

Passion Spins the Plot:  
Agnon's "Forevermore"

Naomi Sokoloff

*In tragic life, God wot,  
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot  
We are betrayed by what is false within.*

—George Meredith

Agnon's "Forevermore" ("Ad 'olam"), a short story riddled with ironies and contradictions, features as its protagonist a scholar who has single-mindedly devoted twenty years to researching the history of an ancient city, Gumlidata.<sup>1</sup> Having completed his work and finally found a publisher for his study, Adiel Amzeh suddenly discovers the existence of a previously unknown manuscript on his topic. Held in the possession of a nearby leper colony, this document beckons Amzeh, who yearns to clarify a puzzling detail about the final siege of the city. Renouncing his long-awaited opportunity for public recognition, the scholar repairs to the leper house and examines the manuscript. Reading and rereading with rapt fascination, Amzeh remains among the lepers forevermore.

1. The story appears in *Elu ve-elu* (1974 ed.), and in English translation by Joel Blocker and Robert Alter, in Alter (1975), pp. 227–249E. Page numbers followed by "E" in this chapter refer to that English version.

A noble quest for knowledge despite adverse circumstances, or a foolhardy loss of perspective? Both interpretations have been offered to account for Adiel Amzeh's actions. The claim for purity of vision, which draws its inspiration from a traditional mid-rashic image, relies in part on a perception of the Jews in their devotion to Torah as an isolated people, degraded in exile, and spurned among the nations. Many critics, indeed, have seen in this story an allegory built around the protagonist's name, which means "this people, an adornment to God." The letters *'ayin* and *gimmel*, which appear recurrently as initial letters of names, have been seen as dividing the characters into groups of good and evil figures. Also working for the positive interpretation of Amzeh's predicament, a number of explicit comments made by the narrator and the secondary characters lend credence to the idea of noble sacrifice. Wisdom herself, personified, whispers in Amzeh's ear, "Sit my love, sit and do not leave me." But then again, is this a figure of purity or an emblem of seduction luring the scholar to false values?

A number of compelling factors counteract the pro-Amzeh arguments. First, the book that Amzeh pursues is not holy scripture, but rather description of a highly repugnant, idolatrous society devoid of redeeming spiritual values or law. Further deflecting power away from the sympathetic reading is Amzeh's characterization, which more closely resembles caricature than hagiography and which shows him to be ludicrously obsessed by an *idée fixe*. Moreover, those letters so crucial to distinguishing good from bad are sometimes scrambled, like the virtuous and wicked qualities of the characters themselves. Finally there is no pat distinction and no simple allegory so much as there is a nagging sense of undecidability. Every noble sentiment thus is in some way eventually undercut.<sup>2</sup> My discussion in this chapter

2. Moked (1984), for example, argues the case for Amzeh's nobility of spirit, as does Tsemach (1968). In her article on "Forevermore" (1985b), Esther Fuchs argues that ironic and caricatural description of Adiel Amzeh emphasizes his

will focus on one aspect of the text, elements of plot, to support an ironic assessment of Adiel Amzeh. This approach to the protagonist lost in endless reading ultimately fosters a metanarrative reading that emphasizes the nature of texts, narrative impulses, and reading itself.

As Peter Brooks has pointed out in *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*, plot is the principle of interconnectedness that, by linking discrete incidents, episodes, and actions, helps confer coherence onto those narrative components of a text. Plot is often conceived of as the outline, or armature, of a story; it is not, however, a static organization but a structuring operation actuated by reading and elicited by meanings that develop temporally through sequence and succession. Brooks observes that the term "plot" in English enjoys a semantic range that can include the idea of order and also indicate the concept of shaping or formulating as a dynamic activity. Plot may mean:

1. a small piece of ground, a measured area of land
2. a ground plan, as for a building; a chart or diagram (hence also the verb "to plot"—for example, to plot a graph)
3. a secret plan to accomplish a hostile or illegal purpose
4. a series of events, the action in a narrative drama.

