

# Agnon and Germany

The Presence of the German World  
in the Writings of S.Y. Agnon

Edited by  
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Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan

## Gershom Scholem and Shmu'el Yosef Agnon: Metamorphoses of a Friendship

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*In front of the palace stands another palace,  
There is no end to the palaces.  
May the day never come on which you'll say  
I have reached the shore.*

(Agnon to Scholem, *ata ben arba'im*)<sup>1</sup>

The notes, autobiographical memoirs, and letters of Gershom Scholem that are now available in German have cast a new light also on the friendships he made prior to his departure for Jerusalem. Not that many encounters so greatly impressed the young and rebellious Zionist Gerhard Scholem during World War I and the turbulent years that followed that he made efforts to maintain a personal friendship. It is likely that the most well known of these encounters took place on 16 July 1916, in the public library on Adalbertstraße in Berlin, when “Mr. Benjamin...[couldn't] turn his eyes away from me at all,” as the 18-year-old Scholem noted in his diary.<sup>2</sup> His relationship to Walter Benjamin was to become “the most decisive of my life, at least to a man.”<sup>3</sup> His encounter with Shmu'el Yosef Agnon was completely different:

- 1 “ki yesh hechal lifne mi-hechal u-le-hekhalot en sof / al yehi yom asher tomar higa'ti el ha-chof,” from Agnon's poem for Scholem's fortieth birthday, Hanukkah 1937, in M. Bet-Arie (ed.), *Exhibition in Honour of S.J. Agnon, Recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature 1966*, Catalogue (Jerusalem 1967), p. 34, no. 143 (Hebrew section). ◀
- 2 G. Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 1. Halbband 1913-1917, ed. K. Gründer and F. Niewöhner (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), p. 131. ◀
- 3 G. Scholem, *Tagebücher nebst Aufsätzen und Entwürfen bis 1923*, 2. Halbband 1917-1923, ed. K. Gründer, H. Kopp-Oberstebrink and F. Niewöhner (Frankfurt am Main, 2000), p. 404, entry from 11 September 1918. ◀

In the Jewish Library in Berlin, which I visited regularly, I often saw a man in his late twenties, slender, almost emaciated; inhibited, introverted and timid were his movements and his gait. He leafed through the Hebrew catalogue from beginning to end. One day, one of the librarians whispered to me: That is Agnon, the writer from the land of Israel, Buber has just written of him that he holds within himself the true destiny and intention of the Jewish mystery, and that one can expect great and secret things from him for Hebrew literature.<sup>4</sup>

In Agnon's stories, Scholem also discovered the mysterious aura that surrounded Agnon the man. No lesser a figure than Martin Buber, with whom Agnon had made contact shortly after his arrival in Germany, took care of the publication of the German translations; the Hebrew presses had ground to a halt during the war years.<sup>5</sup> His panegyric article "Über Agnon" ("On Agnon"), which had so greatly impressed the librarian at the Jewish Library, appeared on Passover 1916.<sup>6</sup> One year later, the first meeting between Agnon and Scholem finally took place, arranged by the lawyer and translator Max Strauss, who had already repeatedly invited Scholem to his home. Scholem, nine years the younger, was "fascinated" by this "infinitely sensitive and complex human being," and obviously also flattered to have made an impression on Agnon.<sup>7</sup> In Scholem's memoirs of his youth, the section on his relationship with Agnon begins with the simple assertion: "We liked each other."<sup>8</sup>

It has often been noted that it was the enthusiasm of young Zionists from assimilated families for the "Eastern Jew" that contributed to Agnon's success

- 4 G. Scholem, "Reshamim ve-hirhurim. Le-yovlo ha-shishim shel Sh. Y. Agnon," in Scholem, *Devarim be-go*, pp. 463-65 (first appeared in *Ha-Aretz*, 13 August 1948), here p. 463. Not until Scholem got to know Agnon personally did the latter answer his question as to what he was looking for so intensively in the catalogue: "Books that I have not yet read" (G. Scholem, "Agnon in Germany: Recollections" in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis. Selected Essays*, ed. Werner J. Dannhauser [New York, 1976], p. 118). ◀
- 5 Agnon was able to publish his Hebrew stories in the magazines *Miqlat* and *Ha-tequfa* (New York and Warsaw). The German translation of "The Tale of the Scribe" ("Die Erzählung des Torahschreibers," from the Hebrew by Max Strauss, *Der Jude* 2 [1917], pp. 253-64), was prepared from the manuscript. ◀
- 6 *Treue. Eine jüdische Sammelschrift*, ed. Leo Hermann (Berlin, 1916), p. 59. ◀
- 7 G. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem. Memories of My Youth*. Trans. from the German by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1980), p. 92. ◀
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 93. ◀

in Germany.<sup>9</sup> But, for Scholem, there was another additional factor. When he met Agnon, Scholem was living in the legendary Pension Struck amongst Russian-Jewish intellectuals,<sup>10</sup> after a registered letter sent by his father on 15 February 1917 had barred him from his home. There, Salman Rubashov helped Scholem with his living costs by securing him a job preparing translations from Yiddish. Rubashov was sufficiently convinced of Scholem's competence on the basis of the latter's criticism of Alexander Eliasberg's translation of three Yiddish books.<sup>11</sup> The publication of this review in the *Jüdische Rundschau* on 12 January 1917 led to the first meeting between Scholem and Max Strauss, where Strauss requested that Scholem look through his translation of Agnon's "And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight"; Strauss shared the "principles" that Scholem had set for his translation work.<sup>12</sup> Scholem's conception of translation is closely tied to his "mystical concept of language," which, developed under Benjamin's influence, understands "all language" as consisting of the names of God.<sup>13</sup> Only through the "deepest understanding ... of the inner structure of the Jewish concepts"<sup>14</sup> can a translation succeed. Yet it remains only partially possible when the fundamentally valid "spiritual patterns of Judaism"<sup>15</sup> – such as the Torah (which in kabbalistic tradition consists of the name of God) – can only be described in Hebrew. It is no wonder, then, that Scholem demanded "knowledge of Hebrew and its determinant patterns" even – and especially – for a translation from Yiddish, in order that these patterns not collapse into a "field of rubble."<sup>16</sup>

At the time that Scholem met Agnon, the importance of the Hebrew language for him was similar to that of Zionism, which he had adopted as the guiding purpose in his life. In Agnon's story with the messianic title "And

9 Cf. M. Brenner, *Jüdische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik* (Munich, 2000), pp. 203-30. ◀

10 Cf. Betty Scholem, *Gershom Scholem, Mutter und Sohn im Briefwechsel 1917-1946*, ed. L. Schedletzky with Thomas Sparr (Munich, 1989), Letter 1, p. 13. ◀

11 G. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 87f. ◀

12 Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 1. Halbband, entry from 14 January 1917, p. 468. ◀

