

BUILDING A CITY: WRITINGS
ON AGNON'S BUCZACZ
IN MEMORY OF ALAN MINTZ

Edited by Sheila E. Jelen, Jeffrey Saks,
and Wendy Zierler

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17 *The Source and the Depth of Oblivion: Story and Folktale in Two Stories by Agnon*

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Translated by Deborah Greniman

AGNON, NO LESS than Y.L. Peretz, sought to embed his literary work in the essence of the *volk*, as embodied in “folksongs” and “folktales.” The idea of the “folk,” in the Romantic, ethnic sense of the term, was felt to bear within it a life-truth embodied in a distinctive character — that of a particular people. From the end of the eighteenth century through the middle of the twentieth, this notion enjoyed the status of a primal truth, and it was shared by the Jewish writers active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The use of folkloric elements by Bialik, Tchernikhovsky, Peretz and Agnon is well known and has been the subject of not a few scholarly treatments.

But Agnon, from the very outset of his career, worked in the field where folk literature meets *belles lettres* in a way all his own, one that was quite remote from any simple faith in the “innocent” creations of the “folk,” and even more remote from any desire to generate an impression of “authentic folklore” in his modern writings. Between his own writings and the creations of the “folk,” Agnon wove a complex web of tensions, paradoxes and uncertainties, to the point that his work appears at times intentionally to subvert the traditional story, to wreck its credibility or its basic notions of aesthetics and value, no less than it is sustained by the story’s vitality and its ability to constitute an identity and a sense of the genuine.

It was clear to the audiences of the writers of that generation that folk elements, where they served as material for an artistic work, had undergone extensive adaptation. The very notion of this kind of reworking and the various methods of accomplishing it were already a ramified literary tradition, and the “artistic” tale or folksong had evinced the burnish of a glorious heritage since the days of Herder, Goethe, Hoffman, Pushkin and Andersen.¹ Agnon’s works, too, based as they were on folkloric elements, were widely viewed as traditional artistic

1. See especially the distinction made between “literary” and “artistic” tales in M. Luthi, *The European Folktale* (English transl. by J.D. Niles) (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982); and see M. Thalmann, *The Romantic Fairy Tale: Seeds of Surrealism* (English transl. by M.B. Corcoran) (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963). On the gaps between these genres see the interesting discussion of J.D. Zipes, *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979).

reworkings of folkloric “material.”² However, many of Agnon’s readers well sensed that what he was doing broke with the usual notions of adaptation, that he was going far beyond other writers of his generation in interacting with his various sources, and in that distance seethed a painful drama of destruction and loss.

In the following pages I shall train my gaze on two major signposts in Agnon’s work that touch upon his treatment of “folkloric” elements and upon the concept of the “folk” itself, for the sake of learning something about the complex synapse that connects these bodies of literary knowledge in Agnon’s writing. The idea of a synapse, drawn from the field of anatomy, defines the strong connection formed by the transmission of energy between two entities — not by means of a simple, direct transfer, but by bridging a gap between the nerve cells that have no direct connection between them, so that the energy must move in a different medium. In other words, the connection bridges a discontinuity, over which the message is passed in a different mode, to be “reinterpreted” by the arms of the next cell, awaiting it beyond the discontinuity. The energy passing between the nerve cells in the form of an electric current is converted in the synapse, for a very tiny fragment of time, into a movement that transpires in chemical form, and only at the end of the passage does it turn back into an electric current. This notion seems to me a useful simile for defining the tension between the transmission, transfer, discontinuity and rectification that take place in the course of cultural transitions in general and in the contact between Agnon’s writings and their folkloric elements in particular.

In the first story that Agnon published in Erets Israel — the story from which he took his pen name, and which he saw as his literary debut — “Agunot” or “Abandoned Wives” — he implanted a fascinating, complex signpost that points to his basic attitude toward the entire heritage of the “folk.” That signpost stands at both ends of the story — at its beginning and at its end. Here are the opening lines:

It is said [in the writings³]: A thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed by He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves — strand on strand — a tallit all grace and all mercy, for the Congregation of Israel to deck herself in. Radiant in the light of her beauty she glows, even in these, the lands of her exile, as she did in her youth in her Father’s

2. Abraham Yaari and Fischel Lachover pioneered the discussion of Agnon’s adaptation of folkloric materials in short essays published in the 1930s. Some important remarks on this are to be found in Gershom Scholem’s article, “The Kabbalistic Sources of ‘The Tale of Rabbi Gadiel the Infant,’” in D. Sadan and E.E. Urbach (eds.), *Le’Agnon Shay* (Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency, 1959), 289–305 (Hebrew). The systematic studies in this field are: Aliza Shenhar, “Folkloric Elements in S.Y. Agnon’s ‘A Lovers’ Bridal Canopy,’” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore*, 4 (5743/1983), 27–62 (Hebrew); and especially Shmuel Werses, “Folk Narrative Processes in the Work of Agnon,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore*, 1 (5741/1981), 101–126 (Hebrew), and his book *S.Y. Agnon Literally: Studies of His Writings*, Jerusalem 2000, 93–105 and 123–189 (Hebrew).

3. *Bikhetavim*. This word is not rendered in Hochman’s translation (below, note 4).

house, in the Temple of her Sovereign and the city of sovereignty, Jerusalem. And when He, of ineffable Name, sees her, that she has been neither sullied nor stained even here, in the realm of her oppressors, He — as it were — leans toward her and says, “Behold thou art fair, my beloved, behold thou art fair.” And this is the secret of the power and the glory and the exaltation and the tenderness in love which fills the heart of every man in Israel. But there are times — alas! — when some hindrance creeps up and snags a thread in the loom. Then the tallit is damaged: Evil spirits however about it, enter into it, and tear it to shreds. At once a sense of shame assails all Israel, and they know they are naked. Their days of rest are wrested from them, their feasts are fasts, their lot is dust instead of luster. At that hour the Congregation of Israel stays abroad in her anguish, crying, “Strike me, wound me, take my veils from me!” Her beloved has slipped away, and she, seeking him, cries, “If ye find my beloved, what shall ye tell him? That I am afflicted with love.” And this affliction of love leads to darkest melancholy, which persists — Mercy shield us! — until, from the heavens above, He breathes down upon us strength of spirit, to repent and to muster deeds that are pride to their doers and again draw forth that thread of grace and love before the Lord.