The first two definitions are based on an idea of boundedness, demarcation, of marking off and ordering. The third suggests plot as scheme or machination, and it may have something in

---

monomaniac fixation on his work. Tochner's essay on "Forevermore" in his collection *Pesher Agnon* (1968), attempts to decode each of the many names and characters in the story within an ideological framework and thus to explicate the story as a polemic against modern biblical scholarship and Hebrew literature. Alter (1975) argues persuasively that such approaches are misguided and that in fact "Forevermore" offers an antiallegory. The proliferation of *'ayin* and *gimmel* invites allegorical reading, but the deployment of this device is inconsistent, so the story remains enigmatic, not to be reduced to such interpretation.

common with the first two categories insofar as to adopt a stratagem is to set out or delineate a particular course of action. In any event the last kind of plot, the literary term, combines the possibilities implied here of design as both pattern and intention. Plotting as Brooks is concerned with it is what "makes a plot 'move forward,' and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative ... the promise of progress toward meaning."<sup>3</sup>

An overriding feature of the primary plot in "Forevermore" is digression, that is, the series of interruptions that prevent the central character from achieving his stated goal of publishing his research. Amzeh is waylaid first by Adah Eden, a nurse who collects magazines for the lepers. A visit from her delays his attending a decisive meeting with his financial benefactor, Gebhard Guldenenthal. Then he dallies to hear a story she recounts about how the Gumlidata manuscript arrived in the hands of the lepers. From there he goes to the leprosarium and, as he reads, his publishing hopes indefinitely deferred, the contents of the manuscript are recounted at length and thus deflect the reader's attention, along with Amzeh's, away from the entire story line about the protagonist's life. A large number of Agnon narratives feature comparable antiprogressive patterns. Repetition, circularity, episodic fragmentation of narrative line, and disconnected events prevail in texts as diverse as *The Bridal Canopy* and *The Book of Deeds*, and the thematic implications that accompany this formal feature vary in various texts.<sup>4</sup> In "Forevermore," this kind

3. Brooks (1984), p. xiii. See also pp. 5–6.

4. The disturbed causal-logical connections and the frustration of linear development in Agnon's fiction often undermine any sense that purpose or meaning in human life corresponds to the will of the individual. There is, however, considerable debate about how to interpret this phenomenon. Some critics have argued that it reflects the personalities of weak, indecisive characters; others claim it is symptomatic of upheavals in the modern world, which have shaken the foundations of faith; yet others think it hints at Agnon's own belief that God's will prevails and not human intentions. For a variety of views, see Kurzweil (1963), Band (1968), Shaked (1976), and Miron (1987).

of narrative design provides ironic plot.<sup>5</sup> The main character perceives the events of his life as a kind of progress, but the reader, by contrast, does not. The fiction therefore offers a regressive plot masquerading as progressive because the protagonist views it as such. In the poem "Modern Love," to which my title alludes, George Meredith wrote, "Passions spin the plot." Amzeh's passion for futile and directionless study here spins his plot into an antiplot, inverting the very concept of plot from the normal sense of forward-moving action to one of disruption and deflection. Early on in the story Agnon succinctly sums up the oddity of Amzeh's life in a sentence that anticipates the deviation of narrative line to come and calls attention to matters of plotting. Articulating the assumption that time progresses in linear fashion and that progress of events is expected to accompany this advancing motion, the text notes that such is not the case with Adiel Amzeh. "Yatsu shanim ve-sifro lo yatsa" (p. 316), it remarks—that is, years went by and his book didn't appear, but literally, years went out and his book didn't come out. The same verb, *y-ts-a*, to leave or go out, is used twice to emphasize the scholar's anomalous lack of progress.

In short, this plot structure creates a pattern of distractions and interruptions that lead finally to a misguided subordination of social ties to an abstract ideal. The central constellation of tensions set up in this way—between action and inaction, text and the context of its transmission—is brought out and adumbrated by other aspects of the plot. The stories within the story, which constitute two of the major distractions in the primary plot, raise questions related to those addressed by that same overarching plot and the narrative as a whole.