13 Ibid., p. 472, entry from 3 February 1917; Scholem didn't realize his plan to write an essay on the linguistic theory of the Kabbalah until forty years later. Cf. Scholem, "Der Name Gottes und die Sprachtheorie der Kabbala," in Scholem, *Judaica* 3 (Frankfurt am Main, 1970): 7-70. ◀

14 Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 1. Halbband, p. 501 (Response to Eliasberg). ◀

15 Ibid., p. 496. ◀

16 Ibid., p. 495. ◀

the Crooked Shall be Made Straight,”<sup>17</sup> the perfection of which Scholem never tired of praising,<sup>18</sup> he first recognized this “new and altogether original incarnation of the Jewish spirit and of Jewish tradition”<sup>19</sup> that then, in the spring of 1917, stood before him in the person of Agnon. More than thirty years later, Scholem would admit that, for a long time, at least during their friendship in Germany, Agnon was for him “more” than an artist.<sup>20</sup> In his later essays on Agnon, which portray the artist as a young man, Scholem focused solely on this period of time. Now famous is his description of a reading Agnon gave in May 1917 of “The Tale of the Scribe,” in a “delicate, plaintive voice,” at the “Hebrew Club” in Berlin.<sup>21</sup> Scholem was the only Berlin-born member on the organizational committee of this club, which had been created in 1916 for the purpose of fostering Hebrew conversation, and which was regularly visited by eastern European and Palestinian Jews.<sup>22</sup> This presentation style, which had impressed Scholem so greatly,<sup>23</sup> gives evidence that Agnon’s artistic creativity exceeded the expectations placed on literature – and this not only in the opinion of others, but also in his own self-understanding.<sup>24</sup> Even

17 *Ve-haya he-aqov le-mishor*, first published in *Ha-po’el ha-tza’ir*, Vol. 5, no. 7 (9 January 1912) to no. 16 (May 19, 1912): the title cites Isaiah 40:4. It is probably the only story that Agnon did not revise again later. ◀

18 In the memoirs of his youth, Scholem writes: “Being mad about Judaica, I gave Lony [Scholem’s cousin Leonie Ortenstein] the German edition of Agnon’s *Und das Krumme wird gerade* to read in order to give her an idea of what I regarded as truly great literature (and a great translation),” *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 111. ◀

19 *Ibid.*, p. 93. ◀

20 Diary entry from 22 June 1948, published by F. Niewöhner, “‘Ich habe keinen Garten und habe kein Haus’. Ein unbekanntes Gedicht Schmuël Josef Agnons in der Übersetzung von Gerhard Scholem, auch Anmerkungen zur Geschichte einer zerbrochenen Freundschaft,” in *Disiecta membra. Studien, Karlfried Gründer zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. O. Marquard et al. (Basel, 1989), p. 87. ◀

21 Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 94. ◀

22 Of his appointment to the committee Scholem said, not without pride, that it was a “success for German Hebraism,” *Tagebücher*, p. 471. On the Hebrew Club (*Bet Va’ad Ivri*), cf. B. Schäfer, *Berliner Zionistenkreise. Eine vereinsgeschichtliche Studie* (minima judaica 3) (Berlin, 2003), p. 150f. ◀

23 Nevertheless, he didn’t consider Agnon to be a good interpreter of his own works, cf. *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 94. ◀

24 On Agnon’s self-understanding and his relationship to Jewish tradition, cf. G. Shaked, “Midrash and Narrative: Agnon’s Agunot,” in G.H. Hartmann / S. Budick, *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven, 1986), pp. 285-303. ◀

the religiously neutral Zionist Yosef Chayyim Brenner had already surprised guests by giving a reading of *Ve-haya he-aqov le-mishor*, which he had published himself, "as though he were intoning the Torah."<sup>25</sup> But even in his private life, Agnon spoke "with [the] cadence of Hasidic anecdotes"<sup>26</sup> and "in the style of the heroes of his stories."<sup>27</sup> For Scholem, this style of speech had "something infinitely attractive."<sup>28</sup>

In the summer of 1917, after successfully avoiding military service, as Agnon and Benjamin had done shortly before, Scholem continued his study of mathematics and philosophy at the University of Jena. Valeria Grünwald, who was at the time very much in love with Agnon, helped Scholem find an apartment, and he in turn helped her with her Hebrew.<sup>29</sup> A conversation with Valeria that Scholem recorded in his diary gives an impression of the intensity of their mutual feelings for Agnon:

I go to Valeria Grünwald's and really only wanted to learn Hebrew with her. She was sitting there and gave the impression of being quite unhappy. When I asked, she said in a quite desperate tone that she had experienced something indescribable, something insulting that I couldn't imagine; she didn't want to tell me what. I wondered if perhaps Agnon were behind it, and asked if she had heard nothing of him, whereupon it came to light that her sister had met with Agnon in Weimar on Thursday without mentioning a word about it to us... . In any case, her mood infected me, and I paced up and down the room in silence for ten minutes and then, to her renewed annoyance (which I could see in her face), explained to her that I didn't want to study with her now. And I actually left.<sup>30</sup>

During the period that followed, Scholem is visited "once or twice" by Agnon from Leipzig, and is invited for his part by Leipzig Zionists from Orthodox family backgrounds, who represented for Scholem a welcome counterpoint to

25 This according to the description given by David Kimchi, cited in *Exhibition in Honour of S.J. Agnon, Recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature*, 1966. Catalogue (Jerusalem, 1967), no. 52, p. 18. ◀

26 Scholem, "Agnon in Germany: Recollections," *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, p. 118. ◀

27 *Ibid.*, p. 121. ◀

28 *Ibid.* ◀

29 Cf. Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, pp. 37, 56. ◀

30 *Ibid.*, p. 56, entry from 16 October 1917. ◀

the assimilation he so despised.<sup>31</sup> For Scholem, Zionism had a religious dimension that would prove decisive for his studies after his move to Switzerland in the fall of 1918: Jewish tradition was for him at the time “the only, absolute focus of mysticism.”<sup>32</sup> In Bern, he intensified his relationship with Walter and Dora Benjamin; yet also, with the help of his Talmud teacher – typically enough a young Jewish student from eastern Europe – and in spite of a general lack of social contact, he got to know an Orthodox family with whom he spent the holidays. At the same time, his relationship with Elsa Burchhardt, the “daughter of an Orthodox Hamburg doctor’s family who had distanced herself from the orthodoxy but still maintained a strong spiritual connection to tradition,” a woman whose “conception of Judaism and Zionism was closely related” to his own,<sup>33</sup> became so intimate that a common future in Palestine arose from it. Scholem wrote to Werner Kraft on 10 April 1919:

It is unspeakably easier and somehow more fundamentally possible for me to be together with completely Jewish people from the East than with other people. I can talk with these people and we immediately have our common center, I myself hardly want to believe (the others don’t believe me anyway) that I’m from Berlin and didn’t have a Jewish upbringing. I’m also now often in the company of a Galician Jewish family, very pious, to which I was introduced by my Talmud teacher (of whom I have no doubt written to you, a very remarkable 28-year-old student, deeply educated in the Jewish scriptures and of just that mold from which Agnon is cast – just as much a miracle here in Bern) and where I always spend the afternoon of the Sabbath after my Talmud studies. These people, whose perseverance is expressed not only metaphysically but also manifestly in music, in song – they all sing: the father the mother the daughter and my teacher, and I sing along and most beautifully when the Sabbath is coming to an end and the old mystical hymns are sung – accept me with great love like or better as one of their own, though I hold to nothing and am a doubter.<sup>34</sup>

31 Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 98. ◀

32 Letter to Ludwig Strauss, 24 March 1918. In G. Scholem, *Briefe I, 1914-1947*, ed. I. Shedletzky (Munich, 1994), p. 149. ◀

33 Scholem, *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem. Jugenderinnerungen, erweiterte Fassung*. Aus dem Hebräischen von M. Brocke und A. Schatz (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), p. 121. ◀

34 *Briefe I*, p. 201ff. ◀

Scholem describes his life as if he had “come home” in Agnon’s works, and appears to identify himself, of course with no small amount of stylized coquetry, with the protagonists of Agnon’s stories. He lived “entirely withdrawn, like Agnon’s Torah scribe but without his peace of mind.”<sup>35</sup> Scholem was captivated by this “almost perfect” story and read it, in Max Strauss’s translation, to Walter and Dora Benjamin on 22 June 1918.<sup>36</sup> The following Sunday he made this note in his diary:

On Friday evening I read Walter and Dora the tale of the Torah scribe. I read it for perhaps the tenth time, but as I already knew, it affects me more deeply each time. From the very first word I became so excited that it took a great effort to keep my voice steady, I trembled as if I had to kiss a girl. Perhaps I read well as a result. The end of the story is indeed reprehensible, Agnon should not have included the vision as a “crowning touch,” since it cannot outdo the reality of all that went before.<sup>37</sup>

Scholem infers the erotic dimension in Agnon’s work here; but, interestingly enough, he cannot follow its resolution in religious revelation. Walter Benjamin, he continues, formulated it “somehow quite correctly: If this story *with* the ending is entirely perfect, then I don’t understand why there is a Bible, then we don’t need the Bible.”<sup>38</sup> In his last interview, given in 1981 to Dan Miron, Scholem still expresses the surprise he felt when he heard Agnon in Munich give his interpretation of the end of the Torah scribe’s tale.<sup>39</sup> To the question whether the hero enters a state of ecstasy and dies in the end, or whether he experiences a mystic vision, Agnon answered: “Of course he does not die. You didn’t understand it, you didn’t catch the hint. I am surprised that a lad like you doesn’t understand what is written down there ... that Raphael

35 Scholem’s formulation, in a letter written in Muri to Aharon Heller on 23 June 1918; *ibid.*, Letter no. 64, p. 161. ◀

36 G. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft* (Frankfurt a.M., 1975), p. 91. ◀

37 Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, p. 244. ◀

38 *Ibid.* ◀

39 The interview, some two hours long, was shown at the end of May / beginning of June 1981 as a television broadcast of the Open University in Israel, and was published in a slightly abridged form in two instalments in *Ha-Aretz* under the title “Sh. Y. Agnon: olam shel meshalim u-temunot.” A German translation with the title “Gershom Scholem über Agnon bei einem Gespräch mit Dan Miron” appeared in *Ariel* 52 (1982): 94-106; 53 (1983): 61-75. ◀



ejaculated. Because of his mystical marriage and the identification of the Torah scroll with his wife, he had an ejaculation, and this is alluded to in the final line of the story – the barest of clues.”<sup>40</sup> Scholem was greatly impressed, “read the words anew and never asked again.”<sup>41</sup> Yet neither does he indicate whether he found support for Agnon’s statement. The last sentence of the story reads: “ve-simlat chupata shel ishto perusa, alav ve-al sifro.”<sup>42</sup> It is in fact possible to suppose that Agnon, as he hinted, worked in an allusion to Deut. 22:17 (*u-farsu ha-simla*), where the sheet (literally: the dress) from the conjugal bed, bearing the traces of the consummated act of intercourse, is shown as proof of the bride’s virginity. The fact that Agnon vehemently refuted this interpretation later on in Jerusalem strikes Scholem at least as consistent with the position Agnon took after his return from Germany: he subjected eroticism to a strict “censorship.”<sup>43</sup> When Scholem drew Agnon’s attention to the complete absence of sexual references in the latter’s 1938 anthology, *Yamim Nora'im*, material that is so dominant in kabbalistic literature that Agnon naturally wove into the collection, Agnon simply replied: “That is not for this generation.”<sup>44</sup>

After discussing the tale of the Torah scribe, Scholem spoke to Walter and Dora Benjamin “about Agnon, what an unhappy person he was, and how he lived his only real, pure life in his books,” and about his own plan “to write a short essay on Agnon soon.”<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, it wasn’t until much later that Scholem was able to realize this plan, which he had also outlined in more detail to Max Strauss.<sup>46</sup> Apart from a meditative article on the occasion of Agnon’s sixtieth birthday, Scholem published nothing on Agnon until after the Nobel Prize for literature was awarded to him in 1966; his well-known articles “Agnon in Germany: Recollections” and “S.Y. Agnon: The Last Hebrew Classic?,” however, share very little of the emotional intensity of his early notes and sketches.<sup>47</sup>

40 Ibid., *Ariel* 53: 67. ◀

41 Ibid. ◀

42 S.J. Agnon, “Agadat ha-sofer,” in Agnon, *Elu ve-elu* (Tel Aviv, 1978), p. 145. ◀

43 Cf. *Ariel* 53: 65. ◀

44 Ibid. ◀

45 Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, p. 244, entry from 23 June 1918. ◀

46 “The book ‘Yizkor’ demands a review that is just as metaphysical and negative as the review of Agnon is positive. I am preparing both of these in my little room.” *Briefe* 1, no. 66, p. 170. ◀

47 Cf. above, n. 3, and “Agnon in Deutschland. Erinnerungen,” in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 12 February 1967, published in English as “Agnon in Germany: Recollections” (trans. Walter J. Dannhauser) in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp.

