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Rendering Galicia for America: On Hillel Halkin's Translation of *Sippur pashut*

THE OPENING LINES of the 27th chapter of *A Simple Story* (*Sippur pashut*) find the novel's hero Hirshl Hurvitz in the midst of an emotional collapse. His "wrong marriage" is the prism for all of the instances in which he does not fit: his sensibilities make him dissatisfied with the family business and he is dimly aware that a psychological curse hangs over his family history. This novel of Galician life in the early part of the twentieth century is the story of a shopkeeper's son coming into manhood in the shadow of the family store and under the sign of forces that both imprison him and impel him toward a sort of redemption. It is one of the most important novels written in Hebrew, and a work which has long been ripe for translation.[1] Yet it is a work beset by traps for the translator, who must choose among radically different modes of representation that exist in the original but which cannot be entirely actualized in translation.

While Hillel Halkin's successful rendering of *A Simple Story* provides innumerable pleasures for non-Hebrew readers, it may in the end prove even more important for those who read both English and Hebrew, who now have an opportunity to examine components of the novel highlighted by the translation. At the end of chapter 26, for example, Hirshl is praying in the town's Beit Midrash and ruminating about the illness of his uncle and the place that illness may have in his own life. While two worshippers in the background discuss the halachah of poultry slaughter, Hirshl contemplates what it would be

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like to behave like a rooster. Only the reader is aware of the significance of this correspondence, just as only the reader realizes the significance of Hirshl's meeting the town matchmaker (whose name means "pigeon") on the way to morning prayers, and only the reader knows that Bertha Tziemlich has just compared her son-in-law to a sparrow. The dramatic irony of these coincidences is heightened by the fact that Hirshl's life is described throughout in ornithological terms. In the middle of this immediate environment of fowls and Jewish law, of poultry and egg merchandising, and within the larger context of bird imagery applied to many other characters, chapter 27 begins: "*Kal kenotsah yatsah Hirshl mibet hamidrash.*" The line is translated with what at first seems to be an irresistible equivalent: "Hirshl left the study house feeling light as a feather." Halkin's rendering does not, however, so much seem compelled by its irresistible equivalent, as by a conscientious and informed decision to moderate some of the allusive figural quality of the novel in favor of story line and setting. "Feeling light as a feather" is a much stronger bridge to the speed with which Hirshl enters the forest and suggests an improved mood, whereas "leaving light as a feather" (the more literal rendering) connects the passage to the previous chapter and its discussion about birds.[2]

If *A Simple Story* needs more than one kind of reading, and I believe it does, one of the issues to consider in those readings is the relative strength of the story as narrative, as against its parabolic power, and its implicit theme of the importance of parables. Clearly this is a novel in which there is more than meets the eye, and in which the idea that there is more than meets the eye is one of the points of the story itself. But no translation can support every reading of a novel, and Halkin has chosen to emphasize the narrative mode of *A Simple Story*, while deemphasizing modestly the metaphoric, allusive and analogical elements in it. A consequence of this de-emphasis is the reduction of the narrator's voice as parable maker and the backgrounding of the Hebrew novel's persistent discussions about the making of parables. The comparisons are still in the novel (as we shall see below), but the narrator's claims on the reader's attention are softened.

Another possible rendering of "*kal kenotsah*" would have been an apparently innocent variation, and would have enabled Halkin to be more explicit about Hirshl's feathery quality and his total connection to birds: "and, indeed, Hirshl left the house of study light as a feather" (suggesting: "like one of those feathery creatures"). "*Kal kenotsah*" means light as a feather, and its broader sense in this novel suggests that Hirshl is like a bird. He is compared to sparrows, roosters, eggs, ceramic geese on dinner tables, and scratching chickens which populate the novel. The availability of an English idiom ("feeling light as a feather")

already forces a loss of some of that tone, but it strengthens the narrative tone and the colloquial social texture of the novel.

A Simple Story is a large tale of human destiny with nuances of national meaning and theological import. Its narrator makes frequent comments on the nature of the cosmos and the human psyche, and he tries to balance the novel's transcendent themes with the simple Galician tale it pretends to be. Two of its signal phrases have to do with God's knowing what motivates the character, and God's bringing events about or trading one event for another. The phrases sound rural and almost folksy in English