The first embedded narrative, concerning how the book on Gumlidata arrived in the lepers' hands, is presented as part of Adah Eden's conversation with Amzeh. In brief it goes like this:

5. My comments here draw on Esther Fuchs's discussion of ironic plot in *Omanut ha-hitamemut* (1985a).

When the Goths destroyed Gumlidata, they captured a nobleman who possessed a copy of the city chronicles. Shortly thereafter the captive contracted cholera and his captors abandoned him to die. Taken in by some itinerant lepers, the man was at first dismayed to find himself in their company. Later, however, he came to be grateful for the refuge they provided him. Joining their community, he recounted to them the glories of Gumlidata. After their deaths his book was acquired by succeeding generations of lepers, who passed it down through the ages. The function of this inserted narrative is clearly to provide a parallel to Amzeh's own experience. In a sense the events narrated anticipate his end: In each case a story survives, a book continues to exist—but at the cost of an individual's life, which is repressed and buried in the isolation of the leper colony. The immediate narrator, the nurse, attributes a positive value to her tale. "Men live and die," she concludes, "but their instruments remain and live on" (p. 242E). In this fashion she sets up an interpretation that might be applied also to Amzeh. In effect, however, her evaluation helps build toward the concluding irony of the story. Any comparison of her tale with the experience of the protagonist produces a false analogy: The count's life depended on the lepers, but Amzeh does not go to the leprosarium to save himself. Even had the detail he sought out been a crucial one with which to validate his entire research, it would not have demanded urgent attention and might have waited till the following day. The reader, then, must judge Amzeh by weighing his loss more than his gain.

The second frame story, the account of Gumlidata's siege, provides another parallel to the main plot, but this is even more pointedly an alternative to, than an echo of, Amzeh's fate. Here the Hun girl Eldag has been captured and held in Gumlidata, forced to serve as a concubine to the aging, repulsive Count Gifayon, Glaskinon Gitra'al of the house of Giara'al. She cannot abide the old man's "groaning and drooling" or "the nauseating smell of the city and its sacrificial altars" (p. 245E). Consequently she tries repeatedly to escape but fails. Eventually,

though, when she relinquishes her attempts to flee and grants the count exceptional sexual favors, she gains the trust of her captors. Due to their relaxed watchfulness, she even finds opportunity to roam about the city alone. One day she takes a wild donkey to a particular place where a small breach has opened in the city wall. She has clothed the animal with a bizarre garment made of calves' eyes, called an Izla, which happens in its shape to resemble the Valley of Cranes—the very place where the walls' foundations are weak. Sending the beast through the opening, Eldag surmises that her father will associate the animal with her. Originally she was lost when riding on a donkey, and he should realize, therefore, that this is a signal for him and his allies, the Goths, to commence their attack. Subsequently this does indeed happen; the invaders enter Gumlidata through the shaky fortifications, destroy the city, and save the girl.

Most significant about this account is that it is a story of captivity and an attempt to break out of enslavement. Unlike Adiel Amzeh, Eldag comes up with a workable plot, a scheme to save herself from slavery. As an instance of action and attainment, it stands in stark contrast to the distractions and digressions that cripple the scholar—a figure who is described as a "slave" to his work (p. 232E). This is also a segment of text that recovers various senses of plot mentioned earlier. The girl schemes as she takes the initiative to bring about a turn of events; her plot, moreover, is enacted at a particular portion of ground that is plotted out, as it were, on the Izla—the garment that functions as a kind of map for the Goths because it is shaped like the Valley of Cranes. These varied definitions of plot converge here to provide a counterpoint to Amzeh, who is not capable of carrying out a plan or breaking out of the narrow strictures of his life. He welcomes enclosed space; his universe is his house, and within that house, the book he has been writing constitutes his entire reality. At the end he trades this limited existence for the even narrower confines of the leper house, and he fails to reach out to a wider sphere of living by publishing his findings. (It should be noted that *le-hotsi la-or*—to publish—in the Hebrew means

literally to bring out to light, so this phrase contributes to the opposition between enclosure and openness that functions throughout the story as a central thematic element.)