Scholem also remained in contact with Agnon while in Switzerland. In June 1918, he received a postcard in Hebrew from Agnon, who was in Brückenau at the time, showing interest in his translation plans: "Have you translated 'Be-metzulot' and 'Bet ha-kneset ha-yashan?' Are you thinking of translating anything by me? What?"<sup>48</sup> But first, Scholem composed sonnets for Agnon on Menashe Chayyim, the protagonist of *And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight*, and sent them to Valeria Grünwald, who was in regular contact with Agnon during this time. Two German sonnets, one of which is also in Hebrew translation, still exist today.<sup>49</sup> After hearing from Valeria Grünwald that Agnon, whom she had met in Jena, would like to see the sonnets in print and wanted to present them to Max Strauss as well as to Ahron Eliasberg, the manager of the *Jüdischer Verlag*, Scholem wrote in his diary:

On the suggestion to publish the sonnets, I'll say this: I am not in agreement. I am not mature enough to write Hebrew, though I believe I belong to the most legitimate class when it comes to understanding and interpreting it. If I write a German poem – which happens only in very unfortunate hours, when I am overpowered by the force of the lamentation that arises in my heart out of sorrow over the death (and

117-25; "S.J. Agnon – Der letzte hebräische Klassiker?" in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 15 October 1967, published in English as "S.Y. Agnon – The Last Hebrew Classic?" (trans. Walter J. Dannhauser), in Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, pp. 93-116. ◀

- 48 *Gershom Scholem (1897-1982): Commemorative Exhibition*, Catalogue, Jerusalem 1988, no. 138, pp. 35 and 37 (Hebrew section). Agnon continued to motivate Scholem to translate his stories, cf. D. Laor, "Agnon in Germany 1912-1924: A Chapter of a Biography," *AJS Review* 18 (1993): 87, and *idem*, *Chayye Agnon: Biografia* (Tel Aviv, 1998). Walter Benjamin wanted to publish the story "Die alte Synagoge" ("The Old Synagogue") in the first issue of *Angelus Novus*, the magazine he planned to put out; cf. Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 133. At this time, however, only the story "Die große Synagoge" ("The Great Synagogue") had been published (1919), which Scholem later translated together with "Die Geschichte von Asriel Moshe dem Bücherwart" ("The Story of Asriel Moshe, Keeper of the Books") (*Der Jude* 8 [1924]: 231-38). Agnon presumably changed the title. ◀
- 49 Cf. Niewöhner, "Ich habe keinen Garten und habe kein Haus," pp. 90-92; the Hebrew translation was apparently prepared on the occasion of Scholem's Hebrew speech, "Agnon's Time in Germany," for the Nobel Prize celebration held at the residence of President Salman Rubaschoff (*Davar*, 9 December 1966, pp. 7f.). Scholem used this speech as the basis for his essay "Agnon in Germany: Recollections." ◀

thereby the immortality) of the ray that illuminated my youth – it is conceived in the Hebrew spirit. I do not want to enter the annals of German literature, unless it is for the translation of the Bible.<sup>50</sup>

The two sonnets for Agnon, with which Scholem, as he later wrote, “earned a place in his heart,”<sup>51</sup> clearly show the topics that occupied his thinking at the time: Hebrew elegies and the messianic time. It is not yet the mystic dimension of Jewish history with its light and shadow that he follows, but rather the impression of a transformation of the mythical into the “highest order of the historical,” which takes place on an “absolute level of language.” Scholem only finds this level in the Jewish songs of lamentation, as they are connected to “prophetic elements.”<sup>52</sup> Since the “historical order” has no individual meaning for Scholem, but only a national character, he considers New Hebrew poetry to be a “sham,” for “prose *alone*” is capable of producing “the Absolute” in Hebrew, and “so does Agnon.”<sup>53</sup> Scholem’s poems to Agnon make an attempt to meet these expectations, albeit not in Hebrew, but nevertheless formally: “The pure sonnet is directed to a single person. The sonnet represents historical existence as messianic existence.”<sup>54</sup> For this reason, Scholem also defines his friendship with Agnon in terms of language:

Those sonnets are simply the ebullience of an hour’s lament, whose language can only be shared and understood by friends. Agnon, even though I do not know him, is my friend (even though I might not be his), and to speak my words to him is therefore not an affront. This is proven to me by his style, which I feel is, if it is not complete nonsense to say such a thing, incredibly akin to my own. I see the foundation

50 Scholem, *Tagebücher*, 1. Halbband, p. 396f. Entry from 10 October 1918. It is interesting to note that Scholem actually did receive a German literature award from the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts, though for his academic prose and not for his Bible translation (his translation of the Song of Songs appeared in 1915, released by the publishing house of his father, Arthur Scholem). ◀

51 *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, p. 122. ◀

52 *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, p. 391. Scholem still talks of his plan to write a dissertation on the significance of the lament in Judaism in his letter to Heller, 23 June 1918, *Briefe* I, no. 64, p. 164. ◀

53 Letter to Elsa Burchhardt, 23 July 1918, *ibid.*, p. 167. Even the poetry of Chayyim N. Bialik was doomed to failure, cf. *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, p. 375. ◀

54 *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, p. 327. ◀

upon which such language (I mean his Hebrew) is possible, even if I may not understand it yet...<sup>55</sup>

The kinship that Scholem sees in Agnon is concretized for him in the figure of Menashe Chayyim, “he ‘who makes life forget’ – and truly: he is as his name says –, a hidden righteous one”; and Agnon, whose prose is “that of the hidden righteous one,”<sup>56</sup> speaks as a *lamedvavnik*, one of the thirty-six hidden righteous ones who, according to Jewish tradition, guarantee the continued existence of the still unredeemed world, and one of whom many a Hasidic legend identifies as the Messiah.<sup>57</sup> This writing, which gives voice to the “misfortune” of Judaism,<sup>58</sup> contains for Scholem a messianic quality that finds its center in the Torah; but “only in silence” can he himself pass it on.<sup>59</sup> It is “the Hebrew of the scriptures”<sup>60</sup> that Scholem associates with Agnon. But the distance between writing in Hebrew and keeping silent in Hebrew remains: “Perhaps one day I shall be with Agnon, but I know what is lacking.”<sup>61</sup>

In the fall of 1919, Scholem returned to Berlin and began systematically buying kabbalistic literature. He had changed his dissertation topic, presumably while still in Switzerland, and passed over “the threshold of Kabbalah research.”<sup>62</sup> He met with Agnon and learned of his engagement to Esther Marx. Unsurprisingly, Scholem was unable to gain much from his meeting with Agnon’s “domineering” friend Elieser Meir Lipschütz, yet was very open towards Agnon’s future brother-in-law, Moses Marx.<sup>63</sup> Scholem spent “countless hours” in Marx’s library and gave him a small kabbalistic book – the contents of which the recipient was apparently unable to understand – in return for Christian

55 Ibid., p. 397. ◀

56 Ibid., p. 319f. ◀

57 Cf. Scholem, “Die 36 verborgenen Gerechten in der jüdischen Tradition,” in *idem*, *Judaica* 1 (Frankfurt, 1963): 223f. ◀

58 *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, p. 320. ◀

59 Ibid., p. 397; in a letter to Elsa Burchardt from 26 October 1918, Scholem formulates even more clearly: “If there is anything on the order of great art that can be achieved in the field of the Torah ... Agnon has achieved it,” *Briefe* 1, no. 69, p. 176f. ◀

60 *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, p. 320. ◀

61 Ibid., p. 397; on Scholem’s concept of “keeping silent in Hebrew,” cf. *Tagebücher*, 1. Halbband, p. 431. ◀

62 Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 140; the French edition of the *Zohar* in particular, translated by Jean de Pauly, who freely invented and added passages of his own, was a “shock” to Scholem (ibid., p. 138, cf. *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 116f.). ◀

