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Shmuel Yoseph Agnon (1888–1970)

BAPTISM BY FIRE

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The New Hebrew Literature, which emerged only in the mid-nineteenth century, demanded far more than the writing and publication of prose and poetry. A Jewish author who sought to write a Hebrew novel in the 1850s found himself amid a peculiar, unique culture, consisting of at least two and often four tongues: Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of religion, rite, and learning; Yiddish, the language of the community, in which the everyday was lived; and, for many, languages of the surrounding Gentile world—Russian, Lithuanian, Polish, and so forth. Yet, albeit this polyglossia, this culture—Jewish culture—had no secular literature of its own.

Hebrew and Aramaic were the timeless, universal tongues of Jewish culture, in which educated Jews were knowledgeable, and this prepared them for their role in the creation of a new Hebrew national language—the Hebrew of modern literature. We may already here point to the fascinating difference between European nationalism, in which language was linked to the locus of the land, and Jewish nationalism, which was founded upon a language that was "disembodied"—existing in time but, for the most part, without a space. This attribute was not entirely lost even when Hebrew literature eventually became correlated with a single locus—the Land of Israel.[1]

Avraham Mapu (1806—1867) was the first to create a foundation, a specific locus, for modern Hebrew prose, fashioned from deep connections among language, genre and place. His *Ahavat Tsion* (Love of Zion, 1853) is one of modern Hebrew literature's most stirring achievements because it created, seemingly out of nowhere, a site of cultural independence. European literature served as a dominant and obligatory model for modern Hebrew literature, and from this point onward the relation between them no longer took the form of a passive acquisition of forms, styles, and literary norms. Instead, it developed into an alert negotiation that was informed by a radical movement toward the literary sources scattered within the long textual

history of Judaism, thus marking a theological and cultural differentiation between Judaism and European culture.

Following Mapu's literary revolution, modern Hebrew prose was transposed to the concrete reality of Jews living in the towns of Eastern Europe. This step was taken, about half a generation after Mapu, by S. Y. Abramovich (1835–1917), better known by the nom de plume Mendele Mokher Sefarim (Mendele the bookseller). Mendele's literary exemplars were Miguel de Cervantes, Johann Wolfgang Goethe and the eighteenth-century English writers—especially Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne. His confident literary treatment of the Jewish shtetl's reality—which for him was a contemporary social, economic, and psychological milieu—and the novel Hebrew style he created in order to describe this reality were major innovations. Because it was shrouded in sanctity, Hebrew, and especially biblical Hebrew, was not used in everyday Jewish life and was thus ill-fitted to represent actual spoken language. In order to solve this problem, Mendele Mokher Sefarim based his work on the language of the Mishnah (oral law) and on the Hebrew of *Hazal* (our Sages of Blessed Memory)—the ancient secular Hebrew—rather than on biblical Hebrew. Biblical Hebrew had been posited as the "classical" model, facilitating a stylistic differentiation and stratification between "high" and "low" Hebrew. This was supplemented by the introduction of Aramaic, which was regarded by Mendele as a sort of ancient equivalent to Yiddish, as a third voice intended to reflect both the distortions and vibrancy of everyday speech. While this resulting style demanded a virtuoso command of Hebrew, it became the obligatory model of modern Hebrew literature for over two generations, and it is this style that was later adopted by S. Y. Agnon—the greatest modern Hebrew writer.[2]

Shmuel Yosef Agnon was born into the Czaczkes family in the town of Buczacz, Galicia. His spiritual world rested upon a firm Jewish foundation, notwithstanding the fact that his knowledge of European literature was acquired in his childhood (he became acquainted at an early age with the works of Goethe, Schiller, and Shakespeare as well as those of Jewish authors of the Haskalah). The breadth of his knowledge of the Jewish literary corpus—ranging from the Bible to the latest literary publications of his lifetime—was truly astounding. By virtue of both his *heder* (primary religious school) education, and private studies with his father (a fur trader and ordained rabbi), he knew the Bible, the Mishnah, and the liturgies by heart. At the age of eight he was already writing poetry and prose, in both Hebrew and Yiddish, and seriously studying German. His acquaintance with contemporary European literature began with a reading of fin-de-siècle impressionist literature, such as the works of Knut Hamsun and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, which were in turn followed by a reading of the great works of nineteenth-century realism.[3]