The Eldag episode then serves fundamentally as an example of a well-conceived, forward-moving plot and as a stimulus for speculation on how Amzeh might better have lived his life. In the classical novel, the subplot often suggests a different solution to the problems worked through by the main plot; it may serve as a way of illustrating and warding off the danger of short circuit, of too easy a solution, and in this way assure that the main plot will continue through to the end.<sup>6</sup> Here, by contrast, in a profoundly ironic text, this secondary, subordinate plot shows what the character might have done right. It presents the short circuit of decisive action that would ward off disabling distractions.

As this episode helps put into relief tensions between digression and linear plot, distraction and decisive action, it also emphasizes the central issue, discussed previously, of communicative circuit. The Eldag tale concentrates on communication. The Hun girl escapes enslavement, not through action alone, but by getting a message to her people, and so breaking out of her isolation. Her ingenuity at creating signs capable of conveying an urgent missive (the iconic reproduction of the valley in the form of the Izla/map, the transformation of the donkey into a visual message), undermines the conclusion Adah Eden reaches that story takes primacy over the teller. On the contrary, the act of transmitting and reaching an audience proves to be indispensable. The very fact that the story within a story functions as a principal organizing structure of the overall plot is significant in its own right. The nature of a frame story is to provide a context that subsumes another and serves as a referential framework for it. Any move from inner to outer tales suggests a movement of reference from fiction to reality, or from the remote to the immediate, and it also puts into relief the act of storytelling as a contractual relationship between narrator and narratee.

6. On the function of subplots, see Brooks (1984), p. 104.

In "Forevermore," concern with the process of transmitting narrative takes on overt prominence because of the central thematic opposition set up from the start: public recognition versus the worth of scholarship, the text itself and its audience. Here, by telling a story within a story, Agnon calls attention to the notion that narration is a preeminently social act that confers currency on stories society accepts as negotiable instruments. In other words, people listen to narrative, fictional or factual, which they perceive as meaningful and worthy of recognition. To survive, a story must have a listener. The manuscript about Gumlidata was making no impact on the world except in a severely circumscribed milieu. When Adiel Amzeh comes along, he functions dramatically as the one who, by reading, makes this story come to the attention of the current reader. By the same token, Adah Eden's anecdote about the count reminds the reader of much the same thing—it brings knowledge of the manuscript out into circulation, wider by one, than it had before. Her frame story, moreover, does not lead so much to information about the siege as to another narrative frame: how the count told his tales to others and under what circumstances. He had trouble preserving the story and succeeded only at the cost of limiting his audience to the lepers. The doubling of frame story within a frame story can easily bring the reader not to Adah's conclusions—that the teller is less significant than the tale—but to a sense of regress. What remains invariable is the telling and the dependence of the tale on the teller.

Amzeh's essential problem is precisely that he fails at communication. This doesn't bother him, because he thinks he is engaged in something more worthwhile: the attainment of verifiable historical truth. He believes that the web of words in which he is tangled will lead him to fact and to decisive answers. However, his unquestioning faith in referentiality is misplaced. Ultimately the story about Gumlidata is of doubtful factuality. It is based on a book of chronicles, written to perpetuate a glorious, heroic version of events from the Gumlidatan point of view. Furthermore, both the narrator and Adah Eden say that ev-

eryone in the city died during the conquest, and this information puts into question the authority of the scribe or storyteller transmitting any account of those events.

The obtrusive use of *'ayin* and *gimmel* in the text as initial letters of multiple words complements this understanding of Amzeh's convictions as poor judgment and misguided faith in referentiality. The bizarre repetition of the letters has the pronounced effect of highlighting and reinforcing the artifice of the work as a whole. Heightening an emphasis on sound, the author calls attention to the words themselves that make up the text and disallows any perception of language as simply a medium to convey an extratextual reality. In this way Agnon deliberately imposes fictionality on all levels of the narrative and, significantly, on the chronicles of Gumlidata. Therefore, whereas Amzeh believes that his sources and research represent historical, empirical inquiry into facts about the phenomenal world, the reader realizes the all-encompassing textuality and antimimetic nature of his endeavor.