63 Ibid., p. 137f. ◀

Knorr von Rosenroth's voluminous *Kabbala denudata*.<sup>64</sup> Agnon created a literary monument to his brother-in-law with "Die Geschichte von Asriel Moshe, dem Bücherwart" ("The Story of Azriel Moshe, Keeper of the Books"), which Scholem was to translate from Hebrew into German.<sup>65</sup> Both Agnon's story as well as the anecdote about Moses Marx in Scholem's memoirs are completely free of any insulting irony at the expense of this ignorant bibliophile, and give instead an idea of what connected Agnon the artist with Scholem the researcher: namely, the devotion to the literary testimonies of Jewish tradition.<sup>66</sup>

Almost twenty years later, Scholem reflected on whether his turning away from Agnon, after he ceased to recognize the "honesty of depth" and saw only the "sublime swindle of a great artist," went back as far as the time of Agnon's wedding on 6 May 1920.<sup>67</sup> It remains unclear what changes Scholem may have noticed in Agnon in retrospect. It certainly was not due to Agnon's wife, for Scholem had a high regard for Esther Marx – "she is capable of a great deal," he wrote to Meta Jahr shortly after the wedding, which apparently was still a secret at the time.<sup>68</sup> He admired the calligraphic postcards from Esther Marx that Agnon showed him, and her "almost flawless Hebrew."<sup>69</sup> And Scholem himself portrayed Agnon's three-year sojourn in Bad Homburg, where he had moved with his wife in 1921, as some of the happiest years of Agnon's life:

64 *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, pp. 143-44. ◀

65 "Ma'ase Azriel Moshe shomer ha-sfarim," *Rimon* 4 (1923): 35-46; "Die Geschichte von Asriel Moshe, dem Bücherwart," *Der Jude* 8 (1924): 231-35. ◀

66 Scholem later attributed the mutual attraction at their first meeting to his "passionate devotion to the sources," which interested Agnon, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 93. ◀

67 Diary entry from 22 June 1948, cited in Niewöhner, "Ich habe keinen Garten und habe kein Haus," p. 87; I consider improbable Niewöhner's supposition that the "intensive inclination Scholem had toward Walter Benjamin at this time" may have led to an estrangement from Agnon. According to Scholem's autobiography, there were other acquaintances in Munich (Elsa Burchhardt and Agnon) who had a greater presence in his life than Benjamin, who visited him only twice, and who was living at the time in "elective affinities" (Scholem, *Walter Benjamin – Geschichte einer Freundschaft*, p. 120f.). ◀

68 *Briefe* I, no. 79, p. 209; Scholem explicitly praises her talent for languages: "She denied being married in the same Hebrew in which the marriage was supposedly consecrated" (ibid.). ◀

69 *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 125. Scholem originally saw another woman's affinity with Agnon. He encouraged Elsa Burchhardt to help "Agnon re-evaluate his view on Valeria's unsuitability (...) for marriage"; Valeria Grünwald could only profit from marrying Agnon, "who could be her teacher," and this marriage would give Agnon a better reputation, "and this with more incomparable certainty than ... Valeria ... who, after all, loves him" (*Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, 8 July 1919, p. 469). ◀

“Never again did I see him so open, so glowing and overflowing with genius as in those days.”<sup>70</sup> Scholem, who at the time was teaching reading courses on the *Midrash ha-ne'elam*, the Book of Daniel, and Agnon's stories at Franz Rosenzweig's Free House of Jewish Learning in Frankfurt, often came to Bad Homburg and joined Agnon and Bialik, the two most outstanding writers of this new, albeit short-lived, center of Jewish culture, on their walks.<sup>71</sup>

The reason for the turnabout in their friendship lay deeper. Perhaps it was the dissipation of the unusual “aura of solitude”<sup>72</sup> in which Agnon was shrouded until his marriage, and with which Scholem, judging from his diary entries, may have felt a very close affinity.<sup>73</sup> Agnon's self-stylization as a lonely wanderer singled out by God, without home, wife or children,<sup>74</sup> and remaining true to his calling, had a prophetic dimension, and the “spirit of loneliness”<sup>75</sup> was the price for being so chosen.

Scholem had moved to Munich after the Sukkot holiday in 1919 to complete there his degree in mathematics, philosophy and Semitic studies. This was the time when he translated with great zeal<sup>76</sup> some of Agnon's stories from manuscript,<sup>77</sup> and frequently took walks with him along the Isar and in

70 *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem, erweiterte Fassung*, p. 106. ◀

71 Cf. M. Brenner, *Jüdische Kultur in der Weimarer Republik*, p. 218. ◀

72 “Agnon in Germany: Recollections,” *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, p. 118. ◀

73 On Scholem's self-reflections and the “stylization of his own solitude” during this period, cf. D. Weidner, *Gershom Scholem: politisches, esoterisches und historiographisches Schreiben* (Munich, 2003), p. 85ff. ◀

74 Cf. the only extant poem by Agnon from this time, which Scholem preserved together with his translation: “Ich habe keinen Garten und habe kein Haus / Ich habe kein Weib und habe kein Kind. / ... Ich will wie ein Blinder irren zwischen den Menschen der Stadt. / Dann blüht in meinem Herzen das heilige Erbarmen; / man gibt den Weg ihm frei, den Gott geschlagen hat. / ... Mich weihte unter denen, die er geladen, Gott – / und wer bin ich, dass er mich nochmals weihte?,” p. 84f. (“I have no garden and have no house. / I have no wife and have no child. / ... I wish to roam, a blind man, among the city folk. / For then the holy mercy will blossom in my heart; / the path that God has made is opened up to it. / ... amongst the chosen ones, to me God gave his grace – / And who am I, that he again should grace me?”). ◀

75 G. Scholem, *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 93. ◀

76 He writes to Werner Kraft on 18 December 1920: “Yet I'd like most of all to spend 5 hours a day reading and translating Agnon” (Gershom Scholem, *Briefe an Werner Kraft*, ed. Werner Kraft [Frankfurt a.M., 1986], p. 128). ◀

77 “Die Geschichte von Rabbi Gadiel dem Kinde” (“The Story of Rabbi Gadiel, the Child”), *Der Jude* 5 (1920): 31-34; shortly thereafter, “Ma'ase Rabbi Gadi'el ha-tinoq” appeared in *Miqlat* 4 (1919-20): 406-409; for Agnon's seventieth birthday, Scholem wrote an essay on

the English Garden. One of these conversations remained fresh in Scholem's memory, and it was the discrepancy between this encounter and Agnon's way of life after his departure from Germany that lays bare the final reason for the break between these two disparate friends:

I was with Agnon in Munich, before his wedding. He lived at the time in the house of a pious Jew and went without a head covering, always without a head covering. And once, here in this land (Israel), when he criticized me for not covering my head when I went out, I said to him: But Agnon, you yourself walked almost daily with me through Munich and never had your head covered. To this he answered: Yes, but I owned a cap (*yarmulka*). Once, also in Munich, we went for a walk together and I told Agnon what I was doing at the moment. Those days I was studying the Gemara daily with a great Talmudist. So one day Agnon stopped me on the street and said: Schulem – he always called me Schulem and not Schalom or Scholem, he spoke (the name) with Galician pronunciation – Schulem, he said, I believe you want to become “*fromm*” [“pious”]. With just this expression: the word “*fromm*” can only poorly be translated [into Hebrew]. Back then he said to me: Schulem, I am afraid that you want to become “*fromm*.” Don't become “*fromm*” (*al ta'ase frum*)! That is what he said to me back then. In the land of Israel he never said it again, but I will never forget this conversation in which he warned me: Don't become “*fromm*.”<sup>78</sup>

The explanation Scholem gives for Agnon's inconsistent behavior leaves no doubt as to the distance with which he confronted Agnon's attitude to Torah observance in Israel: through his religious way of life, says Scholem, Agnon had preserved an authenticity which represented the prerequisite for his creative work, but which, outside the realm of his artistic identity, could only be regarded as “theater”; Agnon was a *shomer mitzvot* (a Jew observant of the laws), but not “Orthodox,” and, in Scholem's opinion, he paid the full price for subordinating the reality of his life to the fulfillment of the artistic

the kabbalistic sources from which Agnon drew the inspiration for this work, “meqorotav shel ma'ase Rabbi Gadi'el ha-tinoq be-sifrut ha-qabbala” in *Le-Agnon shay* (Jerusalem, 1959), pp. 289-305. Further translations: “Aufstieg und Abstieg” (“Rise and Fall”), *Der Jude* 8 (1924): 38-57; Scholem's revised translation based on Agnon's altered version appeared in Schocken Verlag: *In der Gemeinschaft der Frommen* (Berlin, 1933). ◀

78 The German translation of the interview in *Ariel* 52: 104f. paraphrases this passage. ◀

obligations of his medium, Torah observance: "Agnon was, if I may say so, an actor."<sup>79</sup> There would not have been any necessity for Agnon to play this role in Germany, since he was not part of any strict religious community. Agnon didn't seek contact with the communities existing in Germany; furthermore, he shared Scholem's critique of assimilation and those Zionists who were interested only in belonging to an order. In an enthusiastic letter to Erich Bauer of 14 December 1920, Scholem wrote: "In the sixth volume of the *Ha-Tequfa* a story by Agnon has appeared, the likes of which you cannot imagine: an invective against *Hatschi-Zionism*."<sup>80</sup> But even in their views on Zionism, Scholem and Agnon's paths diverged in Palestine. Shortly after his arrival in 1923 – he reached the harbor of Jaffa on Yom Kippur – Scholem had to bury his hope "that a new society in this land would bring forth a religious renewal" under his impressions of the contemporary events and political contradictions.<sup>81</sup> He founded, together with like-minded thinkers, the association *Brit Shalom* in 1925, which worked toward an understanding between Jews and Arabs with the goal of a binational solution to the conflict.<sup>82</sup> This group flew the flag of Achad Ha-am, which meant the prevalence of a humanist countenance for this vitally important Zionism, in contrast to a *realpolitik* built solely on military superiority. Even in the difficult situation of the Arab uprisings at the end of the 1920s, Scholem warned of the danger inherent in a revisionist subversion of Zionism should the realization of a Jewish state be implemented by force.<sup>83</sup> Quite the opposite response came from Agnon, who took a completely

79 *Ariel* 52: 105f. ◀

80 *Briefe* I, no. 80, p. 213. Scholem is referring to the story "Bi-n'arenu u-vi-zqenenu" (a citation from Ex. 10:9), *Ha-Tequfa* 6 (Tevet/Adar 5680/1920): 23-94, in which Agnon caricatures the provincialism and empty phrases of the the Galician Zionists. Scholem calls Zionists who lack the necessary conviction "Hatschi-Zionists"; cf. his letter to Grete Bauer in *Tagebücher*, 2. Halbband, p. 634, as well as his "95 Thesen über Judentum und Zionismus" in Gershom Scholem, *Zwischen den Disziplinen*, ed. P. Schäfer and G. Smith (Frankfurt a.M., 1995), p. 293: "69. Der Hatschizionist ist ein 'praktischer Idealist'" ("69. The *Hatschi-Zionist* is a 'practical idealist'"). ◀

81 *Von Berlin nach Jerusalem, erweiterte Fassung*, p. 188. Cf. *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, pp. 161ff. ◀

82 Among the members were Hugo Bergmann, Ernst Simon, Arthur Ruppin, and Martin Buber. Cf. A. Kedar, "Brith Shalom" in *The Jerusalem Quarterly* 18 (1981): 55-85 and G. Scholem, *Od davar*, ed. A. Shapira (Tel Aviv, 1989), pp. 61-92. ◀

83 "Ist die Verständigung mit den Arabern gescheitert?" ("Has communication with the Arabs failed?"), *Jüdische Rundschau* 33 (1928): 644. ◀



opposite stance. He caricatured the – to his mind naive – position of its members in his pseudo-Midrash on “And the wolf shall live with the lamb” (Isa. 11:6), and alluded to his own experience of the Arab revolt:

A lamb was there that had come to that herd toward the end of the unrest. He said to the lamb (that had spoken before): “Be glad, my friend, that you cannot speak the language of the wolf and did not go to the wolf to make peace with him. Had you gone to him, there would be nothing left of you, and we would have to do without your wisdom.”

That lamb then said to him: “I am ashamed of your words, my brother, that you mistrust him, for did not our Sages, revered in memory, observe (Yoma 19b), ‘he who mistrusts the truthful shall take injury to his body.’”

He replied: “I have already taken injury though I harbored no mistrust. Should God have thought that I mistrusted him from the beginning, I would now be sitting wrapped in my wool in my stall, and not here with you listening to your advice.” With that, the sheared sheep went forth from them and left them full of woe.<sup>84</sup>

Agnon’s house in Jerusalem’s Talpiot district was looted in the uprising, and his library destroyed. Having lost his extensive and valuable library, along with several of his own manuscripts, to fire in Bad Homburg on 6 June 1924, this new catastrophe must have recalled painful memories of that traumatic experience.<sup>85</sup> Not only did Agnon have no understanding whatsoever of peaceful reconciliation, he defended the legitimate (religious) claim to the land: “In any case, neither I nor (the people of) Israel have ceased to believe that the land of Israel belongs to us, and that all those who live here are only custodians, placed here by the most Holy, praise be unto Him, until He has Israel return to the land of Israel. ...”<sup>86</sup> The difference between Agnon’s and Scholem’s positions became even clearer after the Six-Day War: Agnon supported the annexation of the occupied territories, whereas Scholem was vehemently against it.<sup>87</sup>