During the twelve years he spent in Germany, where he married (in 1920) and his two children were born, he naturally experienced a great affinity with European modernism, which was at the time highly vigorous in all fields of art. Yet this affinity was not the earliest source of Agnon's modernism. Clear signs of modernism were already evident in his early writing, and his very first works reveal an intense tension between the traditional and the contemporary. For Agnon, modernism was not some lofty ideal toward which one should strive so as to feel at home in the world of contemporary Western literature, nor was it an external aesthetic code derived and

propagated from the centers of Western culture. To him modernism was, above all, a subversive element that confronted tradition. This subversive element had coursed through his veins ever since his youth. Because he believed that every literary norm was intertwined with some theological or political system, his literary iconoclasm was immediately linked to the theological and political totality of Judaism. In Agnon's works, Jewish tradition itself underwent a modernist baptism by fire.

The absorbing drama of Agnon's relationship with European literary modernism originated from his deep emotional attachment to the various forms of Jewish literature, systematic knowledge of the field, and ongoing study thereof. A highly visible example of this tension is Agnon's way of referring in his stories to the traditional eschatological Jewish narrative, that is, to the tale of redemption.

This is how Agnon begins the novel *Tmol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*), which relates the tale of the second *aliyah*, the wave of immigration to Palestine in the early twentieth century: "Like all our brethren of the Second *Aliya*, the bearers of our Salvation, Isaac Kumer left his country and his homeland and his city and ascended to the Land of Israel to build it from its destruction and to be rebuilt by it."[4] Agnon's "we" denotes the people of Israel in its entirety, and had it not been for the expression "our salvation," one might suppose that Agnon was speaking on behalf of the second *aliyah* immigrants. Yet, the expression "the bearers of our Salvation" makes it clear that the story addresses far broader dimensions, reaching beyond the domain of history to the realm of myth and belief—to the Jewish narrative of the final redemption and the coming of the Messiah. The sentence contains additional allusions to the ancient Jewish tale, which rested in the past upon the creation and the choice, on the divine promise, on the building of the temple, and on its destruction. One cannot but recall the opening verse of Genesis 12:1: "The Lord had said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you' "; in Agnon's story quoted above, he uses the words, "to build it up from its destruction." The very choice of words reveals the story—the story of the destruction and the beginning of the exile.

At first glance these expressions in *Tmol Shilshom* appear to be suffused with the optimism, flowery language, and religious pretensions that characterized the Zionist movement at the time. It is as if these words were delivering the Jewish people from exile, possessing a divine dimension that transcended history—transforming the historical course of the Jewish people, like a gigantic hand descending from heaven and leading a "people" to its land—rather than being a product of social human action, an idea, and a bitter, worldly political struggle. Yet, when one reaches the end of the novel, it becomes apparent that it contains not a jot of the rhetoric of Zionist propaganda (other than a few caricatures at its expense) and, in fact, expresses a profound allegiance to the significance of a practical Zionism—which, in a sense, also belongs to the Jewish narrative of redemption, albeit not in a direct and simplistic manner that equates the Zionist second *aliyah* with the final redemption.

The novel's Zionist protagonist, Isaac Kumer, neither cultivates the land nor makes the desert bloom. Instead of meeting the challenges of Zionism, he works as a painter and returns to the old Jewish world of Jerusalem, to the Me'ah She'arim quarter, where a stray dog bites him, and he is infected with rabies. Before he dies the whole country is beset by a severe drought, and Jerusalem suffers an epidemic.

Just as in the denouement of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the protagonist's death brings rain and solace to the city. *Tmol Shilshom* is thus an alarming modern tragedy; the victim fails to comprehend his mistake. His suffering is incomprehensible, and both the novel's world and verbal texture do not offer any logical nexus between the protagonist's death and the fate of the city, the polis.

Upon the completion of the story of Isaac Kumer, who "failed the test" of the pioneer, the final sentences of *Tmol Shilshom* reinvoke the tone of voice and speech register of the opening sentence and its redemptive language. The novel relates a story that is not merely incompatible with the simple, optimistic vision of redemption; instead, it evokes and narrativizes a world that is utterly estranged from the contemporary Zionist notions of correction and liberation, which it thus questions and undermines. Nonetheless, the redemptive narrative provides the frame within which the story and the historical era it reflects are contextualized—this is the broad panorama within which *Tmol Shilshom* is contained.