These issues come into play pointedly at a moment of crisis. When Adah Eden disrupts Amzeh's plans to meet with his patron, the scholar begins to stutter. That is, his words are broken off in the middle. Consequently her interpretation is met with yet another kind of breakdown that recapitulates in miniature the overall pattern of the plot: Once more, interruption is accompanied by emphasis on communicative failure. The stammering suggests Amzeh's surprise, of course, but it also suggests more. The new information introduced by the nurse, the revelation of new evidence about Gumlidata, serves as an indication that the scholar's work so far has not been firmly based in social fact or even well informed of all the pertinent existing evidence. Indeed, it is hinted, his book is itself a kind of empty language or stammering. Highlighting this impression Agnon plays on the root *g-m-g-m* (to stutter) as Amzeh's stutter draws attention to the same letters in *Gumlidata*. Similarly the narrative calls attention to the interplay of *'ayin* and *gimmel* at a moment when the root

*'-l-g* (to stammer) appears repeatedly.<sup>7</sup> This portion of the story also deals with translation and in so doing contributes to much the same conclusion. Based on conjecture and rearrangements of letters, not grounded in empirical proof, the scholar's theories prove to be largely a play of sounds, signifiers without established connection to signifieds. In short, his research has been exposed as an edifice of words, a verbal construct or fiction. However, instead of recognizing it as such—thanks to Nurse Eden's intervention—and reevaluating his entire enterprise, the protagonist dashes off to the leprosarium to acquire yet more information of dubious factuality. Lost in a world of endless learning, generating more and more readings and interpretations, Amzeh never escapes the circle of signs into historical fact. Intellectually he remains trapped in the prison house of language.

Making his predicament even worse, the communicative circuit he has neglected for the sake of this questionable pursuit of truth does not simply dissipate and disappear. The entire issue of communication reinscribes itself in the story at this point because the protagonist cannot operate in a social vacuum. Rather, he trades a healthy context for a more restrictive and devastating one. Amzeh, who fails to finish composing his version of *Gumlidata's* history because of constant revising, rereading, and re-considering, at the end is faced literally with decomposition; he is threatened with contamination by that manuscript, which has been handled by generations of lepers. Disintegrating, falling apart from handling by generations of lepers, this writing more closely resembles pus on skin than ink on paper. In a grotesquely graphic conception of the transmissibility of narrative, Agnon here presents text as contagion.

The ending to "Forevermore" must be understood then to

7. The Hebrew reads: "Nit'aleg 'alav leshono ve-hithil megangem ma ma ma, im im shamati yafeh gum gum gum li ... li didata" (p. 322, emphasis added here to indicate repeated configurations of letters). Later (p. 324) the narrative refers to "tsehok 'ilgim" and, in close proximity, the word "elgadata," calling attention to the pattern *'-l-g*.

deviate from expectations of narrative conclusion as outcome and closure. The outcome of events, of course, yields a failure to come out, and the result is also to undermine any sense of resolution. On the one hand, the character's fate seems like an emblem of closure par excellence. Enclosed in the leper house, Adiel Amzeh stays there forevermore, temporally and spatially sealed off from the demands of society that he shunned. The "ever after" of fairy tale and folklore, the convention of the perfect happy ending, remains the last word here. (The final sentence reads: "... he did not put his work aside and did not leave his place and remained there forevermore.") And yet this denouement does not represent a state of renewed equilibrium, a restoration of an original positive circumstance enriched by interim adventures, events, and obstacles overcome. Instead Agnon presents a built-in contradiction: a character who, in search of ennobling wisdom, lives a degraded existence, and who, finding an answer he sought with difficulty, has nonetheless missed out on essentials and been seduced by trivialities. In short the result here is an ongoing state of irresolution and finality without termination, a state that suggests an abdication of closure.

