

A N C E S T R A L    T A L E S

*Reading the Buczacz Stories of S.Y. Agnon*

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## Disappeared

Of all the measures imposed on the Jews of Galicia by the Austrian Empire, the one most feared and loathed was conscription into military service. That a Jewish young man should be plucked from his home and community, sent far away for many years—the term of service varied from ten to fourteen years—made to live among gentiles, eat non-kosher food, and desecrate the Sabbath—this prospect struck dread in the hearts of Jewish families. The conscription was not universal, to be sure; Jewish communities were given yearly quotas to fill, and, as we see below, ways were readily found to exempt the well-to-do and the scholarly among the young male population.<sup>1</sup> Yet army service for Jews was very real, and by 1821, it is estimated that thirty-five thousand Jews had served as soldiers in the imperial army.

The Jews of Galicia experienced this measure very differently from the imperial government's intent in imposing it. For the Jews, it bore the markings of a classic *gezeirah*, an edict issued by gentile rulers aimed at their persecution. For the Austrian monarchy, however, it was a sign of the equal status of the Jews in relation to the many peoples and provinces of the multi-ethnic empire. Even though all religious and ethnic groups in the empire were required to provide quotas of young men for army service, there had

indeed been a serious debate within the government about whether Jews should be included or exempted. The military itself was dubious whether Jews could make competent soldiers and, if they were inducted, whether it would be possible to make the arrangements necessary to accommodate their religious practice. It would be more trouble than it would be worth, in their eyes. The civil branch of government, and the monarch himself, on the other hand, put forward the argument that military service is the defining obligation of all subjects of the empire, and without the fulfillment of that duty no ethnic or religious group could hope to be granted rights to participate in other aspects of civil society. This argument prevailed. Despite the military's concerns about the practicability of making Jews into soldiers, the enlightened ideology of inclusion won out.<sup>2</sup>

The question of the religious needs of Jewish soldiers was taken very seriously. Austria was a deeply Catholic country, whose rulers believed that religion plays an essential role in the preservation of morality. While exerting its dominion over many regions and peoples in central Europe, the empire followed a liberal policy in respecting the rights of non-Catholic groups and supporting their institutions. In Galicia, in particular, Vienna strengthened the position of the Greek-Catholic or Uniate church as a counterweight to the Roman Catholicism of the Polish nobility. The Greek-Catholic church, which observed the Eastern rite but was loyal to the authority of Rome, was the religion of most Ruthenians.

When it came to the fierce conflicts between the Hasidim and the maskilim among the Jews of Galicia, the Austrian government declined to persecute the Hasidim; and this was despite the urgings of the enlighteners conveyed in the many German-language memoranda they submitted to the government. In designing the legislation regulating the conscription of Jews into the Austrian army, much thought was given to anticipating the religious needs of the recruits. Although there would be no separate Jewish units, Jews would be concentrated with their co-religionists in the transport and artillery branches of the army. Efforts would be made to locate units with Jews in parts of the empire with Jewish communities so that Jewish soldiers would have some access to kosher food and holiday observances

when possible. When it came to Jews and the Sabbath, the policy was to be similar to the guidelines for Christians on Sunday, which allowed for observance according to ad hoc conditions. Jews were not required to attend Christian worship. Uniforms free of *sha'atnez* would be provided for them to avoid the prohibition against mixing certain kinds of fibers.<sup>3</sup> Although it is difficult to know how these mandated accommodations were put in practice in the field, the liberal intent of the legislation is clear.

Agnon does two things with this historical information in “Disappeared” [“Hane’elam”], the major story in *A City in Its Fullness* that deals with the Austrian period.<sup>4</sup> First, he disregards much of it and makes his protagonist Dan Hoffmann undergo many of the deprivations the legislation was designed to alleviate. Dan appears to be the lone Jew in his unit, which has been deployed very far away to Upper Austria, where Jewish settlement has long been erased by persecution and expulsion. Outfitted in his *sha'atnez* uniform and compelled by circumstance to violate the Sabbath and eat non-kosher food, he struggles bravely to maintain his Jewishness. Second, Agnon declines to frame the Austrian rulers as persecutors. To the contrary: in comparing their behavior toward Dan with that of the representatives of the *kahal*, the official Jewish community of Buczacz, it is the Jews who come away looking villainous. The Austrians may have no love for the Jews, but their bureaucratic rationality requires fair treatment of the empire’s subjects. The only kindness shown to Dan by anyone is extended by an Austrian sergeant, who shows him how to address his letters so they will reach his mother. When Dan fails to return home after he has been demobilized, the whole of provincial officialdom is roused to try to locate him. And when disturbing reports surface concerning the behavior of a Polish noblewoman toward a Jewish young man, the local authorities cannot desist from investigating and uncovering the crime.

The Austrians, in short, are not demonized. As in the case of “Feivush Gazlan” and the Yekel stories, the gentile regime in the far-away capital is responsible for onerous impositions, but it is the morally compromised response of the Jewish community that moves to the center. “Disappeared” is a larger and more ambitious story, and part of its power derives from

the fact that the main Jewish drama is flanked by scenes from the Austrian world and the Polish world between which, and within which, contemporary Jewish life unfolds. The Austrian bureaucracy and military, at several levels of operation, are present in the ways mentioned above. The milieu of Polish nobility is represented by a cameo appearance by none other than Count Potocki himself and by an extraordinary document, the diary of the unnamed noblewoman who keeps Dan chained to a wall for six years. By bringing both the old and new gentile regimes into the story, Agnon gives "Disappeared" an impressive historical breadth at the same time as he inverts the historical sequence. The story begins with the Austrians, the present rulers of Buczacz, and ends with the imprisonment of a Jew by a member of the Polish nobility of the sort who once owned and ruled towns like Buczacz. The story thus enacts a movement backward in time, a disengagement from the rationality of enlightened absolutism and the German language as a vehicle for modernity and a regression back to feudal autocracy and the Polish language of its former rulers.

It was not just the Jews who seemed strange and ungovernable when Austria suddenly found itself in charge of a portion of the former Polish lands. In the eyes of Vienna, the province that came to be called Galicia was a kind of Wild West filled with unpoliced outlaws, oppressed serfs, medieval and mystical Jews, and swashbuckling Polish noblemen who, despite their kindred Catholicism, exploited their freedom from authority to indulge their perverse individual wills.

As enlightened monarchs, Maria Theresa and Joseph II set a task of bringing order to Galicia by ridding the roads and forests of bandits, alleviating the plight of the Ruthenian peasantry, making the Jews into citizens, and curbing the unbridled appetites of the Polish nobles. The success of this civilizing mission was at best equivocal, as can be judged from the stubborn traditionalism of the mass of Galician Jewry. The Polish nobility, in its own way, proved just as recalcitrant. The ending of "Disappeared," which discloses a web of hidden violence and erotic cruelty, relates the history of a noblewoman's mute servant, who becomes an emblem for all of primitive non-rationality the Austrians failed to extirpate from the benighted region. He

is a survivor of the bands of robbers and murderers that were largely wiped out when Austria took over the region. His tongue was cut out by his comrades so he would not talk under torture. Rescued by the noblewoman's father, who had often used him to exact vengeance on his enemies, he now loyally serves the daughter in the execution of her own perversions.

Between the enlightened absolutism of the Austrians and the residuum of Polish feudalism lay the Jews and their corporate structures. "Disappeared" deals with the choices made by the organized Jewish community of Buczacz in filling the conscription quotas and with the consequences of those choices for the lives of the individuals involved. Here, more than in any other story in *A City in Its Fullness*, political history is laid out in detail and presented as knowledge the reader must acquire before the meaning of the events about to be related can be understood. In discharging that responsibility, the narrator plays a role different from the other Austrian stories. He is more worldly, reliable, and omniscient. He knows what is in the heart of a poor widow as well as the words exchanged between two Austrian officials; he follows Dan and his unit bivouacked in the far reaches of the empire just as he keeps track of life in Buczacz. He must, in short, become something of a novelist, and in this he shares more with Agnon in this story than in others.

The story begins in an expository mode by explaining the hard practical choices faced by Galician Jewish communities in filling the conscription quotas. These deliberations are a world away from the discourse about empire and civic duty that took place in the capital surrounding the decision not to exempt Jews from military service. Each year the parnasim of the community would gather and compose a list according to clear criteria: "If [a young man] was from a prominent family or a Torah scholar they would pass him over and in his place take some clod or numskull who would be no loss to the town. If they did not have enough men to fill the government quota, they would recruit from itinerants in the region who sold themselves for military service" (p. 448, 369).

Described here are the workings of the kahal, and it is well to recall the status of Jewish communal leadership under the Austrians. Although the

name of the institution was changed from the kahal to the *Kultusgemeinde* and it lost its titular privileges, the institution retained considerable power, and it constituted the means whereby the regime procured what it wanted from the Jews.<sup>5</sup> Although it remained a self-perpetuating council of wealthy elders, the kahal is presented here as reflecting the consensus of the larger community.

This is the scale of value: a boy from a wealthy family or a boy who is himself learned in Torah is given a pass, and the opportunity is exploited to weed out and ship off “undesirable elements” within the community. (The term in Hebrew is *pohez* from Judg. 9:4, connoting someone who is a mischief-maker or a dunce.) On the next rung down on the scale are the itinerant poor. The narrator takes great care in explaining the severity of this new phenomenon. The fact that a great many Jews earned their livelihood by operating taverns was disturbing to the new Austrian rulers because peasant drunkenness, morally offensive in itself, led to the underutilization of agricultural production. Expelled from this employment, Jews were forced to leave their villages in search of work. In the absence of other prospects, some were willing to be conscripted into army service in return for payment, and with these hired bodies a community could fill its quota.

But what is a community to do when it not only has run through all of its undesirables but has no money to secure the services of the wandering poor? “If the quota set by the regime was still not met,” the narrator explains, “they took from the ranks of the unlettered” (p. 449, 371). The unlettered (*‘amei ha’arets*) are not the rebellious or uneducable but simply those young men, usually workers or apprentices, whose poverty has not allowed them to learn Torah. This is exactly what happens one year. There happen to be no good-for-nothings or adulterers in Buczacz at the time—a reason for the community to pat itself on the back. And the reason why there is no money to hire outsiders is very peculiar. Because of a recent plague, the community needed to expand the cemetery and arranged to purchase an adjoining field from a gentile. They delayed paying him because of the need to deal with unusually heavy taxes and bribes. To display his displeasure, the gentile let his pigs loose to graze in the cemetery. Because of the

“danger that the repose of the dead would be disturbed,” the community paid up and drained its coffers, and thus there is nothing left to “purchase” itinerant strangers.<sup>6</sup> Thus the community chooses to sacrifice a blameless youth rather disturb the repose of the dead.<sup>7</sup>

### *A Perfect Storm*

Having set out the historical background concerning Galician Jews in general and Buczacz in particular, Agnon now devotes himself to launching the story of Dan Hoffmann, the unfortunate young man who has been selected for involuntary recruitment. But the story we get is not the story we expect. Instead of following the adventures and tribulations of the young Jewish recruit in any direct way, “Disappeared” is taken over by a variety of digressions and preoccupations for most of its long span until the story returns at the end to Dan’s victimization at the hands of the Polish noblewoman. Yet, as we have seen throughout these stories, digressions are precisely the place to search for what Agnon is up to. With that in mind, I focus the following discussion on those features of “Disappeared” that seem anomalous or excessive and pose an interpretive challenge. The following is a list of the unexpected formations in the texts, which I consider in the course of this chapter. (1) The story is thickly emplotted—multiple strands of causation are knotted together—only in its opening scene. (2) The emotional experience of the women on the home front (Dan’s mother and his unofficial fiancée Bilhah) receives the preponderance of narrative attention rather than Dan’s fate in the army. (3) Nearly a quarter of the story is devoted to the subject of letter writing and to the portrait of a professional scrivener named Dovidl. (4) In the second half of the story, considerable space is given to the fraught relations between the Polish nobility and the new Austrian rulers. (5) At the end of the story proper—before the revelation of the noblewoman’s diary—the narrator shifts focus away from the elders of the kahal as representative of Buczacz as a community and instead gives us an epic rendering of the people of Buczacz as a kind of body politic. (6) The “Diary of a Lady,” the Polish-language document that mysteriously comes into the hands of the narrator and is placed after the conclusion of the story

proper, begs many questions about the narrator's motives. I list these issues in the order of their appearance in the story, and it is in that order that I consider them in this chapter.

