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Aspects of "Primary Holocaust" in the Works of S. Y. Agnon¹

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1. Introduction

The theme of discourse and disaster was common to theories of criticism in the second half of the twentieth century. Bataille claimed that the history of art was always connected with horror, a claim he demonstrates with prehistoric cave paintings.² Kristeva describes discourse, in general, as part of a destructive process built on the continuous annihilation of a whole system. She describes the signifying process as a proof for a crisis within social structures, a crisis inherent to any form of production.³ In addition, we can also look to Derrida, and his perception of writing as an act that becomes its own destruction in its very attempt to create representation.⁴

One primary theme in the writings of S. Y. Agnon, which critics commonly dispute, is the place of the Holocaust in his work. There are several approaches.⁵ One approach is martyrology. This is a traditional position of

- 1 As other ahistorical works on the Holocaust, the author of this article does not wish to draw any conclusions regarding the concrete historical facts of the Holocaust, and has no intention of quantizing the concrete experience of the survivors into a theoretical terminology. See, for example, H. Weiss, "Ad hena ke-mavo la-sho'a" ("Ad hena as an Introduction to the Holocaust"), *Criticism & Interpretation*, 35-36 (2002): 111; J.F. Lyotard, "Discussions, ou: phraser 'après Auschwitz,'" in *Les fins de l'homme: A partir du travail de Jacques Derrida*, ed. P. Lacoue-Labarthe and J.L. Nancy (Paris: Galilée, 1981), pp. 283-310.
- 2 G. Bataille, *De Tranen van Eros* (Nijmegen: Sun, 1986), pp. 38-42.
- 3 J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 15.
- 4 J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 65.
- 5 See for example *La'or* (1995), p. 97.

acceptance and justifying divine judgment.⁶ This can be found in works such as “Lefi ha-tza’ar ha-sakhar” (“As the Suffering so the Reward”) and “Ha-dom Ve-kisse” (“A Stool and a Chair”).⁷

Another traditional approach defines the Holocaust within a theological frame of crime and punishment as reward for moral sin. Agnon, for example, writes in “Ba-derekh” (“On the Road”): “all these places here were covered with sacred congregations, but because of our manifold sins and the malice of the Gentiles, all the congregations were burned and killed and destroyed and laid waste, and none were left but one Jew here and there.”⁸ Another approach regarding the possibility of aesthetics after the Holocaust was phrased in Adorno’s famous maxim: “Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch.”⁹ Wiesel negates the possibility of aesthetical or philosophical representation of the Holocaust:

[...] there is no such thing as Holocaust literature – there cannot be. Auschwitz negates all literature as it negates all theories and doctrines; to lock it into philosophy means to restrict it. To substitute words, any words, for it is to distort it. A Holocaust literature? The very term is a contradiction.¹⁰

This approach is to be found in Agnon’s critics, such as Se-Lavan’s discussion of “Lefi ha-tza’ar ha-sakhar”¹¹ and Barzel’s discussion of “Im atzmi” (“With Myself”).¹²

Other critics regard the magnitude of the Holocaust as a force requiring

6 H. Weiss, *Kol ha-neshama: cheqer ‘Hadam we-kisse’ le-Shai Agnon (The Voice of the Soul: The Research of “A Stool and a Chair” the Annals of S.Y. Agnon)* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1985), pp. 46-50.

7 D. La’or, *S.Y. Agnon: Hebetim Chadashim* (S.Y. Agnon: New Perspectives) (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1995), p. 84.

8 S.Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. N. Glatzer, trans. M. Louvish (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 185. Wherever possible I will try to use the existing English translations. All other translations are mine.

9 T.W. Adorno, *Prismen – Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft* (in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 10. 1, *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft I*, hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann [Frankfurt am Main, 1977]), p. 30.

10 Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 234.

11 Yosef Se-Lavan, “Eme ha-sho’a be-sippure S.Y. Agnon” (“The Horrors of the Holocaust in S.Y. Agnon’s Stories”) *Katif*, 4-5 (1967): 145-48.

12 H. Barzel, “Ha-poetika shel S.Y. Agnon” (“The Poetics of S.Y. Agnon”), *Sde chemed* (March-April 1971): 234.

special poetic means. Kurzweil, writing on Agnon’s *Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim* (*The Fire and the Wood*), claimed that the works in this book, which were written after World War II, are the result of a new world disorder. This disorder forces the artist, Agnon, to create a new reality for himself while ignoring artistic functions that were cherished before.¹³

Another of Agnon’s critics, La’or, claims that the stand Agnon assumed toward the Holocaust is of a preserver of bygone days. The difficulty of poetical representation of the Holocaust, states La’or, made Agnon turn to traditional forms such as Midrash, Genealogy, and *Memorbücher* (remembrance books), as a means of recalling the vanishing world of East European Jewry.¹⁴ Kurzweil, pondering on Agnon’s total devotion to memory, collection and recollection of the traditional Jewish world, maintains that Agnon’s work, in general, is a departure from the traditional Jewish world. This move has brought Agnon, just as it brought Bialik, to devote himself to the preservation of Jewish spiritual treasures.¹⁵

In this article we will outline another approach that by no means contradicts those sketched before. In terms of culture, meaning, and discourse, the “historical Holocaust” is a secondary Holocaust merely indicating the “primary Holocaust,” which is the all-encompassing Holocaust, the Holocaust of Writing.¹⁶ The secondary Holocaust can be traced by classic historical facts, while pointing the way toward the primary Holocaust, which, in turn, is the Holocaust of meaning, evading any representation system.

After the war, Agnon is not merely an author but also a survivor. Despite having his community and hometown destroyed during World War II, he wrote almost no explicit work on the Holocaust. Even in “Ad hena” (“Until Now”),¹⁷ based on his days in World War I Germany, written and published more than a decade after World War II, Agnon did not respond directly to the Holocaust.¹⁸

13 Baruch Kurzweil, *Massot al sippure S.Y. Agnon (Essays on S. Y. Agnon’s Stories)* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), p. 312.