This conclusion is directed toward misreading by the narrator, who sees Adiel Amzeh's end as fortuitous. Learning, the narrator claims, "bestows a special blessing on those who are not put off easily" (p. 249E). This evaluation should not be taken at face value, though, not only because of Amzeh's straitened circumstances, but also because the narrative as a whole puts into relief the limitations of this narrator's vision and the artifice with which he imposes meaning onto events. His comments here, for example, draw attention to the fact that he has set up a particular design for the story from the start. As a result the text heightens attention once again to narrators, in conversation with an audience, as ones who design plot. "Forevermore" thereby detracts from the vision of story as something independent from the context of its own formulation. For example, this dynamic is evidenced most clearly by an aside the narrator makes, to the effect

that had Gebhard Guldenthal seen Adiel Amzeh at work, he might have observed the radiance of a man truly devoted to wisdom. These parenthetical remarks end as the narratorial voice says, "But you see my friend, for the sake of a little moralizing, I have gone and given away the ending at the very beginning of my story" (p. 234E). Only ostensibly has he given away the denouement—that is, that Amzeh will choose pursuit of knowledge over public recognition. In actuality, as has already been said, the ending turns out to be considerably more complex. The effect of the narrator's comment, then, is simply to point out that this figure has a particular meaning or moral in mind for his story (to wit: Wisdom is more precious than worldly success). The narrator makes evident his role as someone who shapes a text, who tries to tell a tale in order to convey a particular message and design.

The treatment of the ending is especially important because the moment of closure is a highly sensitive one in the structure of narrative. If plot grants meaning over time, endings enjoy special status as the legitimizing authority on which beginnings and middles depend for their retrospective meaning. Readers assume that the end of a story will confer understanding on what has come before, and they read in confidence that what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of what has already been read. For this reason it is possible to speak of the "anticipation of retrospection" as a chief tool in making sense of narrative.<sup>8</sup> In his consciously anticipatory comment, Agnon's narrator makes this dynamic explicit and lays bare the armature of his narrative. The author, Agnon, thereby also puts into relief the artifice of his own construction of narrative, while calling attention to the very issue of narration as a dominant concern in the text as a whole.

These remarks have taken us, then, from reading along with Adiel Amzeh in order to discover the "whodunit" of Gumldata's last days (that is, who laid the siege and where) to a

8. Brooks (1984), p. 23.

metanarrative reading that focuses on the nature of texts and narration. The first kind of reading—reading for the plot in a simplistic sense—is often assumed to be primary in fiction. To be sure, readers of fiction always read at least in part to do detective work, to construct a hypothetical *histoire* (that is, the narrated events) out of the available *discours* (the narration of events). This is the reason Todorov assigns privileged status to the detective story as a genre.<sup>9</sup>

In that genre the work of detection is overtly present for the reader, and it serves to reveal the as-yet-unrevealed story of a crime. The two orders of the text, inquest and crime, clearly illustrate the distinction between *discours* and *histoire*, and this kind of fictional pattern therefore lays bare the nature of all narrative. Agnon's "Forevermore," though, suggests that reading as detective work is not enough; it is necessary but not sufficient. As the story clearly delineates Amzeh's limitations in his strategies for finding knowledge (that is, in his own detective work), "Forevermore" as a whole provides an alternative model of texts and reading as a path to gaining wisdom. The reader is challenged to ask why the fiction is built the way it is and what it conveys thereby, rather than to give weight first and foremost to narrated events. If we read for the plot, that is, to find out what happened to Adiel Amzeh, we miss out on the strategies of deferring and digressing, the crucial structures that put into relief important facets of characterization here and that in themselves contribute fundamentally to a thematic focus on textuality.

The story in effect offers an allegory of reading. In a sense all fictional texts are about reading at some level, and many guide us toward the conditions of their own interpretation. This work by Agnon more directly than many other texts raises these questions, because it explicitly concerns a search for meaning, authority, closure, narratability, referentiality, and audience. As such it invites the reader to be aware that one should not take

9. Todorov (1977).

narrators naively at their word, that it is important to be aware of the fact of narration, of who tells what to whom and why.