In 1948, Scholem had already expressed disgust at the “grotesque

84 “Midrash Zuta,” *Moznayim* 2, no. 28 (14 November 1930), pp. 3-4, reprinted in *Me-atzmi el-atzmi* (Tel Aviv, 1976), pp. 409-412, here p. 412. ◀

85 Agnon also deals with this event in his stories; cf. J. Hessing, “Die Wiederkehr der Tragödie – Samuel Josef Agnon. Die europäischen Wurzeln eine hebräischen Epikers,” *Das Jüdische Echo* 45 (1996): 186-92. ◀

86 Letter to J.L. Magnes in November 1930, in *Me-atzmi el-atzmi*, p. 413. ◀

87 Cf. “Bitachon ve-shalom – ken, sipuach – lo,” *Ha-Aretz*, 15 December 1967. ◀

dimensions” that Agnon’s “extremely intricate Orthodox hypocrisy” had taken on, “especially since the war,” and reflected that he was “no longer [able] to really say ‘yes’ to the *person* Agnon ... [was] fifteen years ago.”<sup>88</sup> Scholem now found Agnon’s “speeches,” which had held such an “attraction” for him in Germany, to be “unbearable.”<sup>89</sup> In a newspaper article (*Ha-Aretz*, 13 August 1948) on Agnon’s sixtieth birthday, Scholem once again attested to the inimitable character that had set Agnon apart from other writers during the short-lived heyday of Hebrew literature in Germany:

Back then, there was – and in my opinion still is, in spite of all his changes – a unique tension, specific to him, that arose out of the distance to tradition, sometimes a very conspicuous distance. His “yes” and “no” were without that sentimentality and antagonistic tone prevalent in such great measure in the other Hebrew authors that we knew. (...) Only, he cannot decide between “yes” and “no.”<sup>90</sup>

Scholem compares Agnon with the protagonists of his stories, above all with the humbly naive Reb Judel Chasid from the novel *Hachnasat Kalla*.<sup>91</sup> In this context, one could perhaps also apply the Lurianic symbolism used by Agnon to Scholem’s characterization: one “who wanders lost in the world of Tohu.”<sup>92</sup> Scholem wrote that it is typical for Agnon to have dedicated his admiration to two contemporaries who could not have been more different: his erstwhile patron and fellow writer, the atheistic socialist Yosef Chayyim Brenner, and the first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rav Avraham Yitzchak Kook, whose *Chabad* Hasidism was far removed from Agnon’s perspective. It was the unconditional sincerity and openness of these two great personalities that Agnon, thanks to the “intuition of a consummate artist” and his “talent for appreciating human greatness,” could admire; and Scholem added: “May God grant that these qualities remain his for many years to come.”<sup>93</sup>

88 Diary entry from 22 June 1968, cited in Niewöhner, “Ich habe keinen Garten und habe kein Haus,” p. 86. ◀

89 Ibid. ◀

90 *Devarim be-go*, p. 464f. ◀

91 Ibid., p. 465; the first version of Agnon’s first novel appeared in *Miqlat 2* (1919/20): 75-85, 259-76, 401-406. ◀

92 “Agunot,” in *Elu ve-elu*, p. 415. ◀

93 *Devarim be-go*, p. 465. ◀

The dialectical relationship between distance and identification, the tension of which Agnon endured, had also undergone an interesting development in Scholem himself. It is an open secret that Scholem still tried, at the beginning of his research into the Kabbalah, to integrate this science into a religious worldview.<sup>94</sup> During the decades of his work, he certainly had an inner connection to the kabbalistic world, which admittedly did not influence his scientific access to the topic. Rather, he developed an “increasingly ironic distance to his subject.”<sup>95</sup> In a letter to Zalman Schocken from 1937 he admits that, as a Kabbalah researcher, he donned the “sheep’s clothing of the philologist.”<sup>96</sup> Only once, to keep with the image, did he show himself as wolf in public, and even then it was only at a “hidden” place:<sup>97</sup> on the occasion of Daniel Brody’s 75th birthday. Scholem had been asked to contribute something that he had never intended “to ever publish under ordinary circumstances.”<sup>98</sup> His contribution, “Zehn unhistorische Sätze über Kabbala” (“Ten Unhistorical Statements on the Kabbalah”), appeared in this 1958 festschrift.<sup>99</sup> But Scholem did not publicize this publication, distributed no review copies, and waited to see “which of the pack” of his “kabbalists” (that is, his students) would take notice of his rare, esoteric commentaries; this he wrote to Joseph Weiss, continuing to play on the image of the wolf in sheep’s clothing.<sup>100</sup> In a certain sense, Scholem imitated the dialectic that he perceived behind the process of kabbalistic tradition and its scientific examination: the truth lies somewhere between the suppressed and the written word. The “Ten Unhistorical Statements” were formulated much more cautiously than his letter to Schocken, which began under the heading “An open word about the

94 Cf. J. Dan, “Gershom Scholem, Mystiker oder Geschichtsschreiber des Mystischen,” in *Gershom Scholem zwischen den Disziplinen*, ed. P. Schäfer/G. Smith (Frankfurt a.M., 1995), pp. 32-69. ◀

95 P. Schäfer, “‘Die Philologie der Kabbala ist nur eine Projektion auf eine Fläche’: Gershom Scholem über die wahren Absichten seines Kabbalastudiums,” *JSQ* 5 (1998): 1-25, here p. 21. ◀

96 *Briefe* I, p. 471. ◀

97 Cf. letter to Th.W. Adorno from 8 December 1967: “... which [i.e. Ten Unhistorical Statements on the Kabbalah] I have admittedly hidden in an inaccessible place,” Gershom Scholem, *Briefe* II, 1948-1970, ed. Thomas Sparr (Munich, 1995), no. 125, p. 191. ◀

98 Letter from 31 March 1960 to Joseph Weiss, cited in Schäfer, “Die Philologie der Kabbala,” p. 23. ◀

99 In *Geist und Werk. Aus der Werkstatt der Autoren des Rhein-Verlages zum 75. Geburtstag von Dr. Daniel Brody* (Zürich, 1958), pp. 209-15; reprinted in G. Scholem, *Judaica* 3 (Frankfurt a.M., 1970), pp. 264-71. ◀

100 Letter to Joseph Weiss, in Schäfer, “Die Philologie der Kabbala,” p. 23. ◀

true intentions of my study of the Kabbalah.” Interestingly, Scholem wrote “the most important ... thoughts already in 1921, during the time of his studies in Munich.”<sup>101</sup> At the same time, he was planning “to write an article about the suicide of Judaism being carried out by the so-called Science of Judaism for Benjamin’s periodical *Angelus Novus*, a journal that never appeared.”<sup>102</sup> This reckoning with the “scholarly liquidators” didn’t appear until 1944, but with an intensity that reveals much of the passion that characterized Scholem’s struggle to find the proper way of dealing with Jewish tradition.<sup>103</sup> Much more innocuous in comparison are Agnon’s innocent statements on the books of Jewish-German scholars that he read in Germany – books not only have their fates, but also their place<sup>104</sup> – and from which he learned “that most of the things we have learned in the study of Judaism (*kibalnu be-chokhmat yisra’el*) are but the sawdust which fell under the saw of the great craftsmen, the Jewish scholars in Ashkenaz.”<sup>105</sup>