14 Dan La’or, *S.Y. Agnon: New Perspectives* (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1995), pp. 87-88.

15 Baruch Kurzweil, *Massot on S. Y. Agnon’s Stories*, pp. 284, 290.

16 Compare with Patrick Fuery, *Theory of Absence: Subjectivity, Signification, and Desire* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996), pp. 1-3.

17 “Ad hena” was published with other works in a book by the same name. Hereafter, whenever an italic *Ad hena* appears, the reference is to the book and not to the work which will appear as “Ad hena.”

18 There are, however, strong relations between “Ad hena” and World War II, as was shown lately: Hillel Weiss, “Ad hena” as an Introduction to the Holocaust,” *Criticism and*

We will begin by tracing an important aspect of the primary Holocaust in Agnon's work, the Lost Text.

2. The Lost Text as a Primary Holocaust

One aspect of the natural connection between meaning and disaster is the notion of the lost textual source. Since the beginning of time, humanity has longed for a source of unifying knowledge, that will furnish answers to existential questions. Like the father in "Ma'ase be-ez" ("Fable of the Goat"), whose son has left him for the Land of Milk and Honey, following a goat through a hidden path,¹⁹ humanity laments the loss of the textual shortcut to the Promised Land of knowledge.

The platonic theory of recollection maintains that the soul is immortal and that all acts of obtaining knowledge are, in fact, acts of recollecting forgotten knowledge.²⁰ This theory is not missing from Jewish classic works. The *Midrash Tanchuma* describes how every newborn, before emerging into the world with a lit candle on its head, is guided by an angel, who shows him/her all the mysteries of the universe. Once the baby is born, the angel taps him/her, puts the candle out and renders forgotten all that was seen.²¹

This Midrash is mentioned in "A Stool and a Chair," Agnon's auto-mythology.²² In this work, the author attempts to write about his potential lives prior to his birth. It is an example of his longing for the possibility of the reconstruction of the only Text; a text fusing his own personal history together with the history of his people, and even with the history of the world.

Agnon's lost world was gone before World War II. Weiss claims that all of Agnon's work, from *Oreach nata la-lun* (*A Guest for a Night*), published in 1939, carries within it signs of the Holocaust,²³ namely, the secondary

Holocaust. Describing Agnon's Holocaust as a Holocaust of meaning, the primary Holocaust, we can claim that all of his work is marked with destruction and absence. "Agunot"²⁴ (plural of *aguna*), Agnon's first major tale published in his new land, Palestine, is a good example. In Jewish law an *aguna* is a deserted wife who cannot remarry until her husband has sent her the *get*, the bill of divorce, or has been proven dead. The cosmic state of *aginit* in "Agunot" penetrates Agnon's extra-textual life when he changes his name from Czaczkes to Agnon, the *nom de plume* under which he published "Agunot." From "Agunot" on, any work bearing the name Agnon will have the signature of a broken unity, of a shattered world that was once complete.

The concept of the lost source of knowledge materializes as a motif in Agnon's work. In his anthology, *Sefer, sofer ve-sippur* (*A Book, an Author and a Story*), a collection of Jewish sources on language and books, Agnon references a famous Hasidic anecdote, the story of R. Nachman of Bratzlav's *Burnt Book*. A long trail of troubles and misfortunes led R. Nachman to conclude that the cause of his misery originated in a manuscript he wrote. He asked one of his followers to burn both extant copies of the manuscript. Commenting on this book, known as *The Burnt Book*, R. Nachman's right-hand man, R. Nathan writes:

When I was writing in front of our Rebbe the holy book which was burnt under his command, told me our Rebbe, "If you only would have known what you are writing etc." I answered him with self-denial, "Of course I do not know at all." He answered me, "You do not know how much you do not know."²⁵

R. Nachman had yet another book, *The Hidden Book*. Just like *The Burnt Book*, *The Hidden Book* is present in its absence, but exists on a much higher spiritual level. On this book, writes R. Nathan, "said our Rebbe that it is secret of secrets [...] and [he] said that only the Messiah will say commentary on this book."²⁶

The *Burnt Book* motif is to be found not only in Agnon's work but also in his biography. While still residing in Germany, in 1924, Agnon's house in Bad Homburg was deliberately burnt down. It was an act of arson. Housed

Interpretation, 35-36 (2002): 111-46; Yaniv Hagbi, "Ode to Absolute Nothingness: A Comparative Study between S.Y. Agnon's and Georges Perec's Language Perception in Agnon's *Ad hena*, Perec's *La Vie mode d'emploi* and their Related Works," Ph. D. diss. (Bar-Ilan University, 2002), pp. 153-67.

19 S.Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, pp. 26-29.

20 Plato, "Meno" in *Great Dialogues of Plato*, ed. W. Rouse (New York: Mentor, 1956), pp. 28-69.

21 Tanchuma, Pequdai: gimel, dalet-he.

22 S.Y. Agnon, "Hadam ve-kisse," in *Lifnim min ha-choma* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), p. 182.

23 Weiss (2002), p. 112.

24 Hochman kept the Hebrew name in his translation of "Agunot"; see S.Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, pp. 30-44.

25 S.Y. Agnon, *Sefer, sofer ve-sippur* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1978), p. 428.

26 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 428.

within was his collection of rare books, his manuscripts and, most important of all, a completed novel, *Bi-tzror ha-chayyim* (*In Eternal Life*). All were burnt to ashes.²⁷ Five years later, in Jerusalem, Agnon's house was again destroyed in the riots of 1929; making it an additional part of his personal experience of destruction. *Bi-tzror ha-chayyim*, Agnon's main work after World War I, remained his own *Burnt Book*. Even in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Agnon laments this lost book. The loss of the novel becomes not only a piece of his personal biography, but also an actual part of Agnon's work, a new fragment of text. Like R. Nachman, Agnon's autobiography bears the presence of the missing book.²⁸ Furthermore, on more than one occasion, in his belletristic work, Agnon mentions the loss of *Bi-tzror ha-chayyim*.²⁹ His own concrete lost text, however, is not the only lost text embodied in his works.