These ideas move us beyond the formalism of describing narrative organization to the issue of narrative desire: desire as a central thematic focus and desire as impetus for narrating. The two phenomena converge in "Forevermore," for this is a narrative replete with multiple narrators, circumstances of narration, and motivations to narrate: there is the count who told his story of the siege to express his gratitude to the lepers, and the nurse who, though a comically bumbling, rambling narrator and a dilatory agent of digressive plot, tells her tales to highly effective, pragmatic ends (by distracting Adiel Amzeh she succeeds in getting him to turn aside from his appointment with Guldenhal and donate magazines, books, almost his entire library to the leprosarium); there is Amzeh who suffers a pathological inability to get his story out; finally there is the author, who tells his own tale via digressions, distractions, and multiple narrators, at once dramatizing Amzeh's distractability, identifying with his protagonist's vagaries, and warning against them. The essential question then arises: why this complexity, why the indirection, the subtleties, the obfuscation? Agnon's text turns on the fundamental irony that an author who creates a caveat against the unreliability of narrators and their hidden motives should create such a slippery narrative, deliberately teasing his readers into oversimple and mistaken interpretations.

Partly this art must be seen as the expression of a personality that needs distance from people, that seeks always to be sly, elusive.<sup>10</sup> Deceits and ironies, hallmarks of Agnon's fiction, in "Forevermore" dramatize and stylistically recreate the thematic em-

10. Aberbach (1984) outlines a psychological portrait of Agnon that would justify this view. His study, however, proposes to establish parallels between the psychological makeup of the author and of the characters in his works. I would argue that careful distinction should be made between author and character, so the story should not be viewed (as Hochman [1970], for example, does) in terms of a simple *ars poetica* that supposes identification between Amzeh and



phasis on unreliable narration. In part, also, we should note that the undecidabilities of the text force the reader, like all narrators, to write a story, making sense out of the available evidence. Leaving the reader with the burden of decoding baffling events, reconstituting them in an interpretation, the text in this way generates a reenactment of tensions that are its own essential concern. The resulting story, the reader's story, must always be formulated with some uneasiness.

Lest my own reading of this text seem too pat or pretend to account for all the puzzling elements of "Forevermore," let me take note of yet another odd, disquieting irony. Perhaps the greatest undecidability of all, a condensation of previous tensions between in and out, text and world, occurs at the end of the text at the important moment of possible closure. Amzeh, locked away in the leprosarium, finds that other scholars have begun to publish his ideas and hypotheses. Though his book never reached the hands of the living, since no material objects are allowed to leave the leper house, somehow the information has leaked out. The narrator explains the phenomenon this way: "When a true scholar discovers a thing that is right, even if he himself is isolated and hidden away in the innermost chambers of his house, something of what he had found reaches the world" (p. 249E). This explanation again insists that transcendent truth is a supreme value that works its way out to society. Another reading is also possible. It could be that the ideas that occurred to Amzeh were not so special and occurred to others as well. In that case his life has been a waste, his sacrifice unnecessary. It may be, too, that the manuscript he pursued was not truly indispensable for his work. Given all the evidence up to this point, I am inclined toward the ironic reading of Adiel Amzeh, but I do not

---

Agnon. A more promising avenue of inquiry would be, in Brooks's formulation, to follow the "superimposition of [a] model of the functioning of the psychic apparatus on the functioning of the text" (Brooks [1984], p. 112)—in other words, to investigate both the nature of composition in a narrative and the motivation for the telling of a tale.

discount the possibility that at this point the text may begin to deconstruct itself. The impasses of meaning here threaten to dismantle the binary oppositions of transcendent truth/contextualized discourse that have guided my discussion till now. Perhaps the final details of the fiction collapse the categories of understanding fundamental to an ironic reading of the scholar's sacrifice.