First is the knotted opening scene that becomes the generating premise of the plot. In weaving together the multiple factors that result in Dan's being pressed into the army, Agnon is attempting to account for the concatenation of events and forces that leads to this fate. The forces are all grounded in the historically conditioned reality of the story's time and place, yet *how* the threads are entangled is determined by the creative discretion of the writer. Any single one of these threads by itself is troubling but not dangerous; knotted together, they produce tragedy. Agnon executes this fateful entanglement in one long passage.

That month Reb Leibush was serving as parnas. The young man's mother had come to him to receive her share of wheat money to buy Passover matzah.<sup>8</sup> He gave it to her, but she demanded more. Reb Leibush said to her, "Look, this is what you are entitled to receive, this is what I gave you, now be gone and on your way." Whereupon she started screeching and hollering and recounting to him all her troubles. Her husband had died and left her with an only son and no visible means of support. Over the winter they sustained themselves with whatever she could earn in her impoverished state. She would buy a chicken from a Gentile woman and sell it at a small profit, she would salt the slaughtered chickens to remove the blood and render the meat kosher for the local women. She would prepare goose fat for them for Passover, or pluck feathers; she would prepare the chickens for the wedding feasts the wealthy families made for their daughters. Now that Passover was approaching she wanted to buy provisions for the festival so that she and her orphaned son would not go hungry as they had all winter, when there was nothing in their mouth but saliva. Reb Leibush replied that there were many poor widows in town and many orphans too.

"What makes you better than they?" he asked. She grew angry at the way he compared her to the other poor widows and retorted fiercely, "Whoever envies us, may his children be orphans and his wife a widow!" Just at that moment Godil the tailor came in. He wanted to measure Reb Leibush for a garment. I am not sure if the garment was for him to wear on the approaching Passover holiday or to impress the officials of the provincial capital when he brought the recruits there to present them. When the widow saw Godil she exclaimed, "Well now, here's Godil! He can say whether I deserve to be

treated well or not. And if not on my own account, then on account of my son, who works with him.”

Godil was silent. Said the widow, “Godil, why are you silent? Why do you swallow your tongue? Say something. Let Reb Leibush hear my son’s praise.” Said Godil, “What can I say about your son? He works for me.” The widow shrieked in anger, “That’s all? Nothing more?” Godil continued, “What more do you want me to say? That he is worthy of being a *Landesrabbiner*?<sup>9</sup> He does his work, and I have nothing against him.” The widow raised her voice at him and screamed, “That’s how you treat an orphan, the son of a widow? That’s all you have to say about him?”

Godil grew angry at the woman for addressing him that way in the presence of Reb Leibush. It might make him think that she was his, Godil’s, equal. “Sha! Sha!” said Godil to her, “If you insist, I will praise your son to the skies.” The widow replied, “So open your mouth and say something.” Godil turned to Reb Leibush and said, “He may be young but he’s as strong as a grown man. He’s as powerful as a mighty oak and taller than everyone his age. Twenty year-olds, twenty-two year-olds, men who sell themselves for the imperial army don’t even come up to his shoulders.”

Her love for her son prevented her from catching the import of what Godil had just said. Indeed, his earlier silence was better than the words he had now spoken. Triumphantly she said to Reb Leibush “So has Reb Leibush heard what Godil has said about my son? I will add to his words. One Sabbath last summer I took a walk with him. We came to a village and sat down in a park belonging to a Polish noblewoman from whom I buy chickens and fruit. The lady passed by and asked me who this young Jewish man was. I said to myself, “May the eyes that this shiksa can’t take off my son wither away!” She then said, “A fellow like this, a fellow like this by us would be made a commissioned officer.” And within two or three days the widow’s son was taken for the imperial army. (pp. 450–51, 372–74)

Let us begin with Godil in untangling the plot complications. Godil is a tailor with social aspirations. In the paragraph directly preceding this one, we are told that he owns a house and serves as a gabbai in the tailors’ synagogue and that several generations back his forbears were related to R. Leibush, the member of the kahal who is taking his turn as monthly parnas. Godil plans to use the prospect of his daughter’s marriage to a prominent family as a major avenue in his ascent. But his daughter Bilhah has fallen in love with Dan, one of his apprentices. Although it is Bilhah who has “cast

her eyes” on the young man, her father’s anger is trained on “this fatherless son of a widow with nothing more than a shirt on his back [who has] worked his charms on the girl and stolen her heart” (p. 450, 372).

R. Leibush too has his aspirations. The reason for Godil’s appearance is to measure him for a new suit of clothes. The purpose of the suit is to make an impression on the officials in the provincial capital when he travels there to hand over the recruits. So, the ceremony that marks Dan’s being torn from his family and condemned to many years of lonely military service is the same ceremony that the parnas from Buczacz hopes to use to inflate his importance in the eyes of the regime. But the new suit will be for naught unless he can deliver the quota of inductees. Even though Dan’s name may have been discussed in the kahal, the slot was not yet filled at the time this scene takes place. Ironically and tragically, it is only after Dan’s mother sings his praises that the deal is done, and R. Leibush can walk away knowing that the complement of recruits is now complete.

Dan’s mother is bereft but not powerless. The fact that of all the characters she alone has no name of her own lends a primal, archetypal force to her being. Her encounter with R. Leibush occurs within the context of an official occasion, in which charity funds are distributed to the poor in advance of Passover to enable the purchase of holiday necessities. Rather than accepting her allotment demurely, she launches into a harangue denouncing the tightfistedness of the community and dramatizing the demeaning and exhausting jobs she undertakes to make ends meet. Her accusatory invectives and her expressions of raw emotionality are the features that are most identified with her throughout the narrative. Stripped of other resources, she possesses only “screeching and hollering” and rehearsing her travails as sources of power. These means are not wholly ineffectual in her encounter with R. Leibush, but, tragically, not for the purpose she intended. Rather than being moved to greater charity, he becomes defensive and provokes her to greater shrillness by asking what makes her more deserving than the other poor widows of the town.

The tipping point in the situation takes place with the arrival of Godil, who has come to measure the parnas for his new suit. To bolster her claims

for increased charity funds, she demands that the tailor give a testimonial to her son's worthiness. The reader knows what she does not: Godil is already predisposed against Dan for interfering with his plans to make an advantageous match for Bilhah. So when she screams at him and abuses him for his tepid response, Godil is provoked from a resentful withholding into a destructive rage. It may not be clear whether the mother is aware that her son is a candidate for forced induction, but Godil certainly knows. With his extravagant praise for the apprentice as being mighty as an oak and taller than the "men who sell themselves for the imperial army," he has effectively sealed the boy's fate. For the one reservation that has been holding back Dan's selection is the fact that he is below the minimum mandated age of eighteen. The obstacle falls away now that R. Leibush sees that he will be universally perceived as at least that age.

As if this weren't enough, the mother makes the situation even worse by proudly recounting the anecdote about the Polish noblewoman who could not take her eyes off of Dan and who declared that he is strapping enough to be made a commissioned officer. This additional nail in the coffin, as it were, is not necessary to bring the sad business to a conclusion, but it serves several functions. It sharpens the terrible irony of the mother's triumph unwittingly condemning her son. It foreshadows the grotesque consequences of another Polish noblewoman's attraction to Dan at end of the story. (Agnon differentiates between the two noblewomen by calling the local one a *peritsah* and the other an *adonit*.) And, most crucially, it introduces the fact of Dan's beauty.

Considering the scene as a whole, one is struck by the complexity of the emplotment. Each strand brings with it a set of circumstances that have to interlock with the others for the tragic outcome to be set in motion and the knot cinched tight. The scene, moreover, is not just a piling up of circumstances but a dynamic field of potentialities, and to actualize them requires the mother's mounting hysteria. It is the devastating irony of the scene that the more unrelentingly she ratchets up her appeals on behalf of her son's welfare the more she undermines the very outcome she seeks. The stark finality of it all, the brute fact of the *fait accompli*, lands like a blow:

“And within two or three days the widow’s son was taken for the imperial army” (p. 451, 374).

It is evident that this complexity makes it impossible to obtain a simple answer to the question of who is responsible for Dan’s fate. Yet it is possible to make distinctions between contingent circumstances and more essential causes. So, for example, R. Leibush happens to be the parnas on duty when the Passover charity is being distributed. Dan happens to be an apprentice in the workshop of an ambitious tailor with an attractive daughter. It happens to be a year in which a cemetery expansion has emptied the communal coffers. Chief among the essential causes are the Austrian government’s decision to conscript Jews and the Jewish community’s policy of sacrificing the poor and unlettered. But there is another, less evident essential cause that has nothing to do directly with historical or political events. This is Dan’s physical beauty. This fact is never told to us by the narrator; and, indeed, Dan is not even aware of it himself. We see it only through the reactions of others to him: Billhah casting her eyes on him, Godil testifying to his size and height, the local noblewoman’s compliment as reported by his mother, and, most of all and most deferred, the erotic obsession of the Polish noblewoman at the story’s conclusion. If it weren’t for his strapping handsomeness, he may never have been inducted into the army in the first place, and the noblewoman would never have overcome her loathing for Jews and made him into an object of desire.<sup>10</sup>

Dan’s beauty represents a different kind of causality. It is a natural endowment; he is born with it. Does it come from God, from the randomness of nature? The answer depends, of course, on one’s fundamental view of life. Yet to the degree that the story is not life but artifice, the answer must be that it comes from Agnon, the author of the story, who is responsible for making Dan so attractive and thus supplying the premise that moves the plot. If Agnon’s goal was to write a story about the consequences for the Jewish community of the Austrian decision to force Jews to serve in the military, there are many ways he could have built his plot. He chose this one. The “accident” of Dan’s beauty is different from all the other circumstances in the story, which are givens of social, historical existence: imperial regimes

seek to exploit and integrate new territorial possessions; tradesmen seek to better their social standing; a young woman falls in love with a handsome man who works in her father's shop; and communal leaders are zealous of their authority. But whether to make a boy be plain or handsome is a choice.

Making Dan be born handsome underscores two important truths about the story. First, "Disappeared" is more novelistic than many of the other stories in *A City in Its Fullness*. The voice of the garrulous narrator-chronicler has withdrawn deep into the background and emerges to make observations only occasionally. Gone is the self-assured, know-it-all voice of a narrator who informs you about how busy he has been managing the telling of the story. And managing is *all* he does, because it is God who has created human destiny and orchestrated human affairs. But in "Disappeared," the world-shaping work of that God has also receded, and in its place there is a sense of reality being shaped by historical and social mechanisms. This is the domain of the modern novelist, who mixes a mimetic responsibility to the world as we know it with the prerogative of fixing the points of departure for the plot. If the story is an equation, Dan's physical appearance is the unknown, the radical that has been inserted by Agnon.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the particular variable Agnon has chosen to insert is far from arbitrary. The erotic attention and the erotic desires elicited by Dan's appearance raise a theme that is not a comfortable presence in the traditional Jewish world of Buczacz. Throughout the epic world of *A City in Its Fullness*, there are virtually no instances of romantic love preceding marriage or leading to marriage.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that such attractions did not exist or that their suppression did not cause pain to those who had to abandon them. But these instances do not have a place in the Buczacz Agnon has reimagined. So when Bilhah falls in love with Dan and gives her heart to him as he is taken off for induction, it is a very significant moment not only in the story but in the cycle of the Buczacz stories altogether. She suffers terribly because of her attachment not just because Dan is removed from her for so many years but also because she has no standing as an official fiancée and must therefore hide her love and grieve in secret. Her persistence in considering herself betrothed to Dan, despite the lack of her parents' approval

and his protracted absence, indicates not only a strong will but a sense of herself as fulfilling some positive ideal rather than merely transgressing the norms of the community. By the time of the action of the story, sometime after 1815, the Austrians have been ruling Galicia in the German language for over forty years, and it is difficult to imagine that no adumbrations of European sentiments, with their idealizations of true love, have infiltrated the consciousness of young Jews.

