world (even the world of the two learned Jews, where Reb Shlomo's wife was familiar with German and already tainted with the modern vices) could shake her faith.

Indeed, if there is something attractive about Reb Moshe, surely it is his innocence; even his pride is innocent, for when he goes to visit Reb Shlomo and Reb Shlomo's wife is furious he is unaware, in his naive self-centredness, of the degree of contempt in the welcome she gives him: he is entirely (and rightly) certain that Reb Shlomo is happy to have him as a visitor since he enters no man's house except Reb Shlomo's.

The nature of the relationship between the two learned Jews, so different in character, is one of innocence of integrity, in spite of the controversy between them; they are two and at the same time one, aspects of a single generation seen in a double mirror. There is a hint of this—after Reb Shlomo's illness, he is given a new name as a talisman, and it is half the name of Reb Moshe Pinhas: "and they gave him the additional name of Moshe." Perhaps, here too, we should remember Jean-Paul, whose twin brothers, so different from each other, have almost identical names—Walt and Vult.

We cannot do justice to the description of the world of innocence in this story of Agnon's without mentioning the story of the old rabbi, the teacher of Reb Moshe Pinhas, who comes to learn Torah from his lips, finds him in bed, and is sure he is ill. Not so:

"He said to him, 'Is my teacher ill?' He answered, 'Why?' He said

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'Because I find him lying in bed.' He answered 'I am an old man, and it is not worth making new clothes for me. So I lie in bed, so as not to fray my clothes through sitting.'

We should also mention the character of the simple townsfolk, the butchers, who have not themselves studied Torah, but are ready to give up their lives for their teacher, Reb Shlomo, out of love for him and simple-hearted reverence for a great student of Torah.

But behind this innocent world stands the wise author, who knows, who knows everything that his innocent heroes do not know, who knows everything that the innocent in his books neither perceive nor understand: that day by day the sharp-witted and the sober-minded, the scornful and the condescending grow more and more numerous. It is they who build the world in their own image. And day by day, we move further and further away from paradise. He even knows that he himself is one of the sharp-witted, though to him it is granted, through the mirror of his heroes, to catch a glimpse of the lost paradise.

We might almost imagine Agnon writing the following superscription to all his works—the quotation is from the well-known essay of Heinrich Von Kleist, "On Marionettes," the final section:

"In that case" I said off-handedly, "we will have to eat again of the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil in order to regain our innocence?"

"Indeed", he replied, "that is the final chapter in the history of the world."

Dr. Lea Goldberg, a leading Hebrew poet and the author of many volumes of verse and prose, is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. This essay is from the S.Y. Agnon Jubilee Volume (Tarshish Books, Jerusalem, 1958).

## The Evolution

Arnold J. Band

The sustained as the professional one of the most twentieth century with his story after decade in culture as a whole, century with its one often finds amazingly wide religious and the of traditional Jewish of modernists. For life in Eastern central universal appeals to such individualistic of those who to Since Agnon i while concealing have often fallen critic finds in Ag the hundreds of