By way of conclusion I would like to suggest as well that this text, in its production of complex and intricate plot, which to a large extent concerns plotting, is revelatory of Agnon, the author himself, as a shaper of narratives. Agnon is a writer known for his many tales—some personal and some collective or religious—that attempt to recover a lost world. Many exhibit nostalgia for a more traditional time or for childhood and a religious milieu that have disappeared. In this regard, to some degree, the author resembles his protagonist. By no means a ridiculously simplistic, laughably monomaniac Amzeh, Agnon is nonetheless a writer whose work throughout is marked by its preoccupation and fascination with the past. In "Forevermore" that whole kind of enterprise is reconsidered. Self-conscious about the issues at stake—the pitfalls attendant on a passion to recuperate the past in writing—the author both reveals and conceals himself at once, simultaneously exposing a dream and protecting it, announcing his cynicism and masking it with pieties.

Presenting the ludicrous scholar to provide comment on the function and possibilities of writing as a means to restore lost worlds, "Forevermore" therefore also offers a perspective on Agnon's brand of artistry, whose point of departure is the lack of sacred texts in modern life. This is an art that Agnon saw as an outgrowth of, but an inadequate substitution for, religion. Imaginative tales cannot pretend to replace sacred writing, but the telling of them becomes significant in an effort to maintain textual tradition, to draw on the sources, and to keep a genuinely Jewish Hebraic influence alive. Not a return to the past, such writing does justify the artist as a shaper of community. So, although the allusive reference to Ecclesiastes, "for whom do I

work?" (p. 242E),<sup>11</sup> echoes with futility for Adiel Amzeh at the end of his story, for Agnon himself the question can be answered somewhat more positively, perhaps with doubt but without the same profound sense of grief. The author's complex relationship to his narration and plot construction in "Forevermore" clues the reader in to these issues, and this consideration of plot may serve as a point of departure to recuperate and reintegrate some of those major aspects of the text mentioned at the outset of this chapter but not specifically dealt with here: the uses of allusion, the confusion of sacred and profane in the imagery of the story, the deliberate but inconsistent invitation to allegorical reading, which fosters puzzlement about what kind of hermeneutics to pursue in explicating the text. The metanarrative reading is not incompatible, for instance, with an understanding of "Forevermore" as a satiric look at modern scholarship or secular fiction. Agnon may be expressing his reservations about both those endeavors as they grasp at excavatory knowledge—archaeological or historical—rather than seeking out the sanctity and spirituality imbued in tradition.<sup>12</sup> Viewing this story from the angle of plot is also not incompatible with an understanding that the text expresses a frustrated search for meaning. While Amzeh ascertains trivial answers to ease trivial dilemmas, his bigger problems go unsolved, and the perplexing uncertainties of the text as a whole defy easy answers. Because of the disallowing of simple allegory the narrative functions here—much in the mode of many Kafka narratives—as *aggada* without *halakha*, lore in search of law.<sup>13</sup> All of these considerations, as they emerge out of careful examination of plot in "Forevermore," may help illuminate Agnon's contradictory relation, as a modern writer, to tradition.

11. "lemi ani 'amel?" p. 334.

12. The shortcomings of scholars and writers is a persistent theme in Agnon's fiction.

13. This is Walter Benjamin's formulation of Kafka's aesthetic. For discussion see Alter (1977), pp. 60–61.

### 3

## Negotiating Jewish History: The Author, His Code, and His Reader

Arnold J. Band

"I tell you, 'Rabbi Binyomin,' that Mendele's style is not the last word in Hebrew fiction."

In a retrospective article written in 1933, the addressee of this statement, "Rabbi Binyomin,"<sup>1</sup> recalls his meetings with Agnon in Jaffa in 1908–1911, when both were young, aspiring writers. In one memorable scene, the two are walking along the Mediterranean shore when Agnon protests that Mendele's style, for all its monumental stature, does not lend itself to the description of nuanced psychological states and, as such, is not "the last word in Hebrew fiction."<sup>2</sup> The implication, of course, is that he (Agnon) will do better. Radler-Feldman, recording this event after Agnon had published the four volumes of the first edition of his collected works in 1931, implies that Agnon had indeed succeeded in forging a new prose idiom in Hebrew, something

1. The Hebrew author Yehoshua Radler-Feldman.

2. Yehoshua Radler-Feldman, *Mishpehot soferim: partzufim* (Tel Aviv, 1960), p. 280.