If the tragedy of “Disappeared” came only from the separation of the two lovers, it would be sad enough. But Dan’s horrible and grotesque plight at the hands of the Polish noblewoman occupies a very different rung of tragedy, and it opens up the chilling dimension of the erotic. Erotic longings and the attraction to physical beauty remain controlled and even chaste within the context of the Jewish community during the early stages of modernization, at least as refracted in these stories. Those same energies are more combustible when they are located, not in the more advanced European society, but rather in the persistence of the pre-modern Polish feudal order. It is in this older regime that the noblewoman is rooted, a regime formed by a configuration of local autocracies in which the desires of the lord are absolute. When it comes to the character of the noblewoman, one of Agnon’s achievements is *not* to make her a cutout of her class but to give her a psychological history that supplies some motive for her behavior. What she does to Dan, however, is driven not just by her own deprivations but by the position in which she has been placed by the Austrian accession. Having rejected the proposals of Austrian officials earlier in her life, she lives alone on her vastly reduced estate, accompanied only by her Catholic piety and her mute ex-murderer servant. Her inability to control her desires, as I discuss below, is directly connected to her isolation and to the radical diminution of her prerogatives.

Finally, there is the question of Dan’s own possession of his erotic appeal. When the noblewoman opens her door to find Dan on her doorstep, she is struck by his handsomeness, and when she teasingly tries to engage him in conversation during the many unnecessary dress fittings, she asks him whether a strapping youth like himself has worked his charm on other ladies. Dan is dumb in response. He does not perceive himself in that way and is

wholly unaware of his effect on women. Without making that assumption, his blindness to the noblewoman's intentions is either inexplicable or fatuous.

Dan's innocence and lack of consciousness in this area should be understood not as an individual trait but as a reflection of the society that has formed him. Although European sentimental norms have just begun to make their presence felt, Jewish Buczacz remains a traditional world in which men's handsomeness is not talked about. A girl's beauty or lack of it may figure in the calculation of her marriageability, but a boy's appearance, not to mention his erotic appeal, generally remains an unacknowledged quantity. The story does not consider whether this is a good or bad thing in itself, but it does explore what happens when this complex of innocence and denial is exposed to a world in which the controls of Jewish traditional society are not operative. The consequences are unsettling.

#### *Women Alone*

One of the biggest surprises for the reader of "Disappeared" is discovering that the dire consequences concerning military service announced in the story's opening turn out not to be so dire. The real suffering is borne not by the recruit on the front but by his mother and beloved at home. For some Jews, Buczacz turns out to be a much more dangerous place to be than the Austrian army.

Dan manages to hold on to his identity and his soul despite enormous challenges. Agnon was likely aware of the accommodations for Jews in the military that were part of official policy, as discussed above. Yet he chose to make the circumstances of Dan's service more trying by virtue of the absence of any of these measures. He is the only Jew in his unit, and he cannot understand the gruff German they speak. The unit is deployed to Upper Austria, a region of the empire at the greatest possible distance from Galicia. Rather than offering a description of Jewish communities in the vicinity that could offer support for this lone Jewish soldier, the narrator makes a point of telling us the grim history of the Jewish settlements that flourished in the Middle Ages in that region. Envy of the success of the Jews led to the promulgation of blood libels, persecution, imprisonment, and banishment

until “the only trace of Jews was their cemeteries from which the despoilers took the gravestones to use as foundations for the houses they built” (p. 455, 379). Agnon seems to have made the Jewish conditions of Dan’s service more severe in order to make his perseverance more remarkable and meritorious.

Dan is acutely aware of the transgressions of Jewish observance that his situation imposes on him. To be forced to work on the Sabbath, to eat non-kosher food, to wear a uniform made from mixed fibers, to live in a dwelling without mezuzot, to arise in the morning without putting on tefillin—all these constraints and deprivations sadden him deeply. Yet rather than being unnerved and crushed by his plight, Dan resists by holding on to the few expressions of Jewishness he has internalized. “At such times as he found himself alone with no one around, he would put his hand on his forehead, close his eyes, and stand and recite the one or two prayers he knew by heart” (p. 456, 380).

There is a telling cleavage between how the narrator reports Dan’s predicament and how he judges it. Dan’s discouragement comes less from the strictures he is forced to transgress than from an emotional connection to Jewish experiences from which he is cut off. This is especially the case with the Sabbath and its warm embrace of both home rituals and synagogue liturgy. Yet, although the narrator reports Dan’s experience, his own attitude toward it is tinged with anxiety bordering on dread. “Woe to the person who performs purposeful labor on the Sabbath, all the more so when the biblical punishment for that grave sin is stoning.” The narrator must surely know that, according to Jewish law, constraint (*ones*) is a mitigating factor and that Dan has little choice in these matters; yet he makes no effort to imagine any remission of the punishment. This failure stems less from a desire to censure Dan than from a horror of a world denuded of commandments into which he has fallen. This is the apotheosis of gentile space, the antithesis of Buczacz; and the very idea that a Jew should be forced to find his way in this world is profoundly unsettling to the narrator.

To sum up Dan’s army experience, Agnon uses a poignant and finely calibrated metonymy. The only Jewish possession that Dan has is a prayer book that he took from home. It is from this prayer book that he learned to

recite the Mourner's Kaddish after his father's death. He guarded it carefully and kept it near his pillow at night.

But then it was taken from him. Forty soldiers, all gentiles, lived with him in one room. They all smoked and were always in need of kindling paper to light their pipes. At one point they came upon a bundle of tattered pages. They took hold of it and divided it up among them without knowing that it was the prayer book of their fellow soldier Hoffmann. They had not taken it and torn it up and used its pages for kindling out of any malevolence but for their smoking needs. In any case, Dan's prayer book was gone. (p. 456, 381)

Like the circumstances around the loss of the prayer book, Dan is not the object of malice. To the contrary, his comrades and commanders respect his industriousness and humility. But they have their lives to live and their pipes to smoke, and they possess no knowledge of what is dear and tender to their Jewish colleague. The mundane conduct of their lives and their harmless everyday pleasures necessarily and unwittingly entail using up the spiritual resources of his life. The process is collective and matter of fact. And before they know it, all the pages are gone.

The great truth of the story's structure is expressed in its title. One of the chief senses in which Dan has or is "disappeared" is lodged in the fact that he is largely absent from the plot. After the narrator gives a summary of the Jewish privations he endures and how he copes with them, the narrative returns to him only two or three times, and briefly in each case, before his embroilment with the noblewoman at the end. "What more can I say about Dan?" the narrator opines, "That he was a soldier in the imperial army" (p. 457, 382). That seems to say it all; the narrator is simply not interested in further exploring this gentile, martial space. Dan is the occasion for the story but not, until the very end, its true subject. He is an absent presence. When we first approach the story after reading the historical background at the beginning, we naturally assume the title refers to an action or a fate visited upon Dan by the kahal under the constraints of the Austrian regime. Yet once we are more deeply inside the story, we realize that Dan's disappearance is also a choice made by the author and his narrator. And this is because the real action is elsewhere.

That elsewhere is at home in Buczacz with Dan's mother and Billah. Dan himself manages to stay afloat in the army thanks to his sturdy constitution, his native modesty, and a nature not overburdened by self-awareness. It is the moral genius of the story to shift our attention to the family members and loved ones, women all, who are paying the heaviest price. If the emotional costs were equally or randomly distributed, the burden would be heavy enough. But because of the community's tainted values, the burden falls on the shoulders of those who can least bear it—women, poor and alone who lack networks of support to sustain them.

Agnon does a brave thing in "Disappeared" by giving Dan's nameless mother more sustained attention than her son, the eponymous hero of the story. All the more so because the mother, for all her desperate advocacy for her son, undergoes no beatification; to the contrary, she is an abject figure whose hysterical harangues importune us, the readers, as much as they do the random passersby in the marketplace. Being in her presence is not comfortable, but Agnon makes us stand there, and in so doing he opens up a new space within *A City in Its Fullness*, which is defined by both gender and class.

Billah joins the mother in bearing the burden of Dan's absence, and the narrative explores their experiences separately and together. As for the mother, before her son's conscription, she was the embodiment of the working poor, and in her tirade at the handing out of the Passover charity, she was not shy in telling R. Leibush the lengths she goes to make ends meet. She goes out to the villages to buy chickens and vegetables so she can sell them at a profit in town; she makes the rounds of the wealthy families to perform the chores of plucking and salting that the housewives avoid doing themselves. Through this dawn-to-dusk industry she manages to subsist and provide for her son; and by dint of this effort she literally holds things together. But the trauma of Dan's removal proves too much for her, and her fragile mental organization collapses.

The widow's thoughts were all confused. Her distress and her agony muddled her mind. As in a nightmare, fantasies raged within her; she was totally discomfited. Her fantasies, though vague and shadowy, appeared before her as frighteningly real. Their actuality terrified her relentlessly and endlessly. (p. 453, 376)

Her mind is pictured as a vacant chamber lacking the separate compartments that would aid her in making sense of what is happening to her. In the absence of structures and defenses, her mind is invaded and terrified by terrible imaginings, which she experiences as true and actual. She laments her son “as if the Angel of Death had snatched him away” (p. 453, 377).

The only “possession” she has left is her expressivity. She stops making the rounds of the villages and the wealthy homes. She shuts herself alone in her ramshackle hut and talks to the four walls. When she realizes no one is listening, she wanders the streets reciting her laments to anyone who would listen. “Sometimes she mistook a shadow for a real person and talked to it as if it were” (p. 453, 377). Her capacity for bewailing and keening is her signature and one that is deeply gendered. She howls because she lacks the language possessed by better educated men and women for explaining and appealing. But the howling can be used as an instrument, as well as being a sign of breakdown and dissociation. In her encounter with R. Leibush, alas, her screed was perversely effective, and there are important instances later in the story in which she projects her abjectness through her wailing and forces a response from people who either cannot bear to hear her go on or who are moved to examine their conscience.<sup>13</sup>

Bilhah deals with her own trauma differently. Not only is it not in her nature to bemoan and expostulate, but she is enjoined from any public expression of her grief because she is an unmarried woman with no recognized tie to Dan. In contrast to the mother’s wild ideation, Bilhah “frames her thoughts quite clearly.” She takes stock of her situation and looks at the future. “I am eighteen and half now. If I add the twelve years that Dan will serve in the army, I will be thirty and half, a half year older than Mother is now. Will I be too old for Dan to still have feelings for me?” (p. 453, 376). The narrator sympathetically points out that her imagining of the future is one-sided and misses the obvious fact that Dan, too, will have aged in equal measure. (Little does she realize alas that aging will be the least of Dan’s problems.)

Even if Bilhah can make only imperfect use of her capacity for reason when it comes to herself, she uses it to good effect in helping the mother.