The change in Scholem’s attitude toward the scientific investigation of the Kabbalah clearly shows that he considered the path of historical-critical confrontation to be the only viable one, although he originally associated his work with an almost messianic claim:

The philology of the mystic disciplines must be of the exact timelessness that no drawing, no image have. This critical history is the illusion without which no insight into the essence is possible in an un-messianic time. In this history, the existence of the system – the fundamental mystical fact! – is called into question. Apparently, and in truth, it is precisely the multidimensional-substantial-spatial quality of the system that necessarily disappears with the projection onto the surface, the ironic paper of historiography, and in it transforms itself into the great illusion of linear development. Yet whosoever passes through and is capable of placing himself in the middle, in the utopian, infinitely-close point, from out of which the living source as simultaneous appearance speaks to us, from out of which tradition speaks to us, he is saved and

101 Schäfer. “Die Philologie der Kabbala,” p. 3. ◀

102 *From Berlin to Jerusalem*, p. 122. ◀

103 German translation in G. Scholem, *Judaica 6. Die Wissenschaft vom Judentum*, edited by P. Schäfer in collaboration with G. Necker and U. Hirschfelder (Frankfurt a.M., 1997). ◀

104 In Agnon’s words: “Yesh sefarim she-ha-maqom gorem liqrot bahem,” *Ad hena* (Tel Aviv, 1952), p. 93. ◀

105 *Ibid.* Agnon does not write “germania” here, which denotes Germany in the story. ◀

can save others. The “salvation” that Jews may expect is the infinite, virtual postponement in the countenance of things.<sup>106</sup>

As professor of Kabbalah studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, however, Scholem is still only waiting, as he formulated in his letter to Schocken in 1947, “to be properly addressed from out of the mountain” of revelation, so as not to suffer “death in professorship.”<sup>107</sup>

Access to tradition is possible for Scholem only through scientific distance, and he finally recognizes the dialectical relationship to his subject in the paradox of the Kabbalah itself: “The kabbalist claims that there is a tradition regarding the truth which is transmittable. An ironic claim, for the truth we are talking about is everything but transmittable.”<sup>108</sup> According to Scholem’s conception of himself as scientist, a “complete identification” with the subject of investigation was impossible; indeed it was “an error to strive to make a priest out of a scholar.”<sup>109</sup> He appears to have applied this in a certain way to the artist Agnon. As soon as Scholem got the impression that Agnon had pulled out of the relationship of tension between distance and identification, he became disappointed by Agnon’s prose, despite the fact that he had seen in it an astonishing similarity to the writings of Franz Kafka.<sup>110</sup> In two cases in particular, he noted a decline in quality: as Agnon, in reaction to the appalling numbers of European Jews being exterminated, fell into the tragic role of the hagiographer, Scholem pointed out: “We observe a frenzied endeavour to save for posterity the forms of a life doomed to extinction. It is a somewhat sad spectacle, for one notices the intention and becomes annoyed.”<sup>111</sup> The second case concerns the stories in which Agnon tried out the role of caricaturist. Scholem reacted particularly sensitively when critics saw a parody of himself in certain of the protagonists.<sup>112</sup> In spite of these reservations, in his essay “S.Y. Agnon – The Last Hebrew Classic?”

106 G. Scholem, “Betrachtungen über den Sinn und die Erscheinung der Kabbala” (1921), cited in Schäfer, “Die Philologie der Kabbala,” p. 5f. ◀

107 *Briefe* 1, p. 472. ◀

108 “Zehn unhistorische Sätze,” *Judaica* 3, p. 264. ◀

109 G. Scholem, “Identifizierung und Distanz. Ein Rückblick,” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 48 (1979): 463-67, here p. 466. ◀

110 Cf. Thomas Sparr, “Gershom Scholem und die moderne Literatur,” *The Germanic Review* 72 (1997): 42-56, esp. p. 47f. ◀

111 Scholem, “S.Y. Agnon – The Last Hebrew Classic?,” p. 115. ◀

112 Cf. *Ariel* 53: 63; and Sparr, “Gershom Scholem und die moderne Literatur,” p. 46. ◀

he tried to present a positive résumé and honored Agnon as a master of the “dialectics of simplicity.”<sup>113</sup>

It may seem to be a foregone conclusion to say that Scholem’s relationship with Agnon was also characterized by distance and identification, and that over the course of the years it was the former that outweighed the latter. But this was not just because Agnon had changed by upholding – in Scholem’s eyes – the illusion of a life within the bounds of tradition. Scholem, too, changed his perspective. In 1921, he still wanted to penetrate behind the unsublated dialectic of tradition that blocks access to the Kabbalah with the “courage to descend into an abyss that could unexpectedly end back here amongst ourselves.”<sup>114</sup> But before Scholem realized that this leap into the abyss was not possible for him, he recognized in Agnon the broad implications this condition of indecision carried with it. In the winter of 1925, in a poem he associated with Agnon,<sup>115</sup> he wrote:

Verworrenes Gesicht von der Fülle der Zeit  
Habe ich heimgebracht.  
Ich war zum Sprung auf den Grund bereit.  
Aber habe ich ihn gemacht?

[Perplexed face from the fullness of time  
I have brought back home.  
I was ready for the leap onto the ground  
But did I take it?]

Scholem, in fact, applied the poem to himself in the 1940s, added a fourth strophe and gave it the title “‘Vae Victis’ oder der Tod in der Professur” (“‘Vae Victis’ or Death in the Professorship”).<sup>116</sup> As an artist, Agnon’s approach to using the language of tradition had obviously found its equivalent in the relationship of the scientist to his subject. It is not surprising that, beyond all the changes in their life histories, no one was more successful than Agnon’s friend, translator and commentator Gershom Scholem, at “bringing the unarticulated implications of Agnon’s stories to an articulated, even dialectically tenable

113 Scholem, “S.Y. Agnon – The Last Hebrew Classic?,” p. 116. ◀

114 Cited in Schäfer, “Die Philologie der Kabbala,” p. 5. ◀

115 Ibid., p. 19f.; according to Schäfer, the poem was originally written as part of an afterword to the stories of an unnamed writer, most probably Agnon. ◀

116 Ibid. ◀

level.”<sup>117</sup> The “elective affinity”<sup>118</sup> with the world of the kabbalists attributed to Scholem undoubtedly also existed with Shmu’el Yosef Agnon.

117 *Briefe* II, p. 193; in his letter to George Lichtheim from 4 January 1968, Scholem refutes the suggestion that he had ever described Agnon as a “deep thinker.” ◀

118 Th.W. Adorno, “Gruß an Gershom Scholem zum 70. Geburtstag,” *NZZ* (2 December 1967), p. 20. ◀