This demands an interpretation, and I shall suggest here only two fundamental directions in which it might be carried out: the narrative of redemption is either an ironic framework, presenting an idea that the novel refutes and derides; or it constitutes the novel's central theme, namely a depiction of the throes of redemption—the tragic stages of suffering that the nation will undergo on its path to redemption. In other words, the notion of redemption is inherently a hubris, which has brought and will bring again a tragic fall on the way to its realization. In any event, one cannot ignore the fact that this Israeli fable, which plays out in recent history and evokes the physical, cultural, and political reality of Palestine circa 1910 so precisely, is enveloped by and emerges through the redemptive narrative.

This voice of the redemptive narrative pervades the story, and this is clearly Agnon's intent. As Isaac approaches Jerusalem for the first time, he is traveling by carriage between the hills: "A wind came and started blowing. It shook the dust and flapped at the rocks. The air began to change, and a still small voice was heard like the voice of wailing in the mountains."[5] The pair of biblical references (Kings I 19:12; Jer. 9:18 and 31:15) that surface in the narrator's account of the approach to the city creates a sphere charged with emotion and meaning. This is a divine voice and it speaks the language of the diaspora: "For a voice of wailing is heard out of Zion: How are we undone! We are greatly confounded, because we have forsaken the land, because our dwellings have cast us out" and "Rachel weeping for her children." It is as though Jerusalem is enveloped within a sphere of speech, for when Isaac approaches the city for the first time:

> Isaac looked before him and his heart began pounding, as a man's heart pounds when he approaches the place of his desire. . . . Before him, the wall of Jerusalem suddenly appeared, woven into a red fire, plated with gold, surrounded by gray clouds blended with blue clouds, which incise and engrave it with shapes of spun gold, choice silver, burnished brass, and purple tin. Isaac rose up and wanted to say something. But his tongue was hushed in his mouth as a mute song.[6]

This is the language of ancient Hebrew liturgy as used in the ecstatic poetry that describes God's throne. Thus, at the moment that Jerusalem reveals itself, it appears not merely infinitely "fair," but is observed through words derived from

the world of the loftiest sanctity at a moment of transcendence, words belonging to a divine vision.

When Isaac arrives at the Wailing Wall on the anniversary of his mother's death, the narrator crafts a sight that by way of inversion suggests the portrayal of the temple in its heyday. Set against the Levite's Song of Ascents (*shir hama'alot*) in the Psalms, Agnon composes here "the song of descending ascents," all the while fascinatingly playing with the meaning of the word *ma'alah* (step, ascent, degree, or virtue). It is also worth recalling that the path to the Wailing Wall indeed comprises a series of steps since it is located in the valley of the cheese makers:

> On every single one of the stone steps on the way to the Western Wall are flocks of paupers, cripples, and blind men, some have no arms, some have lame legs, some have swollen necks, and are swollen with hunger and some are shriveled with despair, and there are other invalids and diseased people, fragments of people whose Creator left them in the middle of His work and didn't finish their creation, and when He left them, He left His hand on them and increased their torments. Or their Creator did finish them and strict justice struck them. And every step down had a sorrow greater than the last one. When you have descended all those stairs, you see a bundle of rags. You think they're rags, but they are a woman and her daughter, and it's not clear if the daughter is younger than her mother, but it is clear that they have the same calamity of hunger. Their eyes look straight ahead, but it's not the eyes that seem to be looking, but the pus in the eyes. Those remnants of bodies lie before our precious Temple that was destroyed, a place where Holy-One-Blessed-Be-He heard every prayer and every supplication of any child of Israel and filled his request, and now that it is destroyed, they pray and supplicate and request and the prayer isn't heard. And if it is heard, it achieves only half, a person's soul is saved but his body isn't.[7]

This brilliant and horrifying play on the symbol of *ma'alot* generates an impression that is the inverse of exaltedness: the precise order of the descent, which presents a symmetry of defects and maladies culminating in the vision of the blind mother and daughter, is a grotesque negative of the temple; it is a realistic portrayal of the Wailing Wall area at the time and also a powerful symbol of the destruction of the Jewish people. Placed at the exact center of the novel, this picture is a concentrated expression of the intermediate stage of the Jewish narrative that stretches from the creation to redemption. While the messianic story and its promise of redemption are indeed referenced, the impression of destruction, the lack of affinity to the deity, and the affront to both the human and divine images are stronger elements.