She realizes that one of the greatest threats to the older woman's sanity is the feeling of not being heard and she knows she is the one person in the world who does not mind hearing about Dan "ten times or twenty times, or even fifty times" (p. 454, 377); so she sits with the mother and listens, and the narrator pays her the compliment of acknowledging, "No greater kindness can be done to those who suffer than listening to their sighs and sighing in sympathy with them" (p. 454, 377).

Billah further understands how important it is for the mother to return to work and be occupied by something other than her grief. She sagely comes up with arguments for why Dan would want her to support herself, and she persuades her to throw herself back into her round of buying and selling and haggling, and she thereby succeeds in keeping the darkness at bay. But only temporarily. Five months go by, and the two women do not receive a line from Dan. When they seek to send a letter to him they come up against the fact that no one knows the address of his unit; neither the worldly Jewish merchants who have contact with many lands nor the officials of the imperial court. Having taken her son away from her, now these clever people will not let her communicate with him.

The mother lapses back into the distraught, disorganized state she inhabited before Billah helped her to return to her buying and selling. She stands in the marketplace and accosts passersby, even gentiles, with her troubles. She storms into the old *beit midrash* and thrusts her head into the ark. Beating her breast, she turns to the Master of the universe, "You are the only One who sees my suffering. Help me! Help me! How many more tears can this broken vessel hold? It is already overflowing. If you don't help me, God, Your children, the Jews You love so much, certainly won't" (p. 458, 383). Her appeal reminds us how much the hand of God is absent from this story, and it raises the question about whether its title, "Disappeared," refers exclusively to the hapless Jewish soldier.

By diverting the focus of the story to the two women, Agnon is locating the only place left in *Buczacz* where moral sensitivity survives and endowing it with narrative attention. Rabbinic leadership has been silenced, ordinary Jews have been cowed, and the oligarchic lay heads of the community

decide what is expedient. The heart of Dan's mother and that of Bilhah, each in its own way, may not be conventionally fertile fictional soil, but Agnon works hard to make us care.

*La Lettre avant la Lettre*

One of the challenging features of the structure of "Disappeared" is Agnon's decision to devote the substantial central section—a quarter of this long story—to the subject of letters and letter writing. The decision is very much a part of Agnon's insistence that the difficult experience of Dan's mother and Bilhah at home in Buczacz be considered the "true" plot of the story, or at least one that should compete with the more melodramatic tale of Dan's fate. It is evident that letters would be the only form of communication between the soldier and his loved ones. But why so much attention should be devoted to the medium itself is not so obvious. A whole new character, Dovidl the scrivener, is introduced and described at length; he has little to do with the plot beyond having taught Dan the rudiments of writing. Described in detail, as well, is the physical and mechanical process of learning how to write, from the preparation of ink and quills to the formation of the letters. We are given scenes of Bilhah reading Dan's letters to his mother over and over again, even though the letters themselves, when the standard salutary rhetoric is subtracted, contain precious little real news. The investment in this theme, in short, is substantial. In the same way as letters make connections among separated correspondents, Agnon uses them to draw together and entangle the separate components of his story. But he goes further: he points to letter writing as a key sign of the modernization that has been accelerated by the German-speaking regime that now controls the lives of Galician Jews.

For an epistolary transaction to succeed, it goes without saying, each party must know the address of other. This is precisely where Dan's mother founders, because no one can supply her son's military address. For his part, far away on the other side of the empire, Dan knows where his mother lives, but he lacks the language tools to address a letter to her. Eventually, a kindly sergeant takes Dan in hand and shows him how to address a letter

to Buczacz, and their arrival gives Agnon the opportunity for a send-up of communal hypocrisy worthy of Abramovitch or Sholem Aleichem.

The background to the scene lies in the fact that before Dan was shipped off to the army he was given a German last name by one of the members of the kahal. The taking on of German last names—largely for taxing and administrative purposes—was an Austrian edict that was widely enforced. Jews had traditionally referred to each other by patronymics (X the son of Y) and occupations (e.g., Godil, the tailor), and they continued to do so among themselves. When Dan was handed over to the state apparatus, he was given the family name of Hoffmann and known henceforth as Private Dan Hoffmann in the army.<sup>14</sup> But not in Buczacz.

The mother is known only by the name of her deceased husband, a name that has not come down to the narrator. So there is widespread bafflement when a bundle of letters arrives at the post office from a senior army officer in Lviv addressed in large, clear script: “TO THE HONORABLE WOMAN, THE WIDOW MRS. HOFFMANN IN BUCZACZ” (p. 461, 387). Agnon has all sorts of fun in explaining through his narrator why this address constitutes such a difficult nut to crack. Hoffmann could be either a gentile or a Jewish name, and the existence of such a distinguished personage would have to be known either to the important Jewish merchants in town or to local Austrian officials. Then there is the very formulation of the name. “If she was Jewish, it was unheard of for a Jewish woman in Buczacz to be called by her family name,” the narrator reasons, “because if she were important and well known she would be called by her given name, and if she were important but not so well known she would be called by her husband’s name.” Eventually, the members of the kahal are forced to assemble to dispel the embarrassment this has caused them in the eyes of the local Austrian government, and it is R. Leibush himself who remembers that they stuck the name Hoffmann on Dan before he was shipped off.

The ongoing perplexity exposes the tensions in Austrian-Jewish relations and the vulnerable subservience of the Jewish communal leadership. Because there is no solution to the problem of the honorable widow’s identity, the head of the post office is forced to cut open the letters, and, upon

discovering them written in Jewish script, he summons two leading members of the community and tells them in no uncertain terms that the wishes of a senior army officer cannot go ignored and that they are instructed to take matters into hand forthwith.

Although today we may not be inclined to see post office officials as especially formidable, the postmaster of Buczacz, in uniform and insignia, likely embodied the full weight of the empire. As the parnasim assemble in the meeting chamber of the kahal, we see them in a different light: not as wealthy, autocratic eminences but as subalterns reprimanded by the ruling power to keep their house in order. The meeting is a desultory affair, beginning with a pious homily—through which R. Leibush dozes—on a verse from Genesis (49:17) that contains the name Dan.

The name is all they have to go on, but no one can make a connection between that name and the honorable widow Hoffmann. Slowly, R. Leibush begins to remember something about an orphaned tailor's apprentice on whom they may have stuck the name Hoffmann. The others find the idea ridiculous. "If the officer really had the mother of that poor orphan in mind, then who should we laugh at first, the officer or you, R. Leibush, for thinking he would do something like that?" (p. 463, 389). But as the others begin to recollect the actions taken by the kahal, what was formerly unthinkable now presents itself as fact, and soon the shamash is delivering the packet to Dan's mother. The pompous and self-satisfied members of the kahal likely persist in regarding her as a person of no account; yet, the fact that she has been addressed as the Honorable Widow Hoffmann must make a difference. The appellation is not a mistake. Although they threw him away, Dan has in fact become a faithful servant of the Kaiser in ways they themselves cannot approach, and as a mother of such a soldier she has to be seen differently.

There is great joy and the shedding of tears of relief and gratitude. Bilhah rushes over and they weep and rejoice together. Yet, "in the euphoria of receiving letters from her son she forgot to ask what he had written in them," and they soon gather themselves and go to Dovidl the scrivener, who reads to the two women. But this forgetfulness is not beside the point.

The content of the letters is far less important than the existence of the letters. Throughout the years of the correspondence, the letters come to serve as a stand-in for her son. She comes to cherish the physical letters—the very paper they are written on and the ink used to form words—as totemic objects, and she gives much thought to the wonder of how letters are created and how they bridge vast distances.

As for what they contain, they are poor things indeed.

How were the letters written? The first line had the name of God in big letters in the center. On the second line was written: “To my revered, humble, and beloved Mother, *most blessed of women in the tent*” (Judg. 5:24). The third line said: “I wish to inform her that her son, whom she reared and nurtured and brought him to this day, is well.” The fourth line said: “May the beneficent God grant life and goodness and let us hear only good tidings.” The fifth line said: “These are the words of your son who every day hopes for your well-being and happiness.” Following all that was his name, printed, because he was not a practiced writer and could not write in cursive script. Even so his mother remarked that though she was completely uneducated, if she saw a letter from her son in a dream she would recognize the letters of his name. (p. 465, 391–92)

Today, when we are accustomed to thinking of letters as little parcels of spontaneous subjectivity, it is well to recall that among the working poor in places like Buczacz at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was quite otherwise. Composing a letter was a challenging and arduous process, and when Dan was younger he was sent to Dovidl to take lessons to learn how to do it. After first learning how to make ink and prepare quills and form letters, Dan proceeded to the more advanced task of composing model letters for different purposes. The templates—a sample of a letter from a young man to his betrothed, for example, or from a son to his mother—were taken from *brivnshtelers*, Yiddish letter-writing manuals.<sup>15</sup> In this method, letters are put together out of modular units. Each unit has a function, such as the salutation (the opening greeting) and the valediction (the closing greeting). Each is formulated in exalted, florid, and pious diction and embellished by biblical verses. The aspiring correspondent learns these *topoi* by heart and reproduces them when he sits down to write a letter; he then adds the news or message that is particular to the communication.

Dan's letters are almost entirely stock sentiment with next to no message. This missing essence is of a piece with the overall nullity with which he is presented as a character. Make no mistake: his inner strength is demonstrated by the respect he wins from his comrades and commanders, by his retention of his Jewish identity, and by the very fact of his surviving the long military service unbroken. But he possesses little interiority, and he lacks sufficient literacy to represent his experiences in writing. Agnon has chosen to invest his narrative resources back home and there, as his mother and Bilhah devour his letters, the conventionality and lack of substance are considered no detriment. Dan's mother presumably cannot read, and she relies on Bilhah to read the letters to her. Their similarity enables her to get to know them by heart over time, and she delights in discerning the nearly negligible differences among them. She treats the physical letters as she would a *tehinah* book, a small, pocket-sized book of Yiddish prayers written for, and often by, women, and she cries over them like a woman reciting those prayers. In a naively revealing observation, the mother comes close to preferring his written words over his spoken voice. "Were I not so anxious to hear his voice I would say that writing is better than speaking. A letter that he writes I can listen to ten times, even a hundred times. As many times as I want" (p. 465–66, 392).

She can listen to the letters so often because Bilhah reads them to her. Bilhah herself, as the narrative points out more than once, cannot be an addressee for Dan's letters. Their bond is secret, and the impropriety of letters being addressed by a soldier, or any unmarried man, to an unmarried woman would be discovered immediately. Besides, the letter-writing manuals offer examples only of correspondence between formerly betrothed couples. Dan's letters thus do double duty and deepen the bond between the two women. "Dan's mother strokes the cat lying in her lap, fixes her eyes on Bilhah and listens attentively to every word coming out of Bilhah's mouth" (p. 467, 394). For both of them, the ritual of reading and rereading the letters in each other's company becomes a great solace. Dan, or more precisely his absence, is the reason why their connection is formed, but the relationship takes on a life of its own. They establish a quasi-family unit in

which men play only a virtual role. It is a community of mutual support, a community of empathy, of *hesed* (kindness), and it stands in sharp contrast to the Jewish community of Buczacz as a whole and the kahal in particular.

These scenes of tranquil letter reading come almost exactly at the middle of the story considered by length, and they form a charmed still point in the narrative. Here a remarkable thing happens. This woman, who was barely recognizable as a human being as she ranted hysterically in the marketplace, is now utilized by the narrator as a vessel for meditations about the wondrousness of letters and the unacknowledged wisdom of Dovidl the scrivener. This kind of combined discourse the narrator is embarking upon is preceded by a rationale that manages to be both telling and opaque at the same time.