The hero of "Ha-drasha" ("The Oration") is R. Asher Zelig from Zalozitz. He is a relative of the narrator. R. Asher's father had left thirteen unpublished books after his death. A big fire in Zalozitz consumed nine of the thirteen books, motivating his son, R. Asher, to invest all the money that he had into printing the remaining four.³⁰ Agnon gives another anecdote about the lost book in "Sefer she-avad" ("A Book which was Lost"). During a visit to his hometown, the narrator discovered a manuscript written by R. Shmarya of Buchach, and had it sent back to the national library in Jerusalem. On his return, the narrator visited the library, wanting to see the book he had sent, but the librarians could not find it for him.³¹

In another story "Al even achat" ("On One Stone") the narrator had a vision about the writings of R. Adam Ba'al Shem. According to Hasidic mythology, the writings of R. Adam Ba'al Shem were discovered by the Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, before he revealed himself to the world. Since only the worthy and righteous can understand these enigmatic and powerful texts,

27 Dan La'or, *Chayye Agnon: A Biography* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1998), p. 161.

28 S.Y. Agnon, *Me-atzmi el atzmi* (*From Me to Myself*) (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1976), p. 86. See also *ibid.*, pp. 7-8, 139-40, 213-14, 271; David Kna'ani, *S. Y. Agnon be'al pe* (*Oral S. Y. Agnon*) (Tel Aviv: Ha-qibbutz ha-me'uchad, 1972), p. 22.

29 See for example S.Y. Agnon, "Pat shelema" ("A Whole Loaf") in *Twenty-One Stories*, pp. 86-87; S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for a Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (London: Victor Gollancz, 1968), pp. 206-208.

30 S.Y. Agnon, *Elu ve-elu* (*These and Those*) (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1959), pp. 213-15.

31 S.Y. Agnon, *Ir u-melo'ah* (*A City and the Fullness Thereof*) (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1973), pp. 207-11.

the narrator could only watch, and describe in words what he saw without understanding, "as metal surrounding precious stones."³² As the story unfolds, the narrator manages to lose not only the sacred writings but his own text as well. His text, we must remember, is not even a copy of the work of R. Adam Ba'al Shem but just a description of the narrator's vision of it.³³

Until now, we have seen how the absent books transform themselves into new texts and how a missing book is introduced, in its absence, into the written corpus. In "Edo and Enam," the Lost Text is not merely a static motif but an active element within the poetical infrastructure. In the beginning, it seems that Dr. Ginat, the philologist, represents a textual wholeness, as the scientist who discovered the "Enamite Hymns," i.e. "a new-found link in a chain that bound the beginnings of recorded history to the ages before."³⁴ The reader soon discovers that the text is not so perfect. The first article Dr. Ginat published was "Ninety-Nine Words of the Edo Language," ninety-nine and not one hundred, a number reflecting a flaw.³⁵ At the time of his death, like Kafka and similar to R. Nachman, Dr. Ginat requests that his publishers not reprint his works. As in Kafka's case, his wish was not granted.³⁶ All of the above examples cited previously are part of the secondary aspect of the Lost Text motif: a text that has existed but no longer exists. In "Edo and Enam," however, we can start the move from the primary Holocaust to the secondary Holocaust. Other texts, too, suffered the textoclastic wrath of Dr. Ginat. Immediately before his death he destroyed by fire not only manuscripts he had written but other rare writings as well. The narrator mourns and pontificates on the loss of these writings, as if they are a cosmic loss, as if a Holocaust has taken place:

No explanations can affect the issue, no accounts of causes alter it. These are no more than the opinions people put forward in order to exercise their ingenuity in words without meaning on cases that cannot be solved, on happenings for which there is no solace. Even if we say that events are ordained from the beginning [*gezera qeduma*],³⁷ we have

32 S.Y. Agnon, *Elu ve-elu*, p. 303.

33 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 304.

34 S.Y. Agnon, *Two Tales*, trans. Walter Lever (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966), pp. 145-46.

35 Hillel Barzel (1988), p. 65.

36 S.Y. Agnon, *Two Tales*, pp. 232-33.

37 See the Hebrew edition: S.Y. Agnon, "Edo and Enam" in *Ad hena* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1952), p. 395.

not come to the end of the chain, and the matter is certainly not settled; nor does any knowledge of causes remove our disquiet.³⁸

The words chosen by Agnon to describe the loss of text reflect a universal disaster. Words such as “no solace,” “*Gezera qeduma*” and “disquiet” allow us to imagine the destruction of the texts by Dr. Ginat as a Holocaust, comparable to the Holocaust of World War II, the historical, secondary Holocaust.

We can see this as a lamentation written by a religious person, contemplating the ways that his God runs the world. The Holocaust of the Jewish people, of his family, and of his hometown, is not only beyond his words, but beyond his silence as well. He can mourn with his silence only the lost texts of Dr. Ginat, the loss of the Book.

We can only begin to make a step toward the primary Holocaust, the Holocaust of discourse, after we have observed the contents of the two bins in which Dr. Ginat burned his texts. Apparently, among the ashes are the remains of some mystical texts that Dr. Ginat bought from Gamzu, a famous traveler and collector of rare manuscripts. During his travels, Gamzu met Gemula, his moonstruck wife, and her father Gevarya. Gevarya gave Gamzu leaves with mystical texts written upon them, with which Gamzu may gain cosmic powers relating to the moon. As Gemula is moonstruck, Gamzu’s special powers of the moon consequently rule over Gemula as well.³⁹ By accident, Gamzu sold these leaves to Dr. Ginat, creating a love triangle between the three, ending in the death of both Dr. Ginat and Gemula and the destruction of the mystical texts.⁴⁰ The obtaining and loss of the texts is the obtaining and loss of Gemula, the mysterious woman. The connection between text and destruction in “Edo and Enam” is not merely the use of the motif, as we have seen before. The primary Holocaust constitutes the new text, “Edo and Enam,” by its author Agnon. The close similarity between narrator and author is emphasized by the fact that the names of all the characters of this novella bears the first letters of their “real” creator, Agnon, the letters *ayin* and *gimel* – as if a mark of their construction and their destruction was put in their names by the author.