The iconic image of the blind mother and daughter, who have no hope of escaping their calamity, is the holiest symbol of the destroyed temple—personifying a far more general condition. Set against the powerful impression of purpose created by the tale of redemption—leading from the onset toward a solution, the *historical* condition of the people, even at the height of the Zionist endeavor—it appears to be disintegrated, abandoned, and directionless. Yet, the issue of the Jewish people's historical position is nonetheless addressed by means of the tale of redemption, albeit by way of a contradiction: Agnon locates the actual story within the eschatological

narrative by means of a raucous, modernist contradiction—a tattered, directionless, and utterly absurd reality. More than anything else, the figure of the dog Balak signals the conclusive elimination of the literary concept of causality. The classical tragic ending is merely a thin veneer for an appalling reality that defies comprehension. When seen in this light, Zionism itself appears to be a traditional, obsolete legend that cannot withstand the stychia of actual historical forces.

Tmol Shilshom is not the only one of Agnon's stories whose world is rendered through the tale of redemption. In fact, almost all of his stories refer to decisive moments within this story, thereby generating a pervasive duality of narratives. The straightforward tale—the center of the new story—is placed within a broader narrative, that is, the Jewish redemptive narrative. Before discussing this structure, we should consider the first story that Agnon published in Palestine—"Agunot" (Forsaken Wives)—from which he took his nom de plume, Agnon, and which he regarded as the ceremonial-symbolic beginning of his writing career. Our interest lies in its plot, which is presented in the story's opening paragraph:

> It is said: a thread of grace is spun and drawn out of the deeds of Israel, and the Holy One, blessed be He, Himself, in His glory, sits and weaves—strand on strand—a prayer shawl 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 house, in the Temple of her Sovereign and the city of sovereignty, Jerusalem. And when He, of ineffable Name, sees her, that she has neither been 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 snaps a thread in the loom. Then the prayer shawl is damaged: evil spirits hover 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 strays abroad in her anguish, crying, "Strike me, wound me, take away 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.[8]

The story of God weaving a prayer shawl (*talith*) from a "thread of grace and mercy" that extends from the deeds of Jews and is intended for the congregation of Israel, who shall cover themselves with it while God shall speak the words of the lover from the Song of Songs—"Behold thou art fair, my beloved"—is a chapter of the tale of redemption that is given here in an allegorical manner derived from the teachings of the Sages (*midreshei hazal*). The fifth chapter of the Song of Songs serves here as a subtext in the construction of the allegory. The episode in this chapter, in which the "lover" slips away from his beloved's home, and in which she in

turn wanders about at night until the guards tear off her veil, is the episode of the rending of the *talith*—the episode of a historical present that is far removed from redemption. The interesting part in this tale is that the rending of the *talith*—an episode replete with obstacles, shame, and aimless wandering—is not analogous to the destruction of the temple and to the exile. Rather, it refers to the subsequent unfolding of a process of corruption and subversion among the people that severs the continuity of the thread that constituted the cloth of the *talith* (or wedding canopy) that extends from God to the people. That is to say, Agnon signifies here an additional chapter of the tale of redemption that is not linked with events of a mythological stature, such as the destruction of the temple, which in turn serves to posit redemption as even more remote, and suggests that this eternal Jewish story is now poised on the brink of an irrevocable rupture.

This chapter of the rending, added to the tale of redemption, is among the leaps of genius made by the young Agnon on his way to becoming a Hebrew writer. It cannot be assigned to some distinct moment of crisis in Jewish history (e.g., Sabbateanism; the rifts among Hasidim, Mitnagdim, and Haskalah; or conflicts between Zionism and secularism) because it is not a historical moment, but rather a literary condition: the rupture is the present moment whenever it might be. In other words, a tale of mythological stature can, by its very exalted nature, be set only in the past, whereby the authentic perspective of an actual view of the world, which demands realism (as opposed to idealism), undermines by its very nature a generalizing superior perspective. Thus this kind of tale can see human reality, both Jewish and general, in such a complexity that it precludes containment within a linear, focused, purposeful, and religious narrative, such as the tale of redemption. The young Agnon realized that there was a profound, revolutionary upheaval generated by modern Hebrew literature within Jewish culture, which did not necessarily arise from its attachment to Zionism. Rather, this change resulted from an obligation to confront the greatest achievement of Western literature in the century that preceded Agnon—realism. In turn, a profound deliberation of realism reveals that it encompasses elements that deny any suggestion of causality or directionality in one's perception of human activity and history, thereby making it essentially secular and modernistic.