Here I connect these thoughts of Dan's mother to things she did not say but which amplify her thoughts about this matter of writing. They contain some of the mother's thoughts that did not reach a final formulation.<sup>16</sup> (p. 467, 392)

The mother's thoughts, as we shall see directly, are observant and even wise, but inchoate. Not only can she not articulate them in speech, but she lacks the mental language to express them to herself. The narrator, who has access to the thoughts of the characters, declares that he is going to extend to her some of the powers of his craft and enter into a sort of joint partnership. He will take these unarticulated intuitions and bring them into language so they can be understood by the reader. It is a singularly generous gesture, and it results in fine passages of *style indirect libre*, which are gifts to us in their insights and the reclamation of the mother as a character.

The mother's meditations focus on the wonders of writing and the figure of Dovidl the scrivener, and we can appreciate the fruits of the narrator's "partnership" with her by comparing how Dovidl is presented first by the narrator alone and later through their combined discourse. We hear of Dovidl for the first time when the mother and Bilhah are desperately trying to send Dan letters. The scrivener is sympathetic but unable to help them in the absence of a useable address. They next visit him under happier circumstances when the bundle of letters is first delivered; he helps them read the letters. It is he, after all, who taught Dan to write them. On this second visit, the narra-

tor gives us a profile of the man. He is a small man living in very modest circumstances, and he observes the commandments like other Jews in Buczacz.

To learn his craft Dovidl poured over epistolary collections. But once he became adept at letter writing, he began to read “more uplifting things, books that served to remind him that good people could do good things and writings from which he could derive moral instruction that would bring joy to his heart and peace to his soul” (p. 464, 390). The source of this edifying literature is Josef Perl and the circles around him. Perl (1773–1839) was a well-to-do merchant from Tarnopol who fiercely opposed the spread of Hasidism by submitting critical memoranda to the Austrian government and by writing a series of scathingly brilliant parodies of Hasidic writing.<sup>17</sup>

To the Jews of Galicia, Perl—referred to familiarly by Dovidl as Reb Yossl—was largely known as an educator who established and maintained a school in Tarnopol in which German and general subjects were taught alongside the traditional curriculum of Torah studies. As an aid to the students, between 1813 and 1815 Perl produced a series of almanacs (*Luah halev* and *Tsir ne’eman*), which interweave words of moral instruction and useful information with the Jewish and secular calendars.<sup>18</sup> These are the texts that Dovidl reaches for when he returns from prayers each night.

This combining of traditional observance with an interest in moral self-improvement and general culture places Dovidl within the wider orbit of the moderate Galician Haskalah, which set out on a path very different from the radical Berlin Haskalah at the end of the eighteenth century. Influenced by Austrian rather than German cultural models, the Galician Haskalah emphasized a widening of the Jew’s worldview, but it remained loyal to the Hebrew language and did not advocate departing from or reforming Jewish practice. It criticized the hypocrisies and inequities of communal leadership and encouraged the ethical improvement of common Jews. This is a trend that gains force as the century progresses and interacts in complex ways with other forces of modernization. Within the social world of Buczacz, Dovidl may be a figure of no account, but the ideals he embodies play an increasingly important role. This is true as well of the writing skills he teaches, which become essential for participation in an expanding world.

The picture we receive through the eyes of the mother is not contradictory but different. Because she knows nothing about Josef Perl and the intellectual ferment in Galicia, she is the perfect medium through which to appreciate the wonder of the new developments. The basic acts of reading and writing, which have long undergone a process of reification, are defamiliarized in her eyes and made into objects of radical amazement.

Consider the power of the letters of the alphabet as they appear on a page. They are tiny as peas and in Dan's case, as beans. Only a trained reader can tell one character from another. They all sit on the page immobile and mute. But when a girl like Bilhah looks at them, the letters immediately start talking and reveal to us what is happening in far off places. (p. 466, 392–93)

Dan had not received enough instruction in writing so that he could reduced the size of the letters that he had laboriously learned to write to the smaller size of an adult hand. In the mother's homely metaphor, he writes in peas rather than beans. To someone who cannot read, the letters indeed resemble random, undifferentiated dried legumes. They remain dry, immobile, and mute until they are brought to life by the gaze of someone like Bilhah, who has learned to decipher them, having secretly been taught by Dan. Only then do they fulfill the potential so dear to Dan's mother: "to reveal to us what is happening in far-off places" (p. 466, 392). The art of writing is even more wondrous to her. She now recalls that under Dovidl's tutelage, Dan spent three months learning how to make ink and sharpen quills before proceeding to the rudiments of penmanship. He learned how "to hold the quill and dip it in the ink, and how much ink to draw, because if too much is drawn the paper will get spattered, and if too little, the quill will scratch." And Dovidl "continued teaching him until he knew how to write the letters of the alphabet and became adept at joining them together" (p. 467, 394).

But not much more. Now that the letters serve as her lifeline to her son—"His letters keep me alive!"—she regrets that she prevented Dan from taking lessons with Dovidl after he reached this rudimentary level, but instead had pulled him out. Back then, she could not fathom the real benefit of further mastery; the lessons cost money, and the choice presented itself as

a stark either/or. “For the good money you waste on tuition every month,” she told her son at the time, “I could buy you every day a cup of milk with licorice and a bun with sesame seeds, and you would eat and drink and put on some weight and start looking like somebody successful” (p. 466, 393). Dan stopped his training just at the point when he was able to assemble and copy the conventional sentiments he was taught to write; but he did not continue long enough to achieve the capacity to convey his own experience. The mother realizes now that her shortsightedness has deprived her of a deeper connection to her distant son. What she does not realize is the ill-fated irony that the narrator has put us in the position of knowing: by opting for helping him grow and put on weight, she was turning him into a lad who looked old enough to be taken by the army even if he was not.

Being herself among the downtrodden and dismissed of Buczacz, the mother can view Dovidl through the sympathetic lens of social class. The skills he has mastered and teaches to others are established by the narrative as being a powerful tool for self-representation as well as for more pragmatic communication. They are furthermore linked to emerging trends in the opening up of Galician society to European culture. Yet in the eyes of traditional Buczacz and its contemptuous leadership, Dovidl will never be thought of as anything more than a scrivener, a tradesman (*ba'al melakhah*) whose quill is not better than a cobbler's awl or a tailor's needle. “In the synagogue he stands by the door with all the undesirables in town. And if once or twice a year he gets called up to the Torah, why do they call him? For the pittance he will pledge to contribute” (p. 466, 393). Yet, despite the slights and insults he has to put up with, Dovidl knows his own worth, and he knows that his standing depends on his ability to dress decently, which he cannot afford to do. So he cleverly talks Godil into making a new suit for him for free in exchange for teaching Bilhah how to write. He persuades the tailor that this is a necessary skill for an unmarried young woman so that she can correspond with her fiancé once she becomes engaged.

As in the story's opening scene in which so many factors conspire to condemn Dan, this scene replicates that dense, ironic emplotment in miniature and to less tragic effect. Dovidl gets his new suit, Bilhah learns how

to write and need not rely on Dovidl's services to write to Dan, and ironically Godil subsidizes her lessons without any hope of there being a fiancé other than Dan.

*The Missing Correspondent*

Does Dan serve ten or twelve years in the Kaiser's army? It is twelve at the beginning of the story and ten toward the end.<sup>19</sup> "Disappeared" is one of only a few of the major stories in *A City in Its Fullness* that did not appear in serial form during Agnon's lifetime. Having not prepared it for press, he probably did not catch the discrepancy. And it matters little. After describing the mother's connection to her son's letters, the narrative skips the intervening years and jumps to the end of his service. This leaves us to assume that in this long interval, life has continued on course; Dan perseveres in the army, and the mother and Bilhah cling to their epistolary lifeline. The only new information we learn about Dan is that toward the end of his service he finds a way to make use of his tailoring skills as a sometimes dressmaker to the wives of the officers. The time of his demobilization finds him untrammelled and optimistic. He plans to return to Buczacz, marry Bilhah, and set himself up as a master ladies' tailor. Because he has no money in his pocket, he sets out to return home on foot while making occasional stops to sew dresses for the nobility, so he will not come back empty handed. On the road, he falls out of the habit of letter writing because he lacks the proper equipment and the focused attention necessary to a task that for him remains laborious.

At first, the cessation of letters is a puzzle and an annoyance. But soon it turns into an enigma tinged with dread and eventually a trauma leading to demoralization and madness. It is six years until Dan's fate is discovered, and the intervals of time are clearly marked: first two months, then one year, three years and then six. Agnon makes us experience this long duration as more acutely measured out than in the first half of the story, which covers the ten to twelve years of his service. The vacancy in the story's title takes on a more frightening resonance. Dan's having "been disappeared" by an act of communal cruelty in the first half is balanced by his stolid perseverance and the fact that we know where he is.

There is nothing metaphorical about his disappearance in the second half. The vacuum of his absence is filled both by the futile grindings of bureaucratic wheels and by the imagining of gruesome disasters, which turn out to pale before the true horror of the boy's fate. Here, again, even more so than in the first half, the focus is on the home front and the consequences of Dan's disappearance up until the disturbing, melodramatic ending. But the focus is widened this time. Although it begins with the escalating desperation of the mother and Bilhah, it expands to include Buczacz's rabbi and several great merchants, contemptuous Polish nobles, and local and regional Austrian officials. The ending of the story proper—before the noblewoman's diary—balloons into a theatrical, even operatic, spectacle, whose epic sweep nearly overwhelms the tortured fates of mother, son, and beloved.

Uneasy, the two women endure the first two months of silence. Bilhah's parents force her to limit her visits to Dan's mother and at the same time to receive a series of suitors for her hand. Penelope-like, she acquiesces to her parents' wishes, but she manages to elude their intentions and remain true to Dan. In the meantime, the mother goes from neighbor to neighbor asking what the possible meaning can be of the delays in hearing from her son. She begins having nightmares and ends up seeing terrible visions by day. What she sees in these dark imaginings begins a process of foreshadowing that unfolds inexorably. She realizes that now, after the French wars, the country is at peace, and the Austrian rulers have cleared the roads and forests of robbers and murderers. So to find a credible source of horror, her imagination goes back to before the partitions and dips into the primordial imaginary of Polish barbarity. In her dreams, she sees her son fallen "into the hands of a she-demon in the guise of a noblewoman." When she goes around town talking about her terrible vision, she is roundly rebuked. For "in Buczacz belief in demons was thoroughly repudiated, and so there was no pity at all for the unfortunate woman." Even if the reader is inclined to share this rational outlook, the hint has been registered and filed away. The all-seeing narrator also does nothing to call attention to this prophetic intuition. Instead, he wanly opines, "Let us rely on God who guides the steps of man to guide Dan's steps and bring him back to where he belongs" (p. 472, 400), a

sentiment that serves only to redouble our awareness of how deeply hidden is God's hand in this drama.

The rebuke pushes her out of the shadows and into a one-woman public campaign to get the regime to inquire into her son's disappearance. First, she knocks on the doors of the homes of the *parnasim*, requesting that they write to the Emperor on her behalf; they think she is joking. She importunes a wealthy merchant with political influence who is visiting the city. She then places herself in the face of R. Avraham David Wahrman, the rabbi of Buczacz, and demands that he do something. Although once confronted he does take steps, the marginalization of the rabbinate is again illustrated by his removal from this key moral drama that is being played out within his congregation. The machinery of Austrian officialdom is finally moved to launch an inquiry, and before long the *parnasim* are summoned to hear a court official read them an *orotund* epistle from the capital certifying that the soldier Dan Hoffmann had been honorably discharged from the Kaiser's army after fulfilling his term of service and that "it is attested in his file that he is on route to his hometown Buczacz" (p. 474, 404). When the *parnasim* relay the import of the message to Dan's mother, all she can do is shriek, "If he has come back, why isn't he here? And if he's not here, then where is he?"