“Ad olam” (“Forever”) has some similarities with “Edo and Enam.” There, too, the characters have the letters *ayin* and *gimel* at the beginning of their names. Furthermore, Agnon uses an excessive amount of words beginning with

38 S.Y. Agnon, *Two Tales*, p. 232.

39 S.Y. Agnon, *Two Tales*, pp. 165-67.

40 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 228.

ayin and *gimel* throughout “Ad olam.” There, too, a scientist, Adiel Amza, seeks a lost text that can only be found in a leper’s house. Adiel Amza, in his desperate search for a trivial piece of information essential to complete his monumental book, enters the isolated house, fully aware that he can never get out again. His text, on the history of the city Gumlidata, becomes a perfect unreachable wholeness, which no one aside from the lepers can have access to.⁴¹

This connection between the book and disaster is elucidated through the insights of one of the characters in “Ad hena,” the famous bibliographer, Dr. Mittel. A Jewish scholar in Germany during World War I, Dr. Mittel examines piles of “Hebrew books brought from the occupied countries.”⁴² In these books, almost none of which are of any bibliographic importance, he has found “eyeglasses in the *Siddur* and white hairs in the *Zohar*.” This makes him aware that all of these books were “plundered from the poor deported.”⁴³ The books, the eyeglasses and the hairs are quantitative metonymy of the piles of burnt books in Germany of the 1930s, and the mountains of hair and eyeglasses left in the extermination camps.

At the center of “Ad hena,” as the focal point, stands another lost text in the form of the library of Dr. Levi. The widow of Dr. Levi asks the narrator’s advice on the library, two rooms full of rare books, that her husband left after his death. Dr. Levi’s books are the excuse for the narrator’s arbitrary wanderings in World War I Germany. The two rooms that comprise the library are repeatedly mentioned in “Ad hena,”⁴⁴ and have been explained by Kariv as representing both the Oral and the Written Torah.⁴⁵ This is only part of a more elaborate analogy, most relevant to our subject, which Kariv has drawn between the character of Dr. Levi and Moses.⁴⁶ Following Kariv, Ben-Dov shows how the narrator (the author) describes his meeting with Dr. Levi in terms of an experience combined of paradisaical ingredients as well as the

41 S.Y. Agnon, “Ad olam” in *Ha-esh ve-ha-etzim (The Fire and the Wood)* (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1966), pp. 333-34.

42 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 19.

43 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 20.

44 For example, see S.Y. Agnon, “Ad hena” in *Ad hena*, pp. 8, 27, 29, 31.

45 Avraham Kariv, “Ribbui partzufin ve-qelaster echad,” in *Shmu’el Yosef Agnon: Mivchar ma’amarim al yetzirato*, ed. Hillel Barzel (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982), p. 296.

46 Avraham Kariv (1982), pp. 294-98.

Revelation at Sinai.⁴⁷ The death of Dr. Levi is the expulsion of the narrator from the paradise of knowledge, a paradise embodied in both aspects of Jewish texts: the written Torah given in a defined historical moment, at the Revelation at Sinai, and the oral Torah, an ongoing discourse starting at the Revelation at Sinai and ending only when humanity vanishes from the face of the earth. Recovering Dr. Levi's books, then, will be the recovery of lost knowledge, of paradise lost, of a hidden path to find God.

3. The Lost Cause as Primary Holocaust

In *A Guest for a Night*, a work corresponding in many aspects to "Ad hena," the narrator ponders on the word "takhlit" ("end, purpose"):

As I have grown older, this word has grown with me. When I was a child and played with my friends, I heard people asking: And what is the end [takhlit] of it all? I began to write poems and people asked, mocking: After all, what is the end of it? When I went up to the Land of Israel, they said: Is this really an end for a young man to follow? And I need not say that all the time I lived there, people used to complain they saw no end in it. Thus most of my years have passed and still I have not achieved any end.⁴⁸

Asking for a *takhlit* is no less than asking for God, known as "bilti ba'al takhlit" in classic Jewish philosophy. Losing this *bilti ba'al takhlit*, or, in other words, the "reason of all reasons" is to lose all sense of reality, of logic. Humanity after World War II, not only the Jewish nation or religious people in general, lost any chance to control logic, to understand the ways of God or the workings of human beings. This loss of the "transcendental signifier," of supreme logic, brings Agnon's narrator to question in another work: "[...] what is the point of killing one-third of the Jewish nation by a detestable thing [...] but if I with my poor wisdom cannot understand, does it make me a fool?"⁴⁹

47 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 28. See also Nitza Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo mu'asharot: Tisqil erot omamut and mavvet be-avodotav shel Agnon (Unhappy Loves: Erotic Frustration, Art and Death in the Work of S.Y. Agnon)* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), p. 120.

48 S.Y. Agnon *A Guest for a Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (London: Victor Gollancz, 1968), p. 296.

49 S.Y. Agnon, *Lifnim min ha-choma*, p. 96.

The logical law of cause and effect is one of the foundations of Western thought. Maimonides in his *Guide for the Perplexed* ends the eternal connection between cause and effect with God: "It is clear that everything produced must have an immediate cause that produced it; that cause again has a cause, and so on, till the First Cause, viz, the will and decree of God is reached."⁵⁰ Agnon follows the logic of Maimonides, not only with regard to the cause and effect axiom,⁵¹ but in defining God as the First Cause.

The "Cause of all Causes" appears repeatedly in Agnon's logic. In his para-texts, most often found in *Me-atzmi el atzmi*, Agnon states the basic assumption, following in Maimonides' steps, "that any cause has an effect,"⁵² and claims numerous times that God is "the cause of causes."⁵³ This issue corresponds well to Kurzweil's interpretation of "Pat shelema" ("A Whole Loaf"), where Mr. Gressler is identified with Satan.⁵⁴ Once again Agnon brings his burnt book back from the dead:

The night my house was burned, Mr. Gressler sat playing cards with my neighbor. This neighbor, an apostate Jew, was a dealer in textiles. He lived below with his wares, while I lived above with my books. [...] "Are you insured?" Mr. Gressler asked him. "Insured I am," he answered. While they were talking Mr. Gressler lit a cigar and said, "Drop this match in this rubbish heap and collect your insurance money." He went and set his goods on fire, and the whole house was burned down.⁵⁵

Then the narrator goes on to tell us "from the causes of causes I kept my distance from Mr. Gressler."⁵⁶ Although Agnon used the plural form, a contradiction is created between the demonical Mr. Gressler and the God of reason, the last chain in the eternal line of cause and effect.

Maimonides' logic, based on Aristotle, appears clearly in *A Guest for a Night*:

50 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. M. Friedländer (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), p. 249.

51 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 224.

52 S.Y. *Me-atzmi el atzmi*, p. 11.

53 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, pp. 78-79, 81, 217.

54 Baruch Kurzweil, *Massot on S. Y. Agnon's Stories*, pp. 93-93. See also Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare*, p. 194.

55 S.Y. Agnon, "Whole Loaf," trans. I.M. Lask in *Twenty-One Stories*, pp. 86-87.

56 Lask has translated "me-sibbot ha-sibbot" into "various reasons." For the Hebrew see S.Y. Agnon, *Samukh we-nir'e* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1955), p. 149.

Maimonides, of blessed memory, said in the *Guide to the Perplexed*: “The end [*takhlit*] is the reality.” There, however, he refers to the reality of the Creator and not to ordinary reality. So the question stands as before: What is the end of his reality in which we live? [...] as Maimonides, of blessed memory, said in that passage when he was discussing reality: “Know that there is no way to postulate an end [*takhlit*] for the whole of reality, not in our opinion ... or according to the opinion of Aristotle.”⁵⁷

Maimonides and Aristotle, who made the term “First Cause” a fundamental term in Western and Jewish philosophy, make a distinction between the divine incomprehensible logic of the God of World War II, and the human earthly logic. In the same manner (and terms), Kurzweil describes the notion of lack of purpose (*takhlit*), as dominating some of the works in Agnon’s “Sefer ha-ma’asim” (“Book of Deeds”).⁵⁸ Kurzweil goes further and describes Agnon’s work as part of the Holocaust experience of rapture, of the fragmental, disconnected, and diversified writing.⁵⁹ If the “First Cause” is God then the search for “First Cause” is the search for God. Indeed, in “Ad hena” we can go so far as to highlight a clumsy sentence, that does not at all become a language virtuoso like Agnon: “A man walks from one place [*maqom*] to another place looking for a place.”⁶⁰ The word *maqom* in Hebrew denotes not only “place” but “God” as well. The narrator’s trivial search for a room and a house during the desperate times of World War I, turns into a theological search, that of a religious person in search of the God of the Holocaust. At another place in “Ad hena,” the narrator, disappointed in his fellow creatures, seeks help in heaven: “I saw there is no hope [*tochelet*] from mankind and expected mercy from the sky [*rachame shamayim* – mercy from heaven]. The sky what has it done? It became covered with heavy clouds and poured rain and thrust rain mercilessly in my face.”⁶¹ *Tochelet* and *takhlit*, hope and cause, are adjoined by a third word, *tekhelet*, which resembles phonetically the Hebrew word meaning sky-blue. The narrator, on another occasion in “Ad hena,” looks up and describes what he sees: “A sort of dim sky-blue appeared in the vault of heaven,

57 S.Y. Agnon, *A Guest for a Night*, pp. 296-97.

58 Baruch Kurzweil, *Essays on S. Y. Agnon's Stories*, pp. 374, 376.

59 Baruch Kurzweil, *ibid.*, p. 311.

60 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 89.

61 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 28.

as the sky-blue of the sky-blue foxes whose furs are brought to the markets of Leipzig.”⁶² Humanity after World War II looks up, into the sky-blue heaven, into the *tekhelet*, in search of comfort and hope, of *tochelet*, which can only be bestowed by God, the First Cause, the ultimate *takhlit*. All they have is their own world of human cruelty, in which animals such as the *tekhelet* foxes are butchered for their furs, and human beings are slaughtered for their religion and race.

In a later work, “Le-achar ha-se’uda” (“After the Feast”), Agnon questions the law of cause and effect by recognizing God’s existence: “[...] because the deeds are strung one after another and there is no cause that stands without another cause after it, until the end, where the causes annihilate themselves and disappear within themselves because of the last cause which is the First Cause.”⁶³ Logically, Maimonides’ and Aristotle’s theo-logic annihilates itself. If the Creator, the First Cause is the last cause as well, the law of chronological cause and effect disappears within itself, turning into a mystical silence of absolute, monolithic knowledge.

In one place in “Ad hena” we find a description of the logical paradox of the modern religious person. The narrator contemplates the chaotic state of the world in times of war. Using the law of cause and effect, in its crime and punishment variation, he attributes the catastrophes and disasters to his angry God:

Now God is angry with us and most of all he is angry with me because I have left his country [...] but even from his anger his love is to be seen because he urges me to return. [...] Now I cannot go back because there is a great war in the world, in land, sea and air, and it is not realistic to get to the land of Israel.⁶⁴

Observing the narrator’s arguments we can easily trace a logical problem. God is angry with the narrator for immigrating to Germany, and therefore has put war in the world. The same war prevents the narrator from going back, and thus, the punishment becomes part of the crime, or, in other words, the effect becomes part of the cause, made by the wrath of the First Cause and indifferent to human logic. All the narrator is left with are his continued wanderings in Germany waiting for the war to end. The narrator’s endless displacement,

62 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 35.

63 S.Y. Agnon, *Lifnim min ha-choma*, p. 269.

64 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 90.

historically almost identical to those of the author, manifests eventually as a text, Agnon's "Ad hena." The secondary historical Holocausts of World Wars I and II, become a primary Holocaust of meaning: a paradox reflecting Agnon's work in general and "Ad hena" in particular. The loss of the First Cause is the primary Holocaust, just as Derrida has described the absence of the transcendental signifier causing the signifying system to remain in eternal movement seeking the lost center of logic.⁶⁵ The creation of the world, the writing of the Book of Nature, was an event, but a never-ending event, an event of eternal movement. Like creation itself, the Revelation at Sinai is a culminating event of the giving of the written Torah, but, at the same time, it is an ongoing event embodied in the oral Torah. The secondary Holocaust, in Agnon's work in particular, is an event written in 1939-45, but it is only part of the primary Holocaust consisting of, among other things, the lost First Cause, the lost First Text and, as we shall see, all the Holocausts of History.

4. Nietzsche's "Eternal Recurrence" as Primary Holocaust

Nietzsche's biography appears in *Ad hena*, in "Shevu'at Emunim" ("Betrothed"). Speaking on Rechnitz, the hero tells Agnon that "From the time of Nietzsche until the time of Rechnitz, no young man in such a position had been appointed professor."⁶⁶

In "Ad hena," the name Nietzsche turns up phonetically in the name of a German economist by the name of von Nietzsche.⁶⁷ Dr. Mittel, the bibliographer, brings us again to Nietzsche. Dr. Mittel mourns his son's death, as did so many people, both Jewish and Gentile, during World War I. Speaking to the narrator who has come to console him, he tells of a consolation letter that he received from a famous German intellectual who also lost his son. "For this war" writes the German intellectual, "we should thank the German teacher who infused an evil spirit in the pupils to see themselves as the heirs of Greece and Rome."⁶⁸

In *Shira*, Herbst shows Taglicht a first edition of Nietzsche's *Die Geburt der Tragödie*. The name of the owner written in the book is unrecognizable

65 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 279-80.

66 S.Y. Agnon, "Betrothed" in *Two Tales*, p. 100.

67 Weiss has already noticed it: Weiss (2002), p. 132.

68 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 99.

"since the letters were highly styled and it was unclear as to whether they were German in Greek style or Greek in German style."⁶⁹ Like the materialization of philosophy, within these letters, Nietzsche saw the synthesis between new Germany and old Greece not merely on the linguistic level or even in the cultural sense but in a physical sense as well: "[...] we are becoming more Greek by the day; at first, as is only fair, in concepts and evaluations, as Hellenizing ghosts, as it were: but one day, let us hope, also in our bodies!"⁷⁰

Nietzsche is relevant to Primary Holocaust not only because of the adoption of his philosophies by the Nazis,⁷¹ but also for his contribution to the question of discourse. Language, or rather, the human inability to control meta-language, is a dominant theme in Nietzsche's philosophy. One of its aspects is Nietzsche's term "The Eternal Recurrence." In one of his rambles, the narrator meets a childhood friend. "This friend's name is as my name, and this is not common since I have two names which are not frequent together."⁷² Soon we learn that his friend's name is of course Yosef Shmu'el, the reverse name of the narrator and the author. Like the narrator, who is the author of an encyclopedic book describing the history of human clothing by the name of "The Book of Garments," his friend is busy writing his own book, "*The Biology of Events* [...] and if you want [...] *Recurrence of Things*,"⁷³ describing the manner in which events repeat themselves in history. A logical question in this theory is "And what is the first event? Is it a new creation, or is it the recurrence too of forgotten things?"⁷⁴

69 S.Y. Agnon, *Shira* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1971 [1989]), p. 136. Weiss has noted this connection, see Weiss (2002), p. 127.

70 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufman & R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 226.

71 In this context it is important to mention Heidegger, not merely one of the prominent philosophers of the twentieth century in his own right but a Nietzsche researcher as well. Heidegger, an active philosopher in the service of the Nazis (opinions differ only as to the measure of his enthusiasm), defined the Nazi relinquishment of power as a philosophical event, existentially, with authentic features, which could be traced for the last time in Western civilization only in certain moments of Greek philosophy; see Rüdiger Safranski, *Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil*, trans. Ewald Osers (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 233.

72 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 82.

73 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 85.

74 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 85. Ben-Dov has already pointed to the connection between *The Biology of Events* and Nietzsche's "Eternal Recurrence" (Ben-Dov [1997], pp. 72-77).

Agnon gives an answer to this question, as we have seen before, in another work, turning to God and claiming: “the last cause [...] is the First Cause.”⁷⁵ Like Nietzsche, his friend had acquired his insight of the “eternal recurrence” from living through a mystical experience.⁷⁶ In a trancelike state, the author of *The Biology of Events* could not decide what is beginning and what is end. The point of time at which he had received his knowledge is, itself, lost in the chain of recurrence, and he does not know “whether it is a new or an old event.”⁷⁷ The very event defining the meta-language, the Eternal Recurrence, exists beyond any linear description of History. Like Nietzsche, the narrator’s friend acquired this insight while in the trenches of a war, he in World War I and Nietzsche in the war of 1870. *Die Geburt der Tragödie* was first published in 1872; it was a first edition, of which only one copy was ever found, as we have seen, by Herbst, the hero of *Shira*. The narrator’s friend takes Nietzsche’s philosophy to a more practical level: If everything is already known, each and every event, all we then have left to do is “to arrange them by their subjects or [...] by their laws.”⁷⁸

Indeed, the central event in “Ad hena” is World War I, so, if the writer of the *Biology of Events* has mapped correctly, this war is only part of the war-genus, together with past wars such as the war of 1870, and future wars such as World War II. Dr. Mittel summarizes: “one war leads to another war.”⁷⁹ Another scene in “Ad hena” has the narrator being chased by dogs. The dogs, which are violent fighting dogs, are chasing the narrator who is a vegetarian, creating a metonym to the Jewish fortune: “[...] and if I chased one swarm of dogs would not come other dogs?”⁸⁰ Any attempt of the narrator, of the Jews, and even of humanity to escape from History is doomed to failure. Trapped in the “Eternal Recurrence,” coined by Nietzsche, whose falsified writings made him the Moses of the master race, human beings, the Jews and the narrator, will forever undergo the same catastrophes.

In one of his temporary lodgings, the narrator plays with words in an attempt

75 S.Y. Agnon, *Lifnim min ha-choma*, p. 269.

76 In August 1881, Nietzsche described the manner in which he came to grasp the notion of recurrence, characterized by Danto as “the apparent impact of a mystical experience” (Arthur Danto, *Nietzsche as Philosopher* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1980], p. 203).

77 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 85.

78 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 85.

79 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 24.

80 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 48.

to coax himself to sleep. One of the stations of his elaborate play is the verse taken from the Torah section known as “The Reproaches”: “In the morning thou shalt say: ‘Would it were evening!’ and at evening thou shalt say: ‘Would it were morning!’” (Deuteronomy 28: 67).⁸¹ Another example to elucidate the manner in which time and linear history are lost in catastrophe can be seen through a visit paid by the narrator to a relative of his, Malka. When he wants to leave, he looks at his watch and then hears his relative asking: “‘What do you want from this wicked [watch]?’ I smiled and said ‘Wicked you call it?’ Said she ‘Is it not wicked? Never does it shows a good hour’. I nodded assent towards her and said ‘Yes my friend, it never shows a good hour.’”⁸²

The tragic recurrence of events is to be found in another place, when Dr. Mittel, who had lost his son in the war, tells the narrator the story of the famous *maskil* Heschel Shor, author of *The Chalutz*. A telegram notifying him of the death of his son was found by Heschel on his dinner table. Heschel

wiped his mouth and said “A good lad he was, a good lad he was, it is a shame he died” and went back to his dinner. From that day on until the day that he died he never changed his food or his clothes. Every day he ate the same dish he ate on the day his son died, and everyday thereafter he wore the same clothes he had worn on that day.⁸³

In his obituary for Meshulam Tuchner, Agnon reminds us of this anecdote again, together with the time, place and situation in which he had first heard it: World War I Germany, from a man who had lost his son in the war.⁸⁴

Agnon’s friends, Heschel Shor, Dr. Mittel and his German friend each experience the death of their sons every day, the Holocaust of the particular. Each morning they wait for the evening to come and vice versa, cursing their watches that never show a good hour. Not only is the Time lost in the private Holocaust not to be found years later, after the Nazi Holocaust of the people, but it was never there to begin with.

In his Nobel speech, Agnon places his own history in the context of a national disaster, or even a cosmic disaster: “From an historic catastrophe when Titus emperor of Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the people of Israel

81 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 27.

82 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 43.

83 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 99. See also Weiss (2002), pp. 128-29.

84 S.Y. Agnon, *Me-atzmi el atzmi*, p. 248.

were deported from its land I was born in one of the cities of the Diaspora.”⁸⁵ Agnon is in search of the lost time, a part of catastrophe that stands beyond any given linear time.

Taking the Eternal Recurrence to another level, we can see something interesting. We have Shmu’el Yosef, the narrator, author of *The Book of Garments*, Yosef Shmu’el, the narrator’s friend, author of *The Biology of Events*,⁸⁶ and another Shmu’el Yosef – Agnon – the concrete author of “Ad hena.” The narrator’s book, the history of human clothing, represents the linear history, history in the most common sense. The *Biology of Events*, based on the principal of Eternal Recurrence, represents a circular history, a self-annihilating historiography, a meta-language claiming its own failure. Like the narrator of “On One Stone” it cannot create new being, only describe without any possibility of understanding. The appearance of the two works in “Ad hena” proves the claim of *The Biology of Events*. The movement of writing and interpretation repeats itself endlessly. The moment of conception of the Eternal Recurrence fades within itself in the same way “Ad hena” does. Not only does the end of the work vanish, as we saw before, but the work itself is in question. “Ad hena” is in an *ad infinitum* movement, erasing itself while being written.

The narrator, Shmu’el Yosef, as his ex-textual creator, Shmu’el Yosef Agnon, and as his own creation, Yosef Shmu’el, tries to put his life in logical order. Unfortunately the hierarchal chain of creator and creature endlessly reverses itself. The last link in the chain, the narrator’s friend, with his book and his perception of history as a circular movement, does not create new values but, by equalizing everything, he annihilates all.⁸⁷ As the narrator says: “Many incidents happened to me, among them recurred events, and among them incidents which only He Who Knows Secrets knows why he has appointed to me.”⁸⁸ The three authors stand one against the other, mirroring each other, creating an imperialistic textual eternity erasing the borders

85 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 85.

86 For a different interpretation see Ben-Dov, *Ahavot lo mu'asharot*, p. 77.

87 Kurzweil has described Agnon’s work in general as an art aspiring to dwell in “meta-temporal dimension, from which any differences in time seems imaginary.” To emphasize his opinion, he quotes a verse of the poet Uri Zvi Greenberg describing the Eternal Recurrence: “What will be in the future has already happened / What never has been will never be” (Kurzweil, *Massot on S. Y. Agnon’s Stories*, p. 289).

88 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 125.

between cause and effect, reality and fiction, words and things, author and character, creator and created.

The original source for the book, the author’s primary creative consciousness, together with the moment of conceiving, is fading away, because we do not know if the work is a “new creation, or is it a recurrence too of forgotten things?”⁸⁹ The destruction of meaning in a perpetual process of signifying is well described elsewhere by Agnon:

And you surely know the way of thoughts. A thought produces a thought and a thought another thought, and they multiply while being born and it is not known which gave birth to which. I will try to arrange them, if not according to their evolvment, than according to the order of events. I will not start from the beginning (*be-reshit*), for the beginning has no beginning, but in the days of the war which found me in Berlin.⁹⁰

The narrator, like his friend, the author of *The Biology of Events*, is trying to control time and narrative by describing a chain of events with no beginning, and actually with no end. He is not trying to narrate an event but to rule Time. He chooses arbitrary co-ordinates of time and space to mark the beginning of history, World War I and Berlin. But in the beginning was the Holocaust, World War I, World War II, or the destruction of the Second Temple.⁹¹

Indeed, the end of “Ad hena” seems optimistic, for the widow Levi, for the books and for the narrator. The sick widow is miraculously cured; the narrator goes back to Jerusalem where he has built his new home with two empty rooms waiting for the Books of Dr. Levi.⁹² Fuchs, though, defines “Ad

89 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 85. Ben-Dov has already pointed to the connection between *The Biology of Events* and Nietzsche’s “Eternal Recurrence” (Ben-Dov [1997], pp. 72-77).

90 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 124.

91 See also Weiss (2002), p. 123.

92 Some of “Ad hena”’s critics have noticed the problematic structure of the work. Band claimed that Agnon would have done better to finish “Ad hena” in the seventh chapter, where the narrator brought Hans, the lost soldier, back home as his mother had dreamt at the beginning (Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* [Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968], pp. 352-53). Ben-Dov suggests another optimistic explanation for “Ad hena,” approving its original structure. In her detailed research, she claims, following her psychoanalytical interpretation, that the narrator’s return to Jerusalem is the end of a sort of a *Bildungsprozess* (Ben-Dov [1997], p. 122). Another stance opposing Band’s opinion is to be seen in Ester Fuchs, “Mivne ha-alila ha-ironit be-sippure S.Y. Agnon al-pi ‘Ad hena,’” *Biqoret ve-parshanut*, 20 (1985): 26.

"hena"'s end as an example of "metaphysical irony." The ironical solution in "Ad hena" emphasizes the solution of the trivial problem, ignoring the central issues that stand at the center of the work and presenting the trivial solution instead of the essential solution.⁹³ Indeed, the reader, used by now to the delays, hindrances, cruelty and inhumanity inherent to the plot of "Ad hena," would find it untenable to consider its end a happy one. Kurzweil was aware of Agnon's tendency to use the miracle in his plots as an opposition for a given epical reality.⁹⁴ But the miracle as an ending or as a solution for this given reality, claims Kurzweil, can never be considered a natural part of the plot.⁹⁵ The reader of "Ad hena," a work set against the backdrop of World War I, but actually written after World War II, just a few years after the extermination of books and people, will find it hard to believe that Agnon let the narrator wait in Jerusalem between the two wars, in a house specially built, in optimistic dullness, for the books of the late Dr. Levi to arrive.

At the end of "Ad hena" the narrator-author explains the name he gave his work: "I have named my book *Until Now* as an expression of thankfulness for the past and a prayer for the future, as we say in the blessing of the song: 'Until now your mercy has helped us and your kindness has not forsaken us do not abandon us ha-Shem our God forever.'⁹⁶ Ending "Ad hena" not only with a prayer expressing complete faith in the God of World War II, but with the etymological explanation for the name "Ad hena," makes us question the naivety of the narrator. "Ad hena" becomes a work in constant movement, shifting meaning again and again, always until the present moment in which it is read, always until now, always "Ad hena."

Dr. Mittel, the sober bibliographer becomes a fortune teller, and tells the narrator what will happen at the end of the war:

I will start at the end. Germany was defeated and her enemies divided the land between them. [...] At the end, from the books of their philosophers and poets not even one page was left. [...] They hear that in a far land, like America there are German Jews, and Jews are

93 Ester Fuchs, *Omanut ha-hit'amemut: al ha-ironiya shel S.Y. Agnon* (Tel Aviv: The Katz Institute for Research in Hebrew Literature, 1985), p. 31.

94 Baruch Kurzweil, *Massot on S.Y. Agnon's Stories*, p. 30.

95 Weiss contradicts Kurzweil's perception of the miracle in Agnon's work (Weiss [2002], pp. 124, 146).

96 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 170. The sentence Agnon quotes is to be found in *Nishmat*, part of the Shabbat morning prayer.

conservatives [...] they preserve the German language, and the books of Germany and her philosophers and poets.⁹⁷

Dr. Mittel finishes his prophecy with the words: "Apparently this is a fictive story like all tales of the future but to tell the truth it is the truth."⁹⁸ The only way a cautious scientist such as Dr. Mittel could believe in his ability to predict the future is if the future is already known, if the disastrous World War I is only one war in a chain of disasters brought upon the world, the Jews and the author. In *Shira*, in Herbst's room, we can see how Mittel's prophecy is fulfilled. Herbst explains to his friend that "from the day the Nazis came to power Jerusalem became a metropolis for German books [...] and it is probable that if one would look for a rare German book it will not be found in Germany but in Jerusalem."⁹⁹

5. Summary

We began this article by defining primary and secondary Holocaust. Impossible to describe in words, it seems Art is the only way to contain the primary Holocaust, the primary absence. The basic notion of the Lost Text inherent to Jewish thought before the secondary Holocaust is most frequent in Agnon's work. The concrete lost text becomes a lost Logos undermining sense and understanding. The lost Logos is the loss of logic embodied in the law of cause and effect. Defining God as the First Cause by Agnon, using Aristotle's and Maimonides' observations, gave order in a chaotic world.

Agnon was born into a culture in which the idea of a broken spiritual wholeness is fundamental. The notion of disaster and catastrophe lies not only in World War II or even in the Jewish exile after the destruction of the Second Temple. The Holocaust took place when the text was given and taken away at the same time, at the Revelation at Sinai. The written Torah is only a secondary textual Holocaust, symbolized by the broken tables, secondary to the primary textual Holocaust which is the oral Torah. God's ultimate presence in the written Torah equalizes only his absence from the oral Torah, in exactly the same manner in which his presence created the world but vanished when his creatures decided to destroy one another.

97 S.Y. Agnon, *Ad hena*, p. 24.

98 S.Y. Agnon, *ibid.*, p. 24.

99 S.Y. Agnon, *Shira*, p. 136.

In its disappearance, the hidden divine source of the lost text left systems of signifiers working endlessly, the oral Torah. Agnon's work is an attempt to fill the void, knowing he is bound to fail. On the personal, national and cosmic levels,¹⁰⁰ Agnon continually attempts to describe the texts he cannot write of a world once whole.

100 Weiss (2002), p. 120.