Realism is the concept of "truth" that Agnon required and to which he was committed above all other values. Agnon did not regard his concept of truth as something secular, but saw it instead as an embodiment of the divine—in the complex and radical sense in which Agnon understood this concept. Even the most disintegrated, secular, and worldly "present" is, in his eyes, a manifestation of the divine, not because it is wondrous or sublime but rather because it is random, chaotic, boundless, and incomprehensible. This rupture is the Agnonic modernist signal, signifying the rift between the present and the past.

This rupture is thus something that occurs in the present and constitutes the symbolic embodiment of the historical present within which the story "Agunot" takes place. Moreover, this introduction invites the reader to read the work as a continuation of the allegory of the story of redemption on a new level—not on the level of a sweeping generalization, as in the introduction, in which a fleeting moment from the Song of Songs grasps the historical present in its totality, but rather in a more detailed and intricate manner. Thus it is likewise understood that the

narrative's protagonists and its course both symbolically and allegorically represent the rending of grace and mercy that connects the people with God, that is, the rending of the tale of redemption itself. The "nakedness" in the rending is also a departure from the protective power of the coupling between the Jewish people, as the Congregation of Israel, and the lover, that is God. This tale, then, is not merely about Jews residing in the world and in history but is part of the Jewish story in the singular—a story that should be understood as the story of the relationship between the people and God. Of course, this is not to say that one should search for some figure that represents God and so forth, but rather that one should regard the stories as two distinct spheres that depict reality and that are superimposed on one another.

In this manner, Agnon created an intricate, singular literary state; a concept of a peculiarly Jewish story; and a story whose Jewishness is not manifested in a single language or some literary tradition of national Hebrew prose. This tradition was rather poor, discontinuous, and lacking in distinctiveness, but it resides in the link to an existing, ancient, and all-embracing narrative—which indeed exists as the story of the Jewish people. On the other hand, Agnon created here an exquisite literary opportunity, in which the "rupture"—the historical circumstance within which the new story fits—is in any event a chaotic and exposed condition that is capable of absorbing foreign elements, "evil spirits" of various sorts, and can serve as a conduit for an immense profusion of literary forms. For in this manner, every story will be connected to the one Jewish story by a relation that is simultaneously an affinity and a rupture. In this way Agnon made it clear that modernism itself was an event that was occurring within Judaism and possessed a specifically Jewish significance.

We should finally discuss the two words with which the story begins: *Muva bekhtavim* (It is written). Written evidence is, of course, the established mode of proof and argument in all the numerous branches of Jewish literature. The written is the basis of all interpretation and is the foundation of the literary structure that evolved historically. Thus, the written is that which comes *first*; it is prior in time and foremost in value, thereby understood as being *more comprehensibly written* than that which was written after or about it. It is as if it were engraved in the hard stone of time. To the Sages (*Hazal*), the written was the Bible, but for the sages of the Middle Ages, *Hazal*, too, became the written, and to those that came later all these predecessors appeared as the written—up to the present day, when Agnon and the national poet H. N. Bialik are now considered to be the written. This mechanism, whereby the prior is elevated in spiritual authority until the ancient becomes supreme, is a universal cultural mechanism. But the special attitude toward the written as something that signifies writing, and the sign that indicates it—"as is written" (*kakatuv*)—is particularly Hebrew and is bound up in the annals of Hebrew as the intertwined development of language and belief. The written is a foundation. It is like a fixed edifice of the world; it is a place.

Beginning "Agunot" with "It is written" is both a principled and ceremonial gesture. The young Agnon hereby announces that he is founding his work on the ancient Jewish structure of study and proof, in which the new text presents itself as both a pale version of the former and as emanating from it. But this opening statement is not simple: the tale of God weaving the cloth of the prayer shawl, which is subsequently torn due to "a hindrance, God forbid," is not to be found in the writ-

ten! Although it is composed in a style derived from the language of the Midrash (homiletic interpretation), and although it masks itself as a traditional story based on the template of the Jewish redemptive narrative, it is by no means a traditional story as it contains strange discrepancies uncharacteristic of the stories of the Midrash. It is an Agnonic story par excellence. In a sense this is a false citation, but this is not the point, since this citation is nonetheless true to the spirit of the kabbalistic-Hasidic tale of redemption. Rather, the point is that Agnon creates an autonomous structure that contains its ancient origins as internal foundations, and in so doing he transforms the standing of the Hebrew writer vis-à-vis the ancient textual authority. Thereby he maintains that this authority is itself a work of creation, emanating from the author no less than from the written. In this manner the metahistorical Jewish story, the redemptive narrative, is comprehended as a story that is still changing; it is a story that is still being created, which constitutes some sort of "thread" between this world, the human world, and the eternal world of redemption.

Sefer HaMa'asim (*The Book of Deeds*) is one of Agnon's most daring modernist breakthroughs. The plots of these stories are not subject to the premises of realism: the dead enter the world and interfere with the living; the tenses become confused and jumbled, undermining the sense of continuity; and, most importantly, the conventional concepts of cause give way to twists that appear puzzling, frightening at times, and always alien and strange. Agnon commingles various kinds of representations, shifting between them rapidly and without warning, and both their continuity and endings are vastly different from what one would expect from a realistic story. Many have termed these stories as "surrealistic"; others have regarded them as dreams written. However, the label "surrealistic" is inappropriate here because the stories do not seek to appear as a stream of associative writing that is entirely devoid of "understanding"; thus, conceiving them as written dreams explains nothing.

One of the elements that Agnon addresses in *The Book of Deeds* is the way in which a modern human being relates to traditional concepts of time: that is, both by the conventional measurement of time and by the concepts of sacred time. The "entering of the day"—the onset of sacred time—exceeds, in the stories of *The Book of Deeds*, the space of regular time signals. This moment is not merely the signifier of some ritual and deed, but it is rather a substantial alteration of the temporal texture, as if time was a substance with relative mass. Furthermore, the manner in which narrative events are related to each other undergoes profound changes. The design of sacred time in these stories is doubtlessly influenced by its shaping in the Hasidic tales, which impart to it an aura of sanctity and the magical atmosphere of a fable. Yet, the construction of these stories around sacred time is a lot more complex than the mere presence of the signifiers of a romantic ambience; in fact, it is directly related to the stories of the Sages.

Most of the stories in this book take place on the threshold of holy days—Sabbaths, Passover, Rosh Hashanah, and Yom Kippur. Their openings signal the threshold of sacred time:

> I was busy all year round. Each day, from early morning until midnight, I would sit at my desk and write . . . since New Year's Eve was upon us I thought to myself, a new year is in the offing and I have left many letters unanswered; I shall

sit myself down and reply to them and enter the new year without obligations. ("The Orchestra")

Or another passage:

> The house was prepared for Passover. The walls appeared white as snow and the floor shone like marble. . . . [A]nd we too were prepared for the festive occasion. Had it fallen upon us that instant it would have found us ready. Having searched for leaven we sat down to the meal. Before we had put spoon to mouth we succumbed to sleep and dozed, since we had not slept the entire week. ("The House")

Agnon fashions here the onset of sacred time as a fundamental transformation of the laws of reality. He does not announce the principle involved, but rather presents it as a reality that embodies a novel set of rules.

In the story "HaNerot" ("The Candles"), a man is searching, in actuality, for the precise moment in which sacred time begins. The story opens with the words "After midday on the Sabbath eve," and from this moment it is apparent that the Sabbath is approaching. The story is studded with time signifiers, yet time's linearity, which is supposed to continuously bring nearer the moment of onset along a predictable and irreversible vector, disappears in a strange manner and is replaced by time fragments that disturb the linear perception that should establish the definitive arrival of sacred time:

> The house was prepared and awaited the Sabbath. Yet its occupants busied themselves with mundane matters. . . . as I stood reading the light of day faded. . . . I raised my head and noticed that all the neighboring houses were lit by the Sabbath candles and the people of the house were displeased. I wondered why these houses had been lit so early, before the holy day was at hand, in any case I must hurry. . . . [S]ome person leaned toward the window and looked out, withdrew his head and said "*naharayim*.".[9] The word *naharayim* [two rivers] is in truth inappropriate here, but I take it to be an antithetic allusion to darkness: This person, that is, had weighed his words so as to spare me humiliation. I became alarmed and went to the sea. . . . [A]nd many people stood among the puddles shining in the light of the sun that had set.[10]

The disappearance of the perception of a linear continuum, which safeguards the story's protagonist's orientation in time and would have pinpointed in a conventionally established manner the moment of the onset of sacred time, is bound up in this story with an entire cluster of disturbances in other dimensions. The story's opening signals a plan of action: "After midday on the Sabbath eve I set aside all my chores, gathered white garments and went to the bath."[11] The action refers to time and to its quality as sacred time: the bathing is an act of purification performed in anticipation of its coming. We have here a dual movement, in time and also in another dimension, a moral and an emotional one. And here, at this moment: "Mr. Haim Apropos came upon me. . . . I bowed my head and greeted him. He greeted me in return and said: 'You are on your way to pray with the Kabbalists.' I nodded to him in affirmation. And even though I had said nothing, I had, after all, lied. I had not intended to lie, but could not bring myself to contradict him. I felt

embarrassed, as I always do when I meet Mr. Apropos, since I knew that he did not approve of me, perhaps because I had set my eyes on his daughter although she is not meant for me."[12]

Mr. Haim Apropos's peculiar name suddenly disturbs the flow of the realistic story since it is an allegorical sign—symbolizing something essentially different from what is apparent—and, as an allegorical sign, it is particularly complex. "Apropos" means "by the way," but Haim Apropos is far more than a person who is incidentally encountered. He is the possibility of life "by the way"; he is simultaneously a condition and an otherness. That is, this meeting ("came upon me"—a motion that emanates from the "world") disturbs the dual motion found at the beginning of the story, the motion in space and time, and the motion towards a moral rectification—the purification. The narrator is revealed to be entangled with Mr. Apropos. He lies because he dares not disengage from the being of this by-the-way fellow, concealing the lie and then revealing it all the more, and this revelation carries with it a further entanglement: a guilty embarrassment about the lust he felt for Mr. Apropos's daughter, who is not intended for him.

There is no awful sin that is revealed in the encounter with Haim Apropos. The constellation of relations that is revealed here is a life constellation in all of its complexity. Apropos's first name is "Haim" (life), and in what follows it becomes apparent that indeed in front of our eyes the ideal of an entire life is fashioned—with its differences of outlook, religion and belief; its imperatives of morality, style, falsehood, and truth; the desire to make peace; and also the ill-fitting, embarrassing, uncalled-for lust. The contact with Apropos has irreparably hindered the dual motion of time and soul toward the sacred time. Instead of the desired smooth motion toward the Sabbath, we are faced with a chaotic journey that appears as a fractal of motions and submotions distancing the protagonist, the I, from any comprehensible concept of direction and purpose.

The following paragraph, as well as the rest of the story, is a consequence of this encounter, which can be understood as an inner encounter between a person and himself and a growing awareness of the complex and problematic presence of the component of "life" within the "I." This component cannot be contained within the simple directional movement of external time and the rules of the precepts (*mitsvot*) that are bound with it. The revelation of the allegorical element subverts the entire perception of reality, exposing it to an expanding cluster of inner realities. This is the working of sacred time, the time of judgment, which comes nearer and nearer and is always on the threshold of arriving. Yet, this divine condition occupies a position that is different from the one it occupies in the traditional story. It is not a tangible change in the world that occurs with the onset of the holy day but rather a spiritual, inner motion within a space that exists far beyond the onset of sacred time. The threshold condition of the holy day is the fissure, the disturbance, through which is revealed everything that stands opposite to the stable concepts of sacred time: a world whose dimensions are expanding to the point at which its interiority reveals the sea that blocks all motion and that undermines the mechanisms of perception themselves. The bridge, the extension of the path over the water, is trembling.

It is fascinating to observe the sea's dual standing in the story. At the beginning it is merely an instrument for bathing and purification that represents the entry into

sacred time and a moral test that precedes it, that is, it is both a worldly instrument with a realistic presence and a symbolic and ritualistic instrument like a *miqveh* (Jewish ritual bath). Further along the journey, the sea's status changes: it loses its simplicity as both the signifier of a place ("the sea raised itself and the water stood as a wall") and the signifier of a ritual. The sea emerges as the innermost being of the "apropos life" of the "I" and as the pinnacle of the inner journey, but at the same time it is experienced as the external, active manifestation of sacred time following its entry into the world. The movement toward the sea is therefore the movement toward the Sabbath, and the confrontation with it is akin to a confrontation with sacred time and its divine quality. From this it becomes apparent that it is actually the tortuous inner path—painful and incidental in its entirety—through which the sacred element with all its divine power is revealed. That which was once a means eventually becomes the end, and that which was a limited symbol, in speech and in deed, becomes an infinite symbol, dangerously powerful, all-disturbing and all-devouring, incomprehensible and yet meaningful. Standing on the trembling bridge is a consciousness of exposure, an almost total nakedness of thought, poised on the verge of wordlessness. But it is nevertheless a stand vis-à-vis the sea.