For a time after the matter is officially recognized, the missing soldier becomes an item of public concern and conversation. Searches are made and inquiries conducted in all the towns around Buczacz, and even the imperial officials are placed on the alert. When a year goes by and then another the urgency of the matter fades from general consciousness. "But in the mother's mind and in Bilhah's mind it was as sharply felt as ever, asserting itself anew every passing day" (p. 475, 405). The story catches the way in which the trauma and isolation of victims persist and deepen after the sensation of their case recedes from public view. The mother's deterioration is precipitous. She stops taking care of herself, cooking food, and mending and laundering her clothes. Soon she becomes a disheveled madwoman. "Had Bilhah not protected her, children would have thrown stones and dirt at her and called her crazy, the way people treat those who are despondent and have descended into melancholia" (p. 476, 406). During the summer, Bilhah takes her to

bathe in the Strypa and makes sure she puts on a fresh dress and stockings. For her kindness to the poor woman, Bilhah is upbraided by her parents who see her ministrations as proclaiming a kinship that does not exist.

This is the last we see of the two women until the end of the story. The narrative has sustained a focus on their ordeal for a considerable time as if to serve as a model against which the behavior of Buczacz is judged. After the initial sensation of Dan's disappearance has worn off, the narrator has stayed with the true victims of the community's actions. But even for the narrator there is not much more that can be said about their forlorn situation, and the focus now pivots toward the higher reaches of Austrian-Polish relations and the tangled skein of plot lines that lead up to the grotesque finale.

#### *Austrian Officials and Polish Nobles*

At this moment, which is the midpoint between Dan's discharge and his discovery, the narrator pauses to make a jaundiced observation about the progress that has been made so far.

Three years went by and nothing came of all the searches and inquiries other than reams of paper, the voluminous correspondence sent from Buczacz to the head of the district and from the head of the district to various officials in several localities. All that paper became in time the pages we find in the bindings of the Talmud and other books. When the government offices became cluttered with old documents and space was needed for the new ones, the old ones were sold to storekeepers who re-sold them to bookbinders. The bookbinders would insert a sheet before the first and after the last pages of a book and then paste those sheets inside the front and back covers that bound the whole book together. There are elders in Buczacz whose excellent German was learned from those pages inside the binding. And there are elders in Buczacz whose proficiency at composing letters to the law courts was acquired from those pages. (p. 476, 406-7)

Administrative rationality is the great civilizing gift the Austrians have conferred upon Galicia, in addition to banishing brigands and murderers. Yet in the face of a real evil, all that can be mustered is a busy and officious production of paper, more and more ineffectual memoranda. The narrator extends his interest in the materials and mechanics of letter writing by following the fate of the mounds of documents used up in the failed inquiries

after the soldier's whereabouts. Jobbers buy the paper in bulk and sell it to bookbinders, who use it as endpapers in the binding of Talmud volumes. If the story ended here, we would have a moralistic anecdote about the enduring superiority of Torah study. But there is one more loop to the recycling: the German learned by the elders comes from these random endpapers. For these denizens of the *beit midrash*, German is not a cultural medium, the language of Herder and Goethe, to be studied in and for itself, but rather a pragmatic tool for dealing with the gentile world. And this tool has ironically been acquired through the mediation of discarded memoranda bound into the *ur-text* of Jewish learning.

The story now jumps to the sixth year of Dan's disappearance, and it is only then that a concatenation of circumstances takes place that leads to the discovery of his whereabouts. The discovery is played out against the background of the fraught relations between the Austrian rulers of Galicia and the Polish nobility, whose power has been altered by the new political order. This is a pronounced shift in the historical framing of the story. Until now, "Disappeared" has focused on the consequences of the Austrian annexation for the Jewish community, and it has traced the machinations that led to a Jewish lad being handed over to the Kaiser's army. After he goes missing, the story increasingly focuses on how the new Austrian administrators of Galicia reckon with Polish nobles, who still own estates and forests, and with the legacy of "barbarity" they associate with centuries of Polish rule.

It is in this new arena that the plot begins to unspool. It so happens that a new district official is dispatched to Buczacz by Vienna, and he and his wife are dissatisfied with the house they have been assigned to live in. The house is being rented from the Potocki family, and the Count himself comes to inspect the problems when he is next in town. After deigning to look around, the Count observes, "I am surprised that the district head is unhappy with his living quarters. My horses would be happy to live in a place like this" (p. 477, 408). The official is stung by the insult, with its equal measures of condescension and resentment, and he refuses to stay in the house. He finds himself a new residence, but it is still being completed when he moves in, and one day he approvingly observes the work of a Jew-

ish tradesman who is installing a stove. He sees an opportunity. As a colonial official newly arrived in unfamiliar territory, he is in search of trustworthy native informants. "Most Jews find ways to go around the government's laws, and we would never catch them," he reasons, "if it weren't for the few honest ones among them who turn in the cheaters" (p. 478, 408). He engages the tradesman in conversation, but the sensational information he extracts from him ironically has nothing to do with the scofflaw behavior of the Jews. The tradesman recounts what he saw by accident when he was called to repair an oven in the house of a noblewoman in a certain village.

A human-like creature that was neither male nor female. I couldn't tell if it was a Jew or a gentile. It looked like a woman because it had long hair like a woman's, with braids and bows, and it had on a blue satin dress. It looked like a man because there was hair on the cheeks like a beard, or maybe it wasn't a beard but long hair hanging down. It looked like a Jew because of the pain I could see in the eyes. And the person was tied to the wall with an iron chain. (pp. 478-79, 409-10)

It is this grotesque sight that triggers a cascade of inevitable consequences. The noblewoman whips the Jew across the face and cautions him to remain silent about what he saw on pain of death. The Austrian official is so enraged by what he has heard that he smashes an expensive flower pot and accuses the Jew of being a liar.

The matter will not go away, no matter how loathsome it is. His superior, the regional governor, happens to be visiting Buczacz at that moment, and the two officials sit together and curse their luck that this incident has landed on their watch. Their concern lies not with the hapless Jew but with the restiveness of the Polish nobility. Although their political autonomy has been curtailed, they remain a powerful and potentially violent factor in the affairs of a region upon which the Austrians are seeking to impose civil tranquility. The destabilizing factor in the recent revelation is shame. The noblewoman in question was once an attractive woman and a prominent landowner, whose hand was sought by the great nobles of the day. She rejected them and remained unmarried. But now? "I can already see how much anger and jealousy and hatred there will be," says one official, shak-

ing his head, “when the noblemen that woman rejected find out that she has taken a Jew for herself” (p. 480, 411). “Yes,” responds the other official, “when I look at these Jews with their beards and side curls, I am amazed that a woman of her class would even get near one of them.” They both well understand the rageful humiliation of the Polish nobles, because, even though they pride themselves on their superior culture and comportment, they feel the same disgust and insult. Their reactions, it is important to point out, are based on the assumption that the enchained Jew is being used as a sexual slave by the noblewoman, and this is the same assumption that will be made by the Jews of Buczacz when they witness Dan being wheeled into the town in the police wagon.

The same tensions are manifest when the chief of police is ordered to put a party of men together to ride out to the noblewoman’s estate and investigate the disturbing report. The first exchange between the chief and the lady is all courtesy and deference on both sides. But once the policeman insists on searching the residence, the meeting breaks down into outrage and insult as the Polish noblewoman vainly resists the dominant position of the Austrian occupiers. When the policeman insists on the authority behind his inquiries, she screams, “No! You are not officers of the Emperor! You’re a bunch of robbers, and you are so-and-so, the head of them. How dare you surround the house of a noblewoman living alone?” (pp. 480–81, 412). It does not take long for the police to discover in the stable a “young man with shaggy hair wearing a woman’s dress tied to an iron chain, and the old servant holding the chain and straining to fasten it to a large stone resting on the stable floor.” The woman and the servant are arrested, and soon a convoy is formed: the police chief and the noblewoman in the first coach and the servant and Dan in the second, with a detachment of mounted officers at the head and in the rear.

### *Buczacz in Full*

Agnon could have ended the story at this point or wrapped it up expeditiously in any one of a number of ways. But instead he insists on slowing down and attenuating the pace by adding two narrative blocs. The first is

the spectacle of Dan's being returned to Buczacz while the entire town looks on, and the second is the account of what happened to Dan as related by the lady in her own words. What is the rationale for these additions?

Consider first how the spectacle of Dan's return is constructed with its manipulations of time and space. Long before the clatter of the wagon wheels and the hoof beats of horses announce the approach of the police procession, the Jews of Buczacz have been gathering en masse, alert to the fact that something important is transpiring. The arrival of a runner dispatched by the police chief heightens the mystery and hastens the production of theories that are baseless. Time dilates, and the "minutes passed as slowly as the sluggish waters of the Strypa in mid-summer" (p. 482, 414). The throng grasps at wisps of speculation like a vast organism starving for nourishment. Finally, a spark of rumor ignites the crowd. The news circulates that a Jewish man has been kept prisoner by a Polish noblewoman. No one knows his name or her name or the name of her village, but there is certainty—false, of course—that the room in which he was chained was her bedroom. In the meantime, the crowd has packed the area between Fedor Hill and the cemetery. A rumor that the lady is being brought in from the north provokes a mass rush in that direction, which is followed shortly by a rumor of the arrival from the opposite entrance to the city, which causes a concomitant shoving toward the south.

Among the crowd are Bilhah and her mother. The narrative exploits the apprehensive tedium of waiting to bring us up to date on her life. Her father Godil, we learn, died after a long illness, his death hastened by his heart-break over his daughter's refusal to marry and by his pangs of conscience for his role in Dan's recruitment. Dan's mother, who had long been closer to death than to life, finally passed away, and now Bilhah is taking care of her own widowed mother. Exhausted, jostled by the roiling crowd, and drained of desire to participate in the spectacle, Bilhah is about to return home just as the convoy enters the town and the faces of the passengers become distinguishable. Agnon has carefully prepared for the anagnorisis, the recognition scene of a classic tragedy. In contrast to the initiated reader, Bilhah and the assembled townspeople of Buczacz have no idea of the identity of

the Jew imprisoned by the lady and no reason to associate him with Dan Hoffmann, whose disappearance has faded from public awareness. Yet even if there is no surprise for the reader, the recognition scene still unfolds with horrifying, tragic inevitability.

Bilhah beheld the boy and emitted an ear-piercing scream. Another scream came from Dan as he looked at her. Dan is the boy dressed in woman's clothing, and from the way his eyes smiled at her everyone knew that this was the soldier who disappeared. (p. 482, 416)

Although this electrifying exchange takes place between Bilhah and Dan, the narrator turns his attention to the "everyone," the entirety of Buczacz that has assembled for the spectacle. The passage that follows is a small masterpiece of collective portraiture. For a moment, "everyone" remembers Dan's mother and her incessant weeping for her son, and they further remember how they treated this suffering woman. But rather than being consumed by regret, especially now that they see with their own eyes that the reality is worse than her histrionic suspicions, they focus on rationalizing their behavior. They say sagely that, "ironically, the greater a person's troubles, the less sympathy he gets," a worldly-wise observation that shifts the blame onto the mother (p. 484, 417). If she had been quieter about her troubles and less abject in her misery, then she would have fared better in gaining support from others. But soon enough the people of Buczacz come to terms with how they had acted, and they move their attention away from themselves and begin to make pronouncements about the mother's fate, some lamenting that she had not lived to see her son be returned and others arguing that she was better off dead than to have seen the horror that has just been paraded before them. They all join together "in wishing death upon the wanton woman whose depravity in taking a Jewish boy and using him for sinful purposes few could surpass" (p. 484, 417). Vilifying the alien woman allows them leave off interrogating their own behavior.