And this is the theme of the tale recounted here ...⁴

The tale of the Holy One weaving a tallit out of a “thread of grace ... drawn out of the deeds of Israel,” for “the Congregation of Israel to deck herself in” before Him as he proclaims to her the words of the lover in the Song of Songs — “Behold thou art fair, my beloved” — is a chapter in the Jewish story of redemption, stretching from the creation of the world to the End of Days. That story is told here in an allegorical form that has its source in rabbinic midrash (“See how the Holy One, Blessed be He, sings the praises of Israel: ‘Behold thou art fair, my beloved, behold thou art fair’”—Song of Songs *rabbah* 1, *et passim*) and is retold in many ways in the kabbalistic literature.

However, this particular story is not told in any “writings,” as the narrator says of it in the opening words (a matter to which I shall presently return), though it is in the style of the midrash and merges completely with the midrashic spirit, and its characteristic progression — from the primal wholeness (“as she did in her youth in her Father’s house, in the Temple of her Sovereign and the city of sovereignty”) through to the final rectification, in which “that thread of grace and love before the Lord” is once more drawn down — is the whole abstracted progression of the redemption story. Chapter 5 of the Song of Songs — the same chapter from which Agnon took the phrase “at the handles of the lock,” which he used in several of his stories and eventually took as the title of his volume of “love stories” — serves him here in his complete reconstruction of the allegory.

4. S.Y. Agnon, “Agunot” (English transl. by Baruch Hochman), in idem, *A Book That Was Lost: Thirty-Five Stories*, ed. Alan Mintz and Anne Golomb Hoffman (New Milford, CT: The Toby Press, 2008), 39–40

In Agnon's hands, the episode of the lover "slipping away" (Song of Songs 5:6), leaving the beloved to wander in the night until the guards of the walls tear away her veil (vv. 6–7), becomes the episode of the "tearing" of the "tallit" — that is, the phase of the historical present, remote as can be from redemption. What is fascinating about this story, crafted by Agnon from his midrashic sources, is that the tearing of the tallit — the phase of hindrances, shame and losing the way — parallels not the destruction of the Temple and the exiling of the Jews, as it is customarily interpreted, but rather a later process of corruption or debasement that occurs with the people, breaking the continuity of the thread from which the cloth of the tallit, or the wedding canopy joining the God to the people, is woven. In other words, Agnon points here to a further chapter in the redemption story, not necessarily bound up with historical events of mythological status, like the destruction of the Temple, one that pushes the redemption yet further away, implying, perhaps, that this eternal Jewish story faces a rupture that may no longer have a chance of rectification.

This further chapter of rupture that is added to the Jewish redemption story has a fundamental meta-literary significance that touches upon the young Agnon's attitude in setting out to be a Hebrew writer. The rupture is not identified with any particular moment of crisis in Jewish history (such as the Shabbatean heresy, the Chmielnicki massacres of 1648–1649, the schism between Hasidism and its opponents, the Enlightenment, or Zionism and secularization), because it is not a historical moment, but a literary state: The rupture transpires in the present moment, whenever that is. That is to say: A story of mythological status, by its very exalted nature, can take place only in the past; while the authentic perspective of a down-to-earth look at the world, one that demands realism (where "realism" here is opposed to "idealism"), by its very nature destabilizes any generalizing view from above; it sees the human, Jewish, reality, and that reality, it will disclose, contains elements that subvert any causative or directional sequence in the apprehension of events and of history. At the same time, let us not err by ascribing a secular nature to this Agnonian realism, and especially to the lack therein of a directionality of cause and effect. This realism is the concept of "truth" so often invoked by Agnon, to which he was committed above and beyond any other value. Agnon's concept of truth appeared to him not as a secular domain but rather as an embodiment of divinity — in the complex and radical way that Agnon understood that concept. The most broken-down, secular, worldly present, in his eyes, is a divine revelation, not in its being wondrous or exalted, but in its being random, chaotic, abysmal and incomprehensible.

This rupture, then, is what is happening in the present, and it is the symbolic embodiment of the historical present in which the story taking place within it — "Abandoned Wives" — occurs. Moreover, this opening invites the reader to read "Abandoned Wives" as a whole as an allegorical continuation of the redemp-

tion story on a new level — not on the level of sweeping generalization, as in the opening, in which a brief moment in the Song of Songs grasps the entire historical present, but in a more complex and detailed form, in which, too, the story's protagonists and progression are understood to represent, symbolically and allegorically, the rupture of the "thread of grace" between the people and its God — the rupture of the redemption story itself. The "nakedness" eventuating from the rupture is also an exit from the domain of the protective force of the plot of the spousal relationship between the people — the "Congregation of Israel" — and the Lover — its God. In other words, the story is not only about Jews situated in the world and in history; it is also part of the singular Jewish story, and it is to be understood as a story about the relationship between the people and God. Of course, one shouldn't try to find a figure in the story that represents God, or the like; the stories should be seen, rather, as two spheres describing reality, superimposed one over the other.

In this way Agnon contrived a complex and unique literary setting: He created a notion of a distinctively Jewish story, a story whose Jewishness is not made out of any one language or out of a literary tradition of Hebrew prose-writing — a tradition that was then, as we know, rather poor, fragmentary and lacking any clear distinctiveness. It is made, rather, in conjunction with an existing story, ancient and all-embracing, existing, indeed, as a story of the Jewish people. He fashioned here a finely honed literary possibility, in which the "rupture" — the historical setting into whose "midst" the new story will be inserted — creates a situation that is already chaotic and breached, making it capable of receiving foreign elements, "evil spirits" of various kinds, and of serving as a vessel for joining together a great wealth of literary modes. In this way, any story will stand simultaneously in a relationship both of belonging and of "rupture" with the one Jewish story.

At the end of the story, Agnon created a parallel but converse structure, one that joined the story from a different direction to the "folk": Ben-Uri and Dinah, the story's protagonists, are left separated and lost in the world. Dina has been divorced from her husband, Rabbi Ezekiel, following a marriage that was empty of content — both because of her love for Ben-Uri and because of Ezekiel's love for Freidele. The rabbi who had officiated both at Dinah's wedding and at her divorce sees in a dream "the Shekhinah in the guise of a lovely woman, garbed in black, and without adornment, nodding mournfully at him" ("Agunot," p. 50). From that dream, he goes out to search for Ben-Uri in "exile," calling to his wife: "seek not after me in my going forth, for the doom of exile has been levied upon me, to redeem the forsaken in love" (*ibid.*). But his departure brings no rectification to the story or to the "forsaken"; instead, the rabbi himself, who, in the story, represents the laws of Jewish practice and the tradition of Judaism, disappears as well, and his wife is left forsaken as well: "He kissed the mezuzah and slipped

away. They sought him, and did not find him” (*ibid.*, alluding to the same chapter of the Song of Songs to which the beginning of the story alludes, only now it refers to the figure of the rabbi!). But this, too, is not the end of the story; from here on, it continues to disintegrate. To start with, the narrator offers different versions: “They say he wanders still” (*ibid.*). First comes the version of an emissary who sojourned in the Diaspora and perhaps, perchance in a dream, saw Ben-Uri fashioning an ornament, with an old man at his side. “Since that time,” continues the narrator, “innumerable tales have been told,” but their narrative becomes more and more incredible, turning into “awful and fantastic tales,” like the Hasidic stories that are in part contrived and in part utterly false. Finally, they arrive at the present day:

At the present time it is said that he has been seen wandering about in the Holy Land. The world-wise cavil and quibble, and even—some of them—mock. But little children insist that at times, in the twilight, an old man hails them, and peering into their eyes drifts into the gathering dusk. And whoever has heard the tale here recounted surely knows that the man is that rabbi, he, and no other. But God alone knows for a fact. (*Ibid.*, p. 51)

The protagonists of “Agunot” disappear into the world. Their presence passes to other planes — to dreams, and then to baseless folktales, and finally to fragmentary impressions of children that no longer have in them anything that attests to their belonging to the story, but one who knows the tale says something about their belonging to it. Moreover, at the end of the story, it revolves not around the protagonists but around the rabbi, the last link to them, who follows a dream to which he gave this interpretation — but perhaps he was wrong? And he, too, disappears. This disappearance into a fog of unknowing creates quite a complex impression: The protagonists, brought close and illuminated by the story on account of their love, have become “forsaken” and receded into the murk of solitude, in which there is no story — but that murk is the “folk” and its stories. Those stories differ essentially from the strong, cohesive story told by the narrator; they are multiple and lack the authority of truth, but they well up within the folk and in life. And so the story melts into the “folk.” To be sure, the story fails in the reestablishment of a “mini-sanctuary” in Jerusalem, because of that forsakenness within that vanquishes anything good in its world, but it finds its place in a kind of transpiring of life and story that continues unfolding outside of it. But, no less than this: It is clear that the “folk” story transpires in parallel with the vanishing and disembodiment of the protagonists after their separation. Disconnected from time and place, they float in a twilight zone between fact and fiction.

In this way, Agnon created a kind of double belonging — to the overarching Jewish story, the redemption story, and to the “folk” story in which “Agunot” is embedded. This is obviously a completely original move: There is no Jewish-Hebrew literary precedent for a story that is a work of fictional art joining itself

to the people's history in the rigorous, religious-messianic sense of the concept, while so sophisticatedly constructing an entirely different association — with the folk legends circulating in various, shifting forms in every Jewish locale. The kind of association that Agnon devised in the story "Agunot," formed by way of a "rupture," creates an entirely free artistic space within it. But, pointedly, Agnon in "Agunot" swore an oath of loyalty to this framework of belonging and to the full scope of its significance, and so posed himself as a national writer in the profoundest sense. It wasn't the Zionist idea that did this, but the great "subject" from which he never wavered: the historical unfolding of the "folk."

We must still take a close look at the opening words of the story: "It is said in the writings." Bringing evidence from the "writings" is, as we know, the accepted way of establishing or proving something throughout all the many branches of Jewish literature. What's "written" is the source for all interpretation, and it is also the basis for the literary edifice that has grown up over the course of history. What's "written" is primary. It is primary in time and in value, and it is grasped as more written than anything written after it or about it. It is inscribed, as it were, on the hard rock of time. For the Sages of the Talmud, the "writings" were the Holy Scriptures, but for the medieval sages, the words of the talmudic sages became "writings," and for those who came later still, their predecessors became "writings" — and so on up to the present day, in which Agnon and Bialik have become "writings." This cultural mechanism by which the earlier becomes superior from the point of view of its spiritual authority, so that the very earliest becomes the highest spiritual authority, is universal, but the specific attitude toward the "writings" as marking an authoritative text, and the ways of marking them — "as it is written" (in its various forms) — is Hebrew, and it is bound up with the history of Hebrew as the unfolding of a language and a faith. The "writings" are the underpinning. They are like a fixed construction in the world; they are a Place. From them one goes out and to them one comes. They are firmer than the earth, and they are maintained in time in the way that only writings are maintained — by that mode of transcription that Agnon devoted himself to explicating in "The Legend of the Scribe." The writings, in being transcribed, pass through time and take into themselves the meaning of the times.

The opening of "Agunot" with the words "It is said in the writings" is a gesture both essential and ceremonial: With this, the young Agnon announces that he is basing his artistic work upon the ancient Jewish structure of learning and demonstration, in which a new writing presents itself as subordinate to an earlier one and as deriving from it. But this is no simple opening. The story of the Holy One weaving a tallit that is steadily degraded on account of "some hindrance" does not appear in any "writings"! To be sure, it is formulated in a style derived from that of the midrash; it dresses itself up well as a traditional story, and its basic structure is that of the redemption story, but it is not a traditional story at

all, and it also contains some odd gaps that are uncharacteristic of a midrashic story. It is in every way an Agnonic story. In a sense, it is a made-up quotation.⁵ But that is not the point. Because this made-up quotation well preserves the spirit of the kabbalistic-hasidic redemption story. The point is that Agnon creates an autonomous structure that even contains its own ancient underpinnings as foundations internalized within itself. In this way Agnon changes the pose of a Hebrew author over against the ancient written authority, by claiming that this authority, too, is a contrivance that derives from within the writer no less than from “the writings.” What had been an objective base standing outside the personal historical circumstances of the traditional Hebrew writer here becomes a living organ of creativity; its existence is absorbed into the “I” of the author.

In this way the overarching Jewish story, the redemption story, is comprehended as a narrative that can still be changed, as a story that is still being formed, and as sustaining some kind of “thread” linking this world, the human world, to the world of eternity and redemption; but, from another point of view, the concept of the “folk” itself has been seriously undermined. Who is this “folk”? Is it the same unified allegorical entity that is embodied in the figure of the beloved in the Song of Songs? Is anything tangible and comprehensible left of it by the end of the story?

II

In the short story “Three Sisters,” Agnon constructs a converse situation to that underlying “Agunot”: While “Agunot” rests upon the most constitutive and all-embracing narrative of the “folk” and melts back into the realm of “folktales,” “Three Sisters” is presented as a folktale even though it is not one at all. Moreover, Agnon here presents a kind of folktale, or artistic story, whose progression contradicts the most vital foundations of a folktale:

Three Sisters
To B. Katznelson, blessings!

Three sisters lived in a bleak house sewing white vestments for others. From dawn to dusk, from the end of Sabbath to Sabbath eve their fingers never strayed either from scissors or needle and sighing never left their hearts, neither in the season of sunshine nor in the season of the rains. But their efforts did not produce any benefit. When they found a dry crust of bread it failed to relieve their hunger. On one occasion they engaged in making a lovely wedding dress for a wealthy bride. Upon completing their handiwork they recalled their sorrows, for they had nothing on their flesh but frail skin, and that too was growing old.

Their hearts overflowed with grief.

5. See Gershon Shaked, *Other Aspects of Agnon's Oeuvre* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1989), Hebrew.

One sighed and said, All our lives we sit and toil for others while we lack even a piece of cloth to make burial shrouds for ourselves. The second one told her sister not to tempt Satan. She sighed as well and shed a tear. The third also wanted to say something, but when she opened her mouth to speak blood splattered out and stained the bride's garment.

When she brought the dress to the bride, her wealthy father came out of his hall. He saw the stain and rebuked the seamstress — it goes without saying he did not pay her.

Oh, if only the second sister had spat blood and the third had wept we could have laundered the garment with her tears, and the wealthy father would not have been enraged. But things don't occur beautifully, in their time. And even if everything did occur beautifully in its time, that is, if one had wept after the other spat blood, there would still be no true consolation.⁶

"Three Sisters" is not a folktale, nor is it based on a folk source. It is based on a Yiddish poem by Y.L. Peretz entitled "Three Seamstresses," which is written somewhat in the style of a folktale, or of an artistic folksong. But "Three Seamstresses," too, is not based on a folk source; it is a reworking or a somber parody of a very well known English song, "The Song of the Shirt," by Thomas Hood. In the second half of the nineteenth century, "The Song of the Shirt" was a kind of hymn of protest against the fate of the workers who were being oppressed and exploited by their wealthy capitalist employers. It was the most famous song in the western world on the subject of workers' rights — particularly those of women. After stirring up a storm when it was first published in the London magazine *Punch* in 1843, it was immediately translated into several European languages and gave rise to innumerable imitations, parodies and reworkings. It was adapted as a play and set to music, and it became an iconic motif in visual artwork. Peretz drew quite precisely upon the opening lines of "The Song of the Shirt," but he continued it in a direction of his own, giving it a tripartite course that leads to a tragic end. This continuation also makes use of various details from "The Song of the Shirt." Peretz changed the identity of the heroine — from one wretched seamstress (Mrs. Biddell of Lambeth, who is not mentioned in Hood's poem but was made known by it to the world) to three seamstresses — and he also added to it some distinctively Jewish traits and turns of phrase. Here is a translation from the Yiddish:

Three Seamstresses

Their eyes red, lips blue, cheeks bloodless, foreheads pale, covered with sweat,
their breath short and hot, three girls sit and sew.

6. Translator's note: This rendering of "Three Sisters" is adapted from Shelly Lilker's English translation, in S.Y. Agnon, *Forevermore and Other Stories*, ed. Jeffrey Saks (New Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2016), 123–124. The translation has been revised to adjust it to the author's discussion, which is based on the Hebrew text.

The needle gleams, the linen is like snow. One girl thinks: I sew and sew by day and by night. But I have yet to sew my wedding dress. What's the point of my sewing? I neither sleep nor eat. If I could give alms for charity, perhaps I'd find a widower or an old man with children who'd marry me.

The second girl thinks: I sew and tread and tread till my braids turn gray. My head burns, my temples throb and the machine beats in rhythm. I understand that man's wink. Without a wedding, without a ring, it would be a game, a dance, a year-long affair. But what then?

The third girl coughs blood and sings: All I sew is illness and blindness. My breast is pierced with every stitch and he's getting married this week. I wish him no harm. Forget the past. The community elders will provide a shroud and bit of earth where I will rest undisturbed. I will finally sleep, sleep.⁷

"Three Sisters" continues in Peretz's path; it is a story that endeavors to sound like a folktale, and it rests upon one of the most widespread formulas in the folktale world: The Three Sisters. This formula plays a fascinating role in the story, and Agnon uses it to make some impressive moves. By virtue of this trinity, the whole exposition (up to "On one occasion") becomes an expansive, all-embracing symbol, turning the fate of the seamstresses into a grim depiction that is cast upon the fate of all humankind. Even so, the narrator in this story makes no effort to sound like an ordinary teller of folktales, and at a very early stage he pokes some striking holes into its quasi-folk aura. As it were, he stands beside the story as though it were a play being performed onstage, while he serves as a kind of narrator-mediator reporting upon it to his audience. Three times, he discloses his active presence. In the third sentence, "But their efforts did not produce any benefit," he reveals his awareness that his story up to now should have engendered an expectation that the sisters would reap great profit from their persistent, endless labor, and he intervenes to dash that expectation. In the next-to-last paragraph, he remarks: "it goes without saying he did not pay her," casting a sideways glance at his audience to confirm the absence of any hope of reward or profit, as if to say: "You and I of course know ...," and adding a note of moral affirmation: The seamstresses have lost their wages because they damaged the cloth (which, as was customary, belonged to the man of wealth), and, more importantly, the garment's symbolic value; and that is how he concludes the first part of the story. The third time is in the final paragraph, which is the second part of the story and is entirely devoted to the narrator's observations about this world, which is the story of the three sisters: "Oh, if only the second sister had spat blood and the third had wept ..." He stands over against the world, expressing his wish that the stained garment could have been laundered with tears, and understanding the impos-

7. Y.L. Peretz, "Dray Neytorins" (Warsaw: M. Kipnes, 1918). English translation in Eleanor Gordon Mlotek and Joseph Mlotek (eds.), *Pearls of Yiddish Song* (New York: Education Department of the Workmen's Circle, 1988).

sibility of changing the order of things. At a stroke, the closing words turn the foregoing narrative into a bleak symbol. This isn't about any real possibility of laundering a bloodstain with tears; it's about the possibility of still being able to weep, be purified and recover after the breakdown and destruction represented by the bloodstain — for that stain is the symptom of a terminal illness, or rather, of a breakdown and a fatal flaw of the greatest and most profound dimensions.

The narrator's inability to change the order of things is a fascinating meta-literary signpost, in that the narrator claims by this that he is not the omnipotent creator of the story. Even though he is its author, he is not at liberty to shape it according to his will. He is a witness to a truth greater than himself, to which he is obliged more than to himself or to the human expectations of those who cry "Oh, if only," yearning for things to occur "beautifully in their time,"⁸ like the Holy One's work of creation and like the rains called down in the annual prayer recited at the conclusion of the festival of Sukkot. In this way Agnon creates a dimension of truth as an independent realm, stronger than the external pull of any desire or idea. This truth is also not identical with the supposed righteousness of God's deeds, as the narrator explicitly remarks: "But things don't occur beautifully, in their time." In his eyes, rather than creating a work of fiction or of the "imagination," writing and narrating involve close observation, which must be entirely faithful, of something that unfolds outside of the author's consciousness and exists objectively. The word "tale" here does not imply something tenuous from the point of view of its existence, as in "fairy tale"; it marks something that "happens in the world." It is therefore subject to the universe's most stringent and overpowering laws and as such is paradigmatic. It embodies an eternal law that supersedes all else.

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Peretz's poem deals with poverty and disease, overtly and unambiguously setting out what it has to say about the sisters' spinsterhood, their poverty, and the disease of tuberculosis that is devouring the third sister's lungs. Notwithstanding an occasional trenchant statement, such as "All I sew is illness and blindness" (in the Yiddish: "Ikh ney mikh krank, ikh ney mir blind"), it does not endeavor to

8. Translator's note: Agnon's expression, *hakol 'asui yafeh be'ito*, derives from Eccles. 3:11, where it explicitly refers to the work of God: *et hakol 'asah yafeh be'ito*. Lilker (above, note 6) renders *yafeh be'ito* as "at the proper time," which arguably is closer to the sense of the Hebrew expression, both in the story and in the biblical context — as reflected, for example, in the rendering of the verse in the 1985 New JPS translation: "He brings everything to pass precisely at its time." However, *yafeh*, both in the biblical context and in rabbinic and modern Hebrew, can mean either "beautiful" or "nice, fitting, seemly, proper." In the concluding section, the author argues that Agnon uses this word to intimate something about the working of artistic beauty in human life. I have therefore rendered it in accord with the 1917 JPS translation of the verse: "He hath made everything beautiful in its time."

deliver a singular statement going beyond expressions of grievance that seek to unburden their load of sorrow and withdraw. These are emotive messages that do not seek to turn into any kind of discursive insight.

For all that, Agnon clearly did not disparage the poem or see in it only a source for the great symbol of the three sister seamstresses; he saw himself as obliged to the “tale” it embodied, as shown by his taking many details from it and treating them with great attentiveness: the impression created by the poem’s rhythm and repetitions — as though the sisters work was never-ending (an element borrowed from Hood); the wedding of the wealthy man’s daughter; the order of the sisters’ speaking; the spitting of blood; and the sighs — all these find their place in Agnon’s story. But Agnon locates these details within an entirely new framework, marvelously complex and quite different from the point of view of the mental and moral world embodied in it. He also eliminates from it all traces of the modern world (= the sewing machine) to create a world that is archaic and timeless. Above all, Agnon creates a powerful and constant tension between the folk symbol of the three sisters, with its all-encompassing dimensions, and the unique texture of the story, which, in every one of its details, declares itself not a folktale, or even the antithesis of a folktale. “Three Sisters” is what Linda Hutcheon has called a “narcissistic narrative,”⁹ noting a long list of instruments (to be discussed below): the carefully molded shape of the speech; the subtle modulations of the tone and its emotional burden; and the multiple and fluctuating gaps between the “world” and the narrator. This is a classic example of what Robert Alter has called a “self-conscious genre.”¹⁰ Even so, as I shall ultimately argue, Agnon ultimately seeks not to eliminate the story’s folk-mythic dimension entirely, but rather to create a literary situation that is stretched between the folk and the romantic modes.

“Three Sisters” commences with a series of general statements: five sentences that form the story’s exposition, the sum of advance knowledge needed to construct the story in its entirety. The four sentences are laid out in two groups — two against two. The first two describe the sisters’ toil, and the next two the “life” for which they toil. The first sentence functions almost as an axiom: It is the law that is imposed upon the whole story:

Three sisters lived in a bleak house sewing white vestments for others.

A longer look at this sentence reveals that its second half relates to the first in an extraordinarily sophisticated way: It presents it with a kind of opposition — between “a bleak house” and “white vestments.” However, the opposition isn’t a simple one — “white” is not the opposite of “bleak” — but rather is implied in

9. Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1980).

10. Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975).

a cluster of oppositions that arises in its wake. “White vestments” are the vestments of marriage (linens, nightclothes and undergarments), highlighting the obvious fact that the sisters are unmarried, since they all live in the same house. Moreover, it seems that all the “others” are getting married, leaving the three spinster sisters to make their wedding vestments. Beyond that, the sentence’s implied opposition emphasizes that the whole world, as it were, is engaged in getting married and is all drenched in light, while the three sisters are shut away in a house as bleak as a grave. This only emphasizes the additional implication of this opposition (not at all to be felt in Peretz’s poem), that it is unmarried women who are tasked with preparing the bridal vestments. Upon this tension — the sexual tension between the spinster women and the acts of coupling embodied in the white vestments — will rise the Agnonic story.

The second sentence, long and complex as it is, puts together a very radical picture of time and labor. It is magnificently constructed as two time-worlds immersed one inside the other, each precisely ordered: The dimensions of external time expand — day, week and seasons of the year, “From dawn to dusk, from the end of Sabbath to Sabbath eve ... neither in the season of sunshine nor in the season of the rains” — while the motion of labor is monotonous, painstaking and never-ending: “their fingers never strayed either from scissors or needle, and sighing never left their hearts.” Moreover, external time, which passes during the time of laboring, is described such that its dimensions expand right up to the limits of the possible, whether from the perspective of bodily needs or from that of Jewish law, so that the time in which “life” happens, the time for which the sisters toil to make a living, shrinks to the point of disappearing altogether from the picture. Over against this, the labor is depicted as an almost involuntary motion, monotonous and mechanical, in which the scissors and needle acquire independence and move all by themselves, like the brooms in “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice.” The list that creates this monotonous impression is made up almost entirely of negations: “never ... never ... neither ... nor” (Hebrew: *lo ... lo ... velo ... velo ... lo ... velo*), and it is these negations that bind the picture of monotonous labor to the seasons of the year that surround it!

The complexity of this construction is worth a lingering glance. Not only does the accretion of negatives create a negative tension on its own, but the transition from the motion of needle and scissors to the seasons of the year, by means of the word “neither” (*lo*), creates an additional symbolic dimension: The three sisters are blind to the seasons of the year. “Season” (*onah*¹¹) in Hebrew signifies not only a period in the annual cycle, but also a woman’s periods of fertility. It thus emerges that the sisters’ toils cut them off entirely from the cycle of fertility, from the natural element of humanity. We may look as well at the list of chores,

11. Translator’s note: This word does not actually appear in the story; instead, Agnon uses the word *yemot* — “days” or “time.”

which, along with working with needle and scissors, includes the sighing that “never left their hearts.” Even these cries of distress are objectified by being put on the list.

Over against the first two sentences come two brief, blunt statements. The story denies the sisters any satisfaction and almost any livelihood: no benefit (*berakhah*) and no bread. The picture is even more hyperbolic: not bread, but a “dry crust”; and they were not remunerated, but rather “found” it. Already here, it is keenly felt that the sentence structures and choice of words operate as they do in the poem: The complex structure of the long preceding sentence, the structures of its parts and its rhythm having created an overall impression — actually, a distortion — of the sisters’ life, the short succeeding sentences now amplify and emphasize it all the more. The picture is bitter and stark: “life,” the thing (*davar*) for which the sisters perform their Sisyphean labor, is tenuous, elusive and practically evaporates from their hands.

Here ends the exposition, without any special graphic indication (such as beginning a new paragraph) to indicate it, but only the disruption of all these general statements with the words “On one occasion.” Everything stops, and instead of generalized, cyclical time and a distant, generalizing gaze come a focused gaze in a singular time. It is the lovely dress for the wealthy bride that stops the perpetual motion. Everything changes at once. The gaze captures the sisters at an entirely different moment from that with which the reader has been familiarized — at the moment of finishing a job. No longer are objects doing as they will, but the three sisters stop what they are doing and recall: “Upon completing their handiwork (*mel’akhtan*) they recalled their sorrows (*tsaratan*) for they had nothing on their flesh (*besaran*) but frail skin (*’oran*), and that too was growing old.” It is enough to listen to this sentence, with its new rhythm, the quiet rhyming that enters it and its chilling conclusion, to sense all at once that the distancing irony of the opening has vanished, and a new attitude of intimate, empathetic listening has taken its place.

The relationship between the exposition and the “discourse” that begins with the words “On one occasion” will be clarified and develop into a complex frame, which is the story’s center. I am using the word “discourse” (*davar*) as a calque of the Greek word *logos* (λόγος), as in the concept of a “prologue” (πρόλογος). The meaning of *logos* resembles the biblical meaning of *davar*: a statement or discourse that discloses a way or principle (as in *devar Elohim*, “the word of God”), and also an object, event or deed. The relationship of the exposition to the “discourse” in “Three Sisters” is that of a rule and the exception to the rule. The turning point that occurs with the words “on one occasion” eventually will utterly disrupt the rule described in the opening.

The sentence that concludes the first paragraph manifests the crucial role played in the story by intonation. Agnon deliberately sets a different tone against

Peretz's blunt onomatopoeic rhyming repetitions, which create a kind of dirge-like melody around the sisters' rememberings. The sentence's concluding phrase, "and that too was growing old," is crowned with a tone so full of feeling and so far from the intellectualizing world of the exposition that one cannot help but see what an extraordinarily important element in the continuous stream created up to now resides in the intonation. Not only the cadences varying from one sentence to the next, but also the shades of the vowel sounds and their rich associations with the meaning of the words.

And here, after the whole progression constructed up to now has taken up one long paragraph, the author devotes a whole paragraph to a single line: "Their hearts overflowed with grief" (*Nitmale liban tsa'ar*). This is an overtly poetic element: The use of the graphic shape of the text to enhance its power. These three Hebrew words stand suddenly on their own over against the opening, and in that instant the delicate drama to which Agnon is directing our gaze is revealed: Over against the phrase "and sighing never left their hearts" comes the statement "Their hearts overflowed with grief." What had been a kind of mechanical release, of the stuff of acquiescence and routine, is transformed and turned into a process of welling emotion, of feeling and comprehension. What had impressed us as small figures encased in puny, repetitively mechanical activities expand before our eyes into large, human figures, imbued with value. But the main thing is the change of focus: What had begun with ironic distance and continued with that pause to recall their sorrows now swells into a full stop of reflection upon their grief. This sentence, because of its location and the course that has led up to it, is not only about grief; it conveys its great and simple meaning with surprising power and bears it up to the reader in the fullness of its vulnerability and harshness. Suffice it to recall for another moment the sobbing lines of the poem to see the difference between the sentimental unburdening of feeling and its comprehension. It is here, on this spot, that Agnon turned his back upon the poem and utterly changed what it was about.

In the second part of the story, paralleling the structure of the poem, each sister has something to say — something else for each. From "three sisters" they turn into three individuals, each with something else to say. This is no mere technical transition from description to dialogue. In the flow of the movement generated up to now — in which we have seen a gradual closing in of gaze and perspective onto the sisters — this dialogue is keenly sensed as the climax of that closing in: What had been described from a great distance of space and time is now described from a proximity so intimate that it is immersed in the very circle of the sisters' voices, attuned to the distinctive character of each. Agnon, like Peretz in the poem, arranges their expressions by order of intensity, with the last of them coughing up blood: The first "sighs"; the second "sighs as well and sheds a tear"; while the third, "when she opens her mouth to speak, blood

splatters out.” But this order turns in the story into a complex, multi-toned structure that is unparalleled in the poem: Each one says two things, which may be defined, respectively, as intellectual utterances over against emotional ones — such as sighs. The emotional utterance escapes unmediated from the body; from the breast; from the heart.

The first sister begins with a sigh and then makes her statement, and her statement is the longest. The second sister begins by speaking, briefly, and then sighs, and she also weeps and sheds tears. As for the third sister, she prepares to speak, but what comes out of her mouth is not a sigh but a splattering of blood.

These are not mere pedantic details, but a tension-filled plot sequence. Each of the sisters presents a different character and a different set of relations between emotion, body and mind. The first sister prefaces her speech with a sigh as though to dispatch it, and her body, and she speaks at length. She is the wisest and most intellectual of the sisters. Her words may appear simple, but they are a very serious symbolic distillation of their situation: She stresses that they are women. She declares: “All our lives we sit and toil for others.” What had seemed an arbitrary contrast at the beginning — “white vestments for others” — here becomes a pointed disparity between spinsters and married women. Only here, it seems, did their consciousness of themselves as women, and not just people in general, emerge. Instantly, the meaning of their “sorrows” is transformed. That they have “nothing on their flesh but frail skin” is now grasped not merely as material poverty, but as awareness of their solitary lives, of the absence of a companion or mate, the absence of affection, and above all — of active sexuality or motherhood. And she adds another thing that they lack: “a piece of cloth to make burial shrouds for ourselves.” Here Agnon exploits the double meaning of the “white vestments” mentioned at the outset, a double meaning that has been dormant up to now. The two kinds of white vestments, notwithstanding the obvious contextual opposition of marriage and death, play a similar role: They are symbols of purity. They are symbols of value, holiness and ceremony, whether of marriage or of burial. The words of the first sister thus amount not to a complaint or a distraught cry, but to a statement of frank comprehension: We have missed out on the ceremony of espousal. We weren’t there at the right time and season. And now the next ceremony that’s in store for us — we’re about to miss out on it as well. It is this that constructs the relationship between vestments of marriage and of death as one that is correct and inevitable.

The second sister not only speaks little, but what she says is that they ought to keep silent and refrain from speaking out. She expresses fear of speaking, as though death itself were bound up in it and in its protraction. But, on the other hand — she sighs and sobs, and here the story produces a new and fascinating regimen, governed by a kind of “principle of the conservation of energy” in the economy of emotions and the body: What is blocked in speech and thought

builds up and bursts out by way of the body and its fluids. Here, for now, only in tears. The second sister is positioned between the first and the third not only as the median between them, but also as a turning point. The principle of silence, in which she puts her trust, turns out to “tempt Satan” in and of itself. Or the reverse: Her attempt to block the first sister’s outburst missed its chance. Satan had already been tempted.

The third sister coughs blood: “Blood splattered out and stained the bride’s garment.” A bloodstain is the most inexcusable thing that could stain a bride’s garment before her nuptials. From the garment and the blood erupts a terrifying picture: The sister, by way of the stain, has turned the garment into her own bridal garment. The splatter of blood, which appears in the poem as well, here entirely loses the melodramatic quality so characteristic of nineteenth-century stories of poverty and exploitation and of the great woman-centered operas of Verdi and Puccini, as it loses almost all connection with its pathological cause, the disease of tuberculosis. The blood-splatter in the story is above all emotional and psychosomatic. What is sprayed on the garment is the blood of virginity’s loss, bursting out at the wrong time and from the wrong place — not from the womb, but from the mouth. This is no tear-jerker, but a grotesque picture, created not by the dimensions of the stain or even by its place on the garment, but by the full and unbroken course of the mouth being switched for sexuality and the womb. That switch is made fully manifest by the word “when” (*keivan*): “when she opened her mouth to speak blood splattered out.” In other words — at the very moment that she opened her mouth to speak, blood spurted out of it. It turns out that the blood is her speech. It is the thing that is said in her speaking, because the body here has demanded the right to speak, and it has spoken in its own language. But the body’s speech, after such long years of sorrow and suffering, is its demise. This is the conclusion of the process that had begun to manifest itself in the words of the second sister, but from here on it is clear that it had been building up for all of the sisters’ lives: Their poverty is but a cover for their womanly loneliness and the terrible desperation born of a lack of sexual and emotional fulfillment. The “sorrow” that has grown up with them throughout their lives is a sorrow of body and soul that cannot be parted. The blood spurting from the mouth is the voice of womanliness, which should have burst forth in the blood of virginity’s loss, when the girl reached maturity — when her “season” began. And by virtue of the “principle of the conservation of energy” at work here, the blockage of that blood, the blood of virginity, was a dam that broke and could not hold back the outburst, because what was blocked was no small thing, but a force of nature — motherhood.

Agnon makes use here of a rare Hebrew word, *tsinorah*, “a spurt.” It appears in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Hagigah* 79:7), where it refers to a splash of spittle that pollutes the priestly garments. Even without knowing this, one is well aware here of the polluting force of that drop of blood, but discovering its source enhances and intensifies

the exquisite precision of the word's use in this specific place. The choice of this precise word out of the range available in Hebrew offers a substantive lesson in Agnon's attentiveness to the Hebrew vocabulary. The story as a whole is written in very simple, straightforward language. Just once does Agnon use a rare form: *toshesh*, "frail"; and just once, a rare word: *tsinorah*. In both cases, one is keenly aware of how precise and pointed is his choice of words and, above all, how "self-aware" this narrative is of itself as a tale immersed in the timeless Hebrew textual ambit — an ambit quite distant from the linguistic world of folktales.

"Blood splattered out and stained the bride's garment": Clearly, the third sister has spoiled the garment. She has besmirched it with a stain that pollutes it and makes it unfit to play its role in the wedding ceremony of a rich bride. Worse: In so doing, she has taken the garment for herself — again, bearing in mind that the cloth for sewing was given to seamstresses by their clients. Thus, plainly, "it goes without saying he did not pay her." The wealthy man's hall (*teraqlin*), though unexceptional in the world of the story, hints, by the very use of the word *teraqlin*, at the well known metaphorical use of this word in *Pirkei avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*) 4:16: "this world is like a vestibule before the world to come; prepare yourself in the vestibule, so that you may enter the banqueting-hall (*teraqlin*)."¹² The word's very use instantly turns the story into a dark allegory about the course of a human life on the way to the world to come: The white cloth is one's life, given to the individual as a pledge — but they, by force of their suffering and the depth of their flaws, spoil it and sully its purity, ultimately facing their judgment wretched and ashamed, misunderstood and, above all, alone. What does the wealthy man know of spinsterhood and disease?

The story had pointed to an allegorical reading even before this, in its very use of the typological number of three sisters. But the number's allegorical nature is more open-ended and does not necessarily refer to the relationship between humans and the Creator; it refers, rather, to a more general human condition: the pattern of toil, suffering and misfortune that ultimately sully the value of the work and the suffering undergone for its sake. Herein lies the root of Agnon's interest in integrating the folkloric element of the motif of the three sisters into a new, "narcissistic" narrative framework, which creates so deep a disturbance in the narrative flow as to drive into it a dimension that utterly contradicts the conviction it purports to declare — that the sisters are victims of the evil that surrounds them. The verbal and symbolic associations that Agnon generates disclose another dimension — one in which the sisters appropriate the garment for themselves, turning it into a white vestment for a kind of ghostly wedding. This direction, which, in effect, justifies the wealthy man's refusal to pay them, comes from a place that contradicts any ethos bound up with the folktale.¹²

12. On elements that contradict the world of the folktale see B. Bettelheim, "Fairy Tales as Ways of Knowing," in M.M. Metzger and K. Mommsen (eds.), *Fairy Tales as Ways of*

The last paragraph is not an epilogue but a “metalogue”: It is the narrator’s statement regarding the story’s open-ended allegorical conception. Without making it explicit, that statement nevertheless sharpens the reader’s thinking about a “discourse” that is revealed to their eyes to a heightened degree of precision. The narrator sees in tears a symbol of mourning and weeping. His question discloses that he, too, is overwhelmed with questions and expectations upon reading the story: Fulfillment of the wish to go on weeping after the moment of catastrophe would signify that one might still live on and turn it into a dawning of insight, so that the moment of destruction would not be the final event in the fateful process — the critical event that spoiled everything. That, if it could have happened, would have been a thing “beautiful in its time.” But “beautiful” is not the same as “lovely” (like the dress). “Beautiful” is a moment of value within its own negation; it is a human overcoming of the blow that makes an end of it. “Beautiful in its time” is perhaps more like the classic tragic endings, in which a “lesson” emerges from the suffering. But that is not the human situation in this place. Utter destruction is the final thing, so all-consuming that there can be no rising from it, and the person crumbles into their own flawed nature. The narrator does raise the heroic possibility that a person might rise up from the ruins and launder their life with tears, inasmuch as to say: Such a possibility exists in the world — but not in this story. This is a declaration by the narrator of faithfulness to, or rather dependence upon the existential, inexorable truth standing over against him. This is the story’s truth claim. The narrator does not excuse himself from relating to the second, “beautiful” possibility from a higher perspective: Even if it were to exist, “there would still be no true consolation.” The order of the world is flawed at the root, without any possibility of rectification, now or in the future.

We must still direct our gaze at the turning point in the sisters’ lives, the crisis point in the story, the point at which “on one occasion they engaged in making a lovely wedding dress for a wealthy bride.” Why is it precisely here that the repetitive continuum of their everyday routines, which continued for so many years, is broken? Why is it precisely here that the twinge of recollection occurred that suddenly brought them to look at themselves — at their “lives,” their “sorrows” and their “grief”? Here, more than anywhere else in the story, we encounter Agnon’s metaphysical world, by way of his construction of a disturbing causal gap. What “causes” the turning point? The reason for it lies in the “loveliness” of the dress. That loveliness has to do with the bride’s wealth. With this dress, the sisters had to go beyond what was usually required for wedding ceremonies to create something especially appropriate. No mere white vestment was made here, but something exceptional that entered the realm of art. It was the need to create

beauty that elicited a different process, at the end of which the three sisters were faced with a work of art crafted by their own hands. The dress, as a thing of beauty, ceased to be a mere vestment and commenced being a symbol imbued with meaning. Moreover, the value of beauty derives from the force of the eros that passes into objects and words. The three sisters suddenly were exposed to the meaning of their deeds and to the erotic power passing into the dress and back to them like light reflected from a mirror. It was the sisters' "moment of art" that disrupted their life routines and faced them with their own death.

The "beautiful" is conditioned by material wealth. It has to do with abundance and surfeit. It can never have a place in the realm of poverty and need. The "beautiful" goes beyond the realm of labor and its reimbursement. It wrings the essence of their lives out of the seamstresses. That is the reason for the differentiation between the "lovely" in this section and the "beautiful" at the story's conclusion — the beauty draped in weeping. That is to say, in this story Agnon differentiated between two kinds of beauty. For the one, the beauty of a work of art, he uses the word *na'eh* ("lovely"), drawn from the language of the rabbinic texts; for the other, the beauty manifested in the sorrow of human existence, he uses the more elevated biblical word *yafeh* (beautiful). Here the story utterly contradicts the world of the poem. It is not poverty, exploitation and disease that have ravaged the lives of the poor seamstresses, but the advent of an external force that departs from any socio-historical comprehension. The "beautiful" is absolute cruelty. It may be conditioned by material wealth, but material wealth cannot explain it, and neither can the physical powers that generate it in the lives of its creators. Through this "beauty" the entire story is refracted.

The structure of "Three Sisters" rests upon the dialogue between the exposition and the "discourse." The nuanced reiteration of several of the elements mentioned in it — like the masculine "others" (*aḥerim*) in the first paragraph, which become feminine "others" (*aḥerot*) in the third, and the "sighing [that] never left their hearts" reflected in their "hearts overflowing with grief"; and the sense of a sharp and profound change that transpires with the onset of the "discourse" — all these construct a very organic framework, spare and tightly compact. That framework is structured by the tension between the "lovely" and the "beautiful." The "lovely" depends upon devastation. The "beautiful" remains outside of reality. This ideational agenda is clearly no concern for a folktale. What this story is concerned with is the touching of "high" art upon human life.

A final comment regarding the dedication: "To B. Katznelson, blessings." Berl Katznelson was a close friend of Agnon's and one of the few Zionist leaders whom Agnon respected and even admired. He saw him as one of the "four smiths":¹³

13. Cf. Zechariah 2:3.

When I look at the country and see how the *Yishuv* has arisen from clutches of emigrants and bands of dreamers, I see four smiths, who, it seems to me, have endowed it with shape and form, [...] These four men in whom the Almighty, I believe, vested the power to give shape to the *Yishuv* were Y.H. Brenner, Arthur Ruppin, our great rabbi R. Abraham Isaac Kook of blessed memory and Berl Katznelson.¹⁴

To define the force of Katznelson's leadership, Agnon quotes a laborer who belonged to the Second Aliyah:¹⁵

We would get up and do our plowing,¹⁶ and each of us was sunk in his own troubles and didn't see himself as doing anything beyond toiling for his living. One day Berl Katznelson came and started talking with us, and he gave us a breath of life. We started to feel like this work that we were doing out of routine, for lack of choice, for the sake of getting by, was a service not to be excelled.

The dedication of "Three Sisters" to Berl Katznelson is surely a gift of love. However, it also seems to imply a solemn, somber statement addressed against Katznelson's optimistic-messianic attitude regarding the rationale of Zionist labor and the rectification it was meant to embody — a statement in the form of an allegory: The three penurious, unmarried sisters, laboring in toil and trouble, were the Jewish people in exile. The lovely garment that seems to herald some kind of way out, by virtue of the man of wealth — the Holy One, Blessed be He — or at least to speak to them of marriage, beauty and restoration, is the Zionist revolution, with its concept of labor as a way to remedy the people's situation and its fate. But the three sisters (the people) have languished for so long in the realms of decline and disease that the rectification, coming so late, will now lead only to destruction and ruin, and there is no healing in it — as in the words of the proverb: "Hope deferred sickens the heart" (Prov. 13:12). There is a limit to hope, beyond which comes the too late, overturning the restoration.

The folk element in "Three Sisters" imbues the story with a mythic dimension. The story's strange effect flows precisely from the irresolvable tension between its modernist progression, leading to the utter subversion of the balance of good and evil in it, and the naïve quality of the symbolism that underlies it. Agnon sought in this story to galvanize the full power of its folk element and even to "update" it, in sharp contrast to the place of the "folk" element in the ending of "Abandoned Wives," in which it is in effect identical with the loss of all

14. S.Y. Agnon, *Me'atmi el 'atmi*, 148. The translation of this sentence is taken from Orr Scharf, "The Double-Edged Sword of Criticism: Berl Katznelson and the Partition of Palestine," *Havruta* (Winter 2012), 68.

15. The wave of immigrants that arrived in Erets Yisra'el between 1904 and 1914, mainly from eastern Europe.

16. The word for plowing, *horesh*, is homonymous with *harash*, smith.

meaning. There, it is the depth of oblivion, into which the voice of the whole story vanishes. The “folk” element stands on both sides of the story’s unfolding: It is its source and also its loss to oblivion.

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