The final word of the story—"trembling"—is essential to its internal movement, being the sign of the disturbance in all dimensions of perception. It follows that the story tears down and annuls the sign of the ending and the purpose that underlies the concept of narrative and the human agency within it—and therefore also the dividing lines between land and sea, between sacred and mundane time, between the essential interiority and the incidental (apropos) exteriority—replacing it with a "trembling" sign that is all movement, a bridge stretching into infinity that shudders, complementing the motion forward with movements of collapse and retreat. This is not a harmonious merging in the manner of tragedy or an ascent to heaven, because the symbolic sign itself (the bridge, the path, the instrument) is destabilized upon contact. This is a symbol that incorporates its own nullification without interfering with the flow that occurs within it. The word "trembling" is associated with the religious awe that at this very moment becomes an intense experience, as in its origin: "with horror and with awe and with trembling and with sweat" (Berakhot 22:1).

The ending of the story with the opening symbol, which destabilizes even the act of symbolization itself, does not contest the ancient literary and religious perception but rather supplements it with a critical dimension that in fact reinforces it. The standing on the trembling bridge is a powerful literary rendition of the condition of awe; it is a standing in the presence of God, which embodies, using a startling but effective verbal instrument, the collapse of perception and wordlessness in the face of the inconceivable infinity of the all-mighty. "The Candles" thus ends by breaking through obstacles and establishing an immediate contact with the divine meaning of sacred time as embodied in space.

Agnonic modernism is expressed in the constitution of relations between traditional (both Jewish and Western) literary and poetic elements and innovative modes of storytelling through a radical subversion of the concept of causality and an undermining of the concept of world and narrative continuity. Agnon wrote a series of modernist tragedies that form the apex of his oeuvre, including such works as the novella *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, the novel *A Simple Story*, and the stories "The Forsaken" and "The Two Sages Who Were in Our City," as

well as many others. In these tragedies the friction between the tradition of classical literature and the innovative modes becomes patently apparent.

This much is clear: for Agnon, modernism was a syndrome associated with the subversion of Jewish traditional life and faith, and with the ruin that befell the Jewish communities of Central and Eastern Europe from the late nineteenth century up to European Jewry's final devastation in the Holocaust. His two monumental works—*A Guest for the Night* and *A City and the Fullness Thereof*—deal with the anatomy of Jewish community life in the town of Buczacz, Agnon's Galician place of birth. The former work, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1966, addresses the destruction of community life during World War I, while the latter is a chronicle of this community from its founding in the late Middle Ages to its demise in the catastrophe inflicted by the Nazis. In these two works Agnon's art of storytelling reaches its pinnacle, and in them his most audacious modernist breakthroughs occurred. One clearly senses that the literary modernism that pulsates through both these works originates from within the fabric of Jewish life itself, and that this is not a mere stylistic attribute but rather an essentially Jewish event. The experience of the rift between the present and the past and tradition, and the acute awareness of the past as a complete world that cannot be changed, occurred within and emanated from the life of Judaism.

Like several other great authors of Hebrew literature who were his contemporaries, such as Yosef Haim Brenner and A. N. Gnessin, Agnon was not influenced by "strong" or hegemonic literature but rather stood at the forefront of Western modernism as it unfolded. He contributed to it his own innovations through an initiative that was not based on the position of a minority. The fact that Agnon's innovations did not become as well known as those of Kafka, for instance, does not stem from a difference in originality and importance but rather from Agnon's deep dependence on Hebrew and its immensely rich depth and resonance. The special intertextual quality of modern Hebrew literature cannot, in fact, be translated into any other language, and from this it follows that Agnon's literary greatness is destined to remain confined to Hebrew.

Notes

1. See Benjamin Harshav, *Language in Time of Revolution* (Stanford, 1993).
2. See Robert Alter, *Hebrew and Modernity* (Bloomington, 1994).
3. See Gershon Shaked, *Geschichte der modernen hebräischen Literatur* (Frankfurt, 1996), 127–50.
4. S. Y. Agnon, *Only Yesterday*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Princeton, 2000), 3.
5. Ibid., 195.
6. Ibid., 196.
7. Ibid., 367.
8. S. Y. Agnon, *Twenty-One Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer and trans. Baruch Hochman (New York, 1971), 30.
9. The word *naharayim* has several connotations. Here it would appear to mean "light" or "brightness"; and it is understood by the narrator to indicate "darkness" by way of antiphrasis, and to imply a reprimand.
10. S.Y. Agnon, *Samukh ve-nir'eh, Sipurim im sefer ha-ma'asim* (Tel Aviv, 1968), 117. The quotations were translated by Avner Greenberg from the Hebrew original.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.