This self-serving communal introspection is brought to a halt by the policemen's shouts and the demand that the Jews disperse and go home. The breakup of the crowd makes us realize how extraordinary these scenes have been. Within the corpus of *A City in Its Fullness*, there are only a few times

when Agnon assembles the entire community of Buczacz. One instance takes place in “The Parable and Its Lesson,” a generation after the 1648 massacres on the occasion of the 20th of Sivan, the fast day for the martyrs, when every man, woman, and child in the small community of survivors gathers in the synagogue to recite laments and listen to Rabbi Moshe’s homily. Another takes place almost two hundred years later at the conclusion of “In a Single Moment,” when the community dissolves into joyous dancing upon hearing the news that a young Talmud scholar is going to wed a young woman who has been insulted and rejected by an avaricious bridegroom. Here at the end of “Disappeared,” “[e]very man and woman, old and young, came out that day to hear and to watch in what became one huge throng, the biggest gathering of people Buczacz had ever seen” (p. 483, 415).

These are scenes in which Buczacz undergoes a process of totalization. Individual desires, temperaments, and social standing are momentarily unified and submerged into an entity called Buczacz, which is then treated as if it were itself a character in the narrative. If in the other stories the motives for totalization are exalted, here they are fallen. Compelled by sensation and rumor, Buczacz has gathered to gawk, and when the identity of the central character in the spectacle is revealed, the reflex is to evade responsibility and to demonize the gentile victimizer and to cluck about the sadness of it all.

From the first pages of the story, the responsibility for Dan’s ordeal is placed upon the shoulders of the parnasim, the oligarchical elders of the community, and the dynamic of entreaty and rejection takes place among them and the dyad of Dan’s mother and Bilhah. With the spectacular recognition scene with the entire community of Buczacz assembled en plein air, Agnon takes a forceful step to widen the radius of accountability. It may have been the elders who shipped Dan off, but they did not do so without the tacit support of the good folks of the town who thanked God that it was not *their* son who was taken and who did their best to avoid having to deal with the supplications and ravings of the mother.

The conclusion to the story proper is quickly wrapped up, and it contains no glimmer of uplift or learned wisdom. At first Dan is enveloped

by Buczacz in a great spasm of solicitude. The outward signs of his forced feminization are erased by Jewish barbering, and he is given proper Jewish clothing and fed kosher food. Afterward, the community doesn't know what to do with him because his mother is dead and he was never married to Bilhah and the municipal Jewish almshouse is full. Ever thrifty, the elders find a way to kill two birds with one stone. There is a melamed who has become paralyzed, and as a way of providing for him, a group of householders each agree to pay a weekly sum to his wife for taking care of Dan in their home. Even then the melamed's wife has to spend all of Thursday trying to collect the payments for Sabbath necessities, ending up with only half the promised amount. We are not surprised to learn that "Bilhah, to her credit, would bring Dan food and drink two or three times a week, and on Fridays a clean shirt" (p. 485, 418). There is a glimmer of recognition in Dan's eyes when she is with him, but he remains semi-catatonic and does not hold on for more than a year. "The sorrow pent up within him brought on the illness from which he died." Of Bilhah we are told nothing more. But of the noblewoman we are told that she voluntarily entered the Mother of God convent, to which she consecrated all her possessions, including her mute servant. Devout in her faith, she lived on for many years.

### *The Lady and the Bear*

It is difficult to count the many ways in which "The Lady's Diary" is a remarkable artifact.<sup>20</sup> The narrator's explanation conceals more than it explains.

Thus ends the story of Dan Hoffmann. But the diary of the lady has come into my possession, and so I would add here that it is clear and apparent from what she writes that Dan was steadfast in his righteousness and his integrity and never submitted to transgression. He suffered much at the hands of that impure woman and never gave in to her seductions, served well by the merits of Joseph, the paragon of a virtuous man who did not succumb to the seductions of an alien woman. (p. 486, 419)

How the intimate diary, written in Polish by a Roman Catholic noblewoman who finished her days in a convent, should simply "come into the possession" of our traditionalist Jewish narrator is a rather large question, and

it is one that Agnon has not the slightest intention of answering. The same applies to the justification for violating the privacy of the diary. It is, simply, just so. All that is important to the narrator is the vindication of Dan's reputation. The sensational, scandalous, and publicly played-out nature of Dan's discovery has made his fate one upon which both Austrian officials and the Jews of Buczacz make shocked pronouncements with utter certainty.

The narrator knows they are mistaken, and he adduces the diary as conclusive evidence of the truth. Their error has been to assume not only that Dan has been used to satisfy the lady's sexual lusts but also that he must have yielded to her seductions. The diary will demonstrate, in her own words, that sexual violation and sexual relations never took place, despite the perversity of her desires. Through the traditional lens of the narrator's consciousness, the great strength necessary to withstand the lady's seductions must have been augmented by a source beyond Dan's own determination, and he names this source as the merit (*zechut*) stored up by the biblical Joseph when he fled from Potiphar's wife. Thus, Dan is not only cleared of complicity but he becomes a latter-day fulfillment of a biblical type.

It should not be surprising to find Agnon, the master ironist, traducing his own narrator's purpose. The demonization of the lady is undone by the access we are given to her inner life, which has been stamped by the trauma of her mother's murder and by her own struggles with sin and temptation. Dan himself, moreover, is in no sense a simple embodiment of Joseph the Righteous. He is surely innocent, but his innocence is so extreme that it renders him insensible of threats to his safety. The narrator, furthermore, is naïve about the contradictory powers latent within the diary as a form. He sees the diary simply as a source of documentary evidence for establishing Dan's purity; and he himself remains unaware of the potential for sympathy—or at least the neutralizing of judgment—that is realized when we are made privy to the lady's inner thoughts and motivations.

What the diary reveals, which the story proper does not, is the power of Dan's beauty. This quality was noted only in passing early in "Disappeared" when Dan's mother unknowingly reports that another Polish lady had remarked on her son's strapping appearance. It was always there, of course,

but the conventions of Jewish social discourse do not mark male physical beauty and attractiveness as a noticeable or special characteristic. This may remain inconsequential within an internal, shared community of value. Yet when the community is exposed to the outside and Jews move into gentile space, unacknowledged male physicality can trigger unforeseen and untoward behaviors. There can be no greater dramatization of this exposure and reaction than the opening lines of the diary.

This is how it all began. A soldier newly released from the army came and knocked on the door of my palace. I asked him what he wanted. He said he was a tailor who knew how to make dresses for ladies and noblewomen. I looked him over and saw that he was good-looking and well built and charming. (p. 486, 419)

The attraction is instantaneous. “When the boy started to unroll the blue velvet, my eyes were attracted to his. I couldn’t tell which was bluer—the velvet or his eyes.” From that moment on, the lady finds herself in a web of erotic obsession. She rushes off to bathe and perfume herself and assumes all sorts of postures that show off her figure as he takes her measurements, and then, upon her insistence, takes them again and then again. She is aware he is a Jew and that it “does not befit the daughter of a nobleman to be so interested in a Jewish boy” (p. 487, 420). She addresses Mary, Mother of God, and protests that she did “not sin and did nothing that could be construed as foolish.” Nevertheless, her attraction takes over. She instructs her servant to tell anyone who comes to the door that she is not at home; she neglects the affairs of her estate; and she stops writing in her diary, in which she nightly records the events of the day. Instead, she sits transfixed and bewitched watching him sew her dress. “I have never ever seen such delicate fingers,” she confesses, “and I don’t know anyone whose movements are so lovely.” But she looks forward to the spell being broken once he finishes the dress and leaves to return home to his sweetheart.

But rather than resisting she gives in. And he does, too, in his own way. The dress turns out to be a success, and as she is about to take her leave from the ex-soldier, she jokingly asks him if he would be willing to delay his departure to make a second dress for her. Knowing what is on his mind,

she increases the payment for this job so that he will have more money to take home to his “dearly beloved.” He agrees to the offer. But this time, the job is not completed expeditiously. She delays several days in giving the fabric he needs to make the dress, and then she changes her mind several times about the style she wants. She then settles into a routine of sitting near him while he works and observing his nimble movements. She remains fixed in her erotic reverie. Of the tales he tells her about ladies for whom he has made dresses, “what amazed me most” she reports, “was that in all his stories he never once mentioned that he had gotten near a woman, and here was a good-looking boy with all his juices” (p. 488, 422). This is the situation in a nutshell: Dan speaks freely about his proximity to women’s bodies without the slightest awareness of the attraction he may be exuding while at the very same moment, that is *all* that the woman sitting across from him is experiencing. In Hebrew, “with all his juices” is *bimlo’ humo’ amad*, literally, he stood in full heat. For the lady, he radiates sexuality; for himself, he is merely plying his needle.

Soon she makes him her prisoner, but it doesn’t start out that way. In thrall to her obsession, she stumbles from step to step with no premeditation. When the ex-soldier announces that he must take his leave because the great holiday of Passover is approaching, she spends a sleepless night in the throes of chaotic emotions. When praying on her knees to the Holy Mother to stand by her in her hour of need brings no answer, she believes she has been abandoned for “giving her heart to a Jewish man” (p. 489, 422). She instructs her servant to take away the boy’s clothes and lock him in his room while she escapes to ride in the countryside on her horse. She rides out again the next day, and this time she comes back with a small she-bear she has bought from a gypsy. The bear becomes a complex stand-in for the boy. She is delighted by its antics, but after only three days the bear stops frolicking and starts to decline. “A kind of sadness could be seen its eyes,” (p. 489, 423), and this is the characteristically Jewish quality that the oven maker saw in the eyes of the strange, chained creature he discovered. The mute servant puts the animal down with a shot from a rifle and buries its carcass. For a brief interval, the bear had provided a diversion, and she can reflect that “the sinful thoughts

I had now faded and were not as wicked or as troubling as they had been before.” Does this mean that her sexual urges have become muted, or does it mean that her conscience has become inured to her wicked thoughts?

The denouement of this dilemma, which is to last for six years, makes an argument for an uneasy stalemate. The boy/ex-soldier is dressed in the blue dress, his beard is shaved, and his hair allowed to grow long and be done up like a woman’s. He is chained to the same peg used for the bear. His needs are seen to by the mute servant, and whenever he has been bathed, the lady visits him and caresses his face and murmurs, “If I didn’t know you were a man I would say you’re a girl, your skin is so soft and smooth, like a virgin’s, or maybe you really are a virgin. Sometimes I am not even sure you’re a man” (p. 490, 424). If we rely on the truthfulness of her account, the attentions she forces on him are limited to fondling his face and feasting on him as a spectacle. Why does she not molest him genitally? Is it because such contact with a Jew would be degrading to her? Is it because his resemblance to a virgin woman arouses feelings that are too disturbing?

The only clue we are given concerns the “winter palace,” the deeply hidden building on her grounds into which she moves during the cold weather. It was built by her father to house a mistress he brought back from Dresden. In one of the rooms there was a bear chained to the wall, and when her mother stepped into the room to observe the bear, the mistress locked the door behind her and let her die of fright and starvation. The identification with the mother and the trauma of her gruesome death provide an explanation for why she avoided marriage and turned down the offers of the Polish nobles who sought her hand. Why, after all, would she consider ever placing herself under the thumb of a man like her father? Yet rejecting subjugation to a man does not mean that she possesses no sexual feelings, and those feelings suddenly assert themselves in the presence of a beautiful object of desire who not only poses no threat to her but whom *she* can subjugate.

What, then, has the narrator wrought by providing us with the lady’s diary? In a narrow sense, he has indeed succeeded in his professed purpose: defending Dan from the taint of submitting to seduction. But the victory

is pyrrhic. In the process of achieving it, he has exposed the poor boy's undefended innocence, the haziness of his moral agency, and the humiliation of his abasement. And in providing the lady with a credible psychology, he has made it difficult for us to hold on to the perception of her as a monster.

If there is a monster in the story, it is the lady's father and his mute retainer. The closing passage of the story presents us with a final quandary. She grows tired of the boy and wants to send him packing, but she is afraid that he will reveal her shame. The mute servant knows that more final measures are in her self-interest. But when he slides "his hand across his neck like one about to slaughter a chicken or a cow," she backs down and tells him that no harm should come to the Jew. Precisely at this moment, the lady declares: "This is the place for me to tell why the slave was mute and why he was so loyal and attached to me" (pp. 490-91, 425-26). Why indeed is this, the final lines of the story, the place for her to give us his history? His origins evoke the violent period one or two generations earlier when the new Austrian rulers set themselves to routing out bands of murderers and robbers lurking in the mountains and the forests. On the strength of his power as a nobleman, the lady's father intervened to save this man, whose tongue had been cut out by his comrades so he would not talk under torture. The intervention was not undertaken on humane grounds. The man had presumably served as an assassin secretly dispatching the father's enemies, and saving his life made him into a servant unconditionally loyal to the family's interests.

Now, we might think that this gruesome tale serves to illustrate and endorse the binary between Austrian notions of civil society and the gothic feudalism of the Polish nobles. But its placement as the lady's final thought pushes in a different, deeper direction. She returns to the acts of cruelty and violence she observed as a girl because she herself remains arrested and incapable of releasing herself from the consequences of those traumas. The ancient tongue-less servant, with his amoral blood loyalty, embodies what is carried over from her father to her. The darkness in her heart, despite her piety and desire for expiation, connects her to the darkness we have seen elsewhere in the Austrian stories in the hearts of Jews as well. The cruelty of

Reb Feivush as he looks on as his namesake and longtime retainer is being beaten up, the vindictive malice of R. Yisrael Shlomo in assuring Yekele's hanging, the aloof heartlessness of R. Leibush and the other parnasim as they pluck Dan from his mother—all these point to a depth of evil in human affairs that is the possession of no one people.

Yet, in the final analysis, it is the soul of Buczacz that Agnon cares about. That soul is deeply compromised and mired in turpitude in “Feivush,” the Yekele stories, and “Disappeared.” In all of these stories the policies promulgated by the new Austrian rulers, in themselves onerous and pernicious, serve to expose the degradation of the Jewish community of Buczacz. In earlier historical periods, reflected in earlier sections of *A City in Its Fullness*, Buczacz had been held up for admiration as a *kehilah kedoshah*, a holy community. That distinction has now become deeply tarnished. This picture of the city reveals a painful cleavage within Agnon and his narrator. The moral realism of the Austrian stories bespeaks an allegiance, however disturbing, to truth-telling and to the relevance of historical forces. On the other hand, identification with Buczacz and anguish over its decline leads to an urgent quest to purify the image of the beloved city and to find some path toward redemption, even if it is fleeting.

11. Menaḥem Mendel Lefin of Satanov (1749–1826) was an early East European maskil and the author of several works of Musar (ethical) literature. See Nancy Sinkoff, *Tradition and Transition: Mendel Lefin of Satanow and the Beginnings of Jewish Enlightenment in Eastern Europe, 1749–1826* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1996).

12. Although Maimonides recommends remaining at rest immediately after eating (*Hilkhot De'ot* 4:3), he does not explicitly advise sleep.

13. Philip Birnbaum, ed. and trans., *High Holiday Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 2000), p. 33.

14. Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Kra (the Neta Sha'ashu'im) served from 1794 to 1814, and Rabbi Avraham David Wahrman (the Da'at Kedoshim) from 1814 to 1840.

15. For the attitude that *A City in Its Fullness* has concerning Hasidism, see “Hasidim harishonim,” 526–30, 453–454. Also, see Chapter 1. It is important to note that the volume's implicit bias leads to a kind of underreporting of the importance of Hasidism in Buczacz. The historical period is an additional factor. In the mid-nineteenth century, Galicia had the greatest number of Hasidic institutions in Eastern Europe. But this was not yet the case at the end of the eighteenth century and the turn of the nineteenth. The Hasidic dynasty centered in and named for the town of Chertikov, close to Buczacz, was later prominently represented in Buczacz, and Agnon's grandparents were affiliated with Chertikov Hasidism. By the end of the nineteenth century these distinctions exerted far less force.

16. The allure of this book also conquered R. Elya in the story “Haḥazzanim.” See Chapter 3, note 18.

17. See Mishnah *Yevamot* 6:6.

18. See Shmuel Shiloh, *Dina dimalkhuta dina* [The law of the land is the law] (Jerusalem: Academic, 1976).

19. The general communal opinion pauses for a moment to register the fact that “a woman's testimony is not accepted according to Jewish law,” but then goes on to say, “still the matter needed to be investigated” (p. 515, 448) and be absorbed in the groundswell to condemn him.

20. In “Yekele One” the agency of R. Yisrael Shlomo is mediated by the active presence of the local governor, who prods the compliant parnas into considering the death sentence. The governor is also given a semi-comic scene in which he bosses his clerk around like a petty tyrant.

21. The ritual is described in the ninth chapter of Mishnah *Sotah*. The ritual was abrogated, we are told in *mishnah* 9, once murders became commonplace. It could also not be performed outside the Land of Israel while the Sanhedrin existed. The actions of the Buczaczers are merely a symbolic expression of their bad conscience and their powerlessness.

## Chapter 7

1. The conscription of Jews into the Russian army, which began about twenty-five years later, is a parallel phenomenon with different features and aims. Among them is the age of induction. In the Austrian army, the age of conscription was supposed to be no lower than eighteen, whereas in Russia, much younger boys were taken and edu-

cated in military schools before being transferred to the regular army. A boy served a 25-year term of service after he reached eighteen. See the entry “Military Service in Russia” by Yohanan Petrovsky-Stern in *The YIVO Encyclopedia*, [http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Military\\_Service\\_in\\_Russia](http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Military_Service_in_Russia), accessed June 14, 2015.

2. For an excellent overview of the debate, see Michael K. Silber, “From Tolerated Aliens to Citizen-Soldiers: Jewish Military Service in the Era of Joseph II,” in *Constructing Nationalities in East Central Europe* [Austrian and Habsburg Studies 6], ed. Pieter M. Judson and Marsha L. Rozenlit, 19–35 (New York: Berghahn, 2004). It is impossible not to see parallels to this debate in the discussions within the Israeli government, from 2010 to the present, in which the army expresses exasperation about integrating ultra-Orthodox Jews into military service and the government, because of popular outcry, urges their inclusion.

3. For some of the original legislation, see *Continuatio edictorum et mandatorum universalium in Regnis Galiciae et Lodomeriae* (1788): 76–121, esp. §65 and (1789): 98–99, esp. §48–51. (Again, my thanks to Rachel Manekin for drawing my attention to these materials.)

4. *‘Ir umelo’ah*, 448–92; *City*, 369–426.

5. Jews continued to refer to it as the kahal despite the official nomenclature.

6. This is the concept of *hitutei shikhvi*, disturbing the repose of the dead. It is based on *Yevamot* 63b, which quotes 1 Sam. 12:15. See Radak ad loc.

7. The narrator is circumspect in making explicit judgments, but he lets us know about his moral discomfort by telling us about the existence in Buczacz of a dissenting view expressed by “those who seek God selflessly and are faithful to His covenant,” (452, 375–76). The narrator also points to the example of the venerable Buczacz-born-and-raised scholar R. Meshulam Igra, who left his post as rabbi of Tisminitz and moved to Hungary rather than be complicit in the practice. The rabbi went so far as to say that “if his only son, Rabbi Yosef Eliyahu, ever was about to be conscripted, he, Rabbi Meshulam, would let him go and would not redeem him with another Jewish man,” (452, 375–76).

8. Wheat money (*ma’ot hittin*) was disbursed from communal funds to the poor to buy wheat to be ground into flour from which Passover matzah was baked. The custom of distributing such funds goes back to Talmudic times.

9. A *Landesrabbiner* was the head rabbi of a district or a province in the countries of Central Europe.

10. I am grateful to Ariel Hirschfeld for sharpening my awareness of this feature of the story.

11. The metaphor is Hirschfeld’s.

12. An exception is the story of the melodramatic elopement of the son of a Jewish miller and the daughter of a Greek-Catholic priest, “Devarim shekisuyam yafeh megilyam” [Matters better left unsaid], pp. 214–15.

13. The telling metonym for the mother’s abjection is saliva and spittle (*roq*). “So what did that woman live on? What sustained her?” asks the narrator. “If not her suffering, then it was only her saliva that kept her alive as she had told R. Leibush, the parnas, before he took her son from her,” (p. 453–54, 377). *Roq* is a figure for what an abject person possesses when there is nothing else. *Roq* is also the fluid produced in the

mouth from excessive, demonstrative speaking. In both senses, then, this is truly what that woman lived on.

14. The narrator parses the name as “man of hope”; but *hoff* more likely means court. There is abundant irony in both options.

15. See the entry “Brivnshtelers” by Alice Nakhimovsky, and Roberta Newman in the *YIVO Encyclopedia*, <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Brivnshtelers#author24>, accessed June 24, 2015. The greatest example of the use of the genre in Jewish literature is Sholem Aleichem’s epistolary novel *The Letters of Mehaḥem Mendl*.

16. The second sentence is not in the translation and is added here.

17. On Perl, see Joseph Perl, *Sefer Megale Temirin*, 2 vols., ed. Jonatan Meir (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2013).

18. The medic who tends to the injuries of Feivush and his wife is interested in similar moral issues. See “Feivush Gazlan,” pp. 292–93, 227–52.

19. There is also an accounting later of ten years altogether, four in the army and six with the noblewoman. See p. 484, 416.

20. For “diary” Agnon prefers the antique *sefer hayamim* over the common neologism *yoman*. We are using “lady” as a translation for *adonit*, which is already an equivalent for the Polish term for a female member of the gentry.

## Chapter 8

1. *A City in Its Fullness* contains close to one hundred pages of additional material, to be sure; but these two texts are the last full-fledged fictional stories. (“Frogs” [“Tsefarde‘im,” pp. 589–602, 498–517] intervenes between the two, but it can be considered as a kind of study for “Pisces.”) In Emunah Yaron’s editing, the volume concludes with “The Sign” [“Hasiman,” pp. 695–716, 1–29], a story of formidable importance but one that was previously published. As I argued in the Introduction, the story is a consecration story that explains Agnon’s calling to undertake the writing of the Buczac stories but does not belong to the project proper.

2. First published in *Davar (Musaf)* 7, no. 33 (July 22, 1932). The story appears in the standard edition in the volume *Eilu ve’eilu*, pp. 256–67.

3. For a useful overview of the different modalities of the Elijah legends, see Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, “Genre and Types of Yiddish Folk Tales about the Prophet Elijah” in *The Field of Yiddish (Second Collection)*, ed. Uriel Weinreich (The Hague: Mouton, 1965), 202–25.

4. Translation by Hebert Levine and Reena Spicehandler.

5. The gift of a kerchief from a husband to a wife recalls the story “The Kerchief” mentioned above (see note 2). In that story the kerchief is a richly endowed symbol of the sanctity and purity that inhere in family attachments.

6. Although the story doesn’t use the term, what he has done is an instance of *me’ilah*, the appropriation for one’s own benefit of resources devoted to holy purposes. It is a cardinal sin for those invested with the community’s trust.

7. “Vagrant,” with its slight pejorative inflection, is a translation of the Hebrew *helekh*, which comes from the common verb to walk or travel. The Hebrew emphasizes impermanence, sojourning, and movement rather than poverty. The *helekh* is a *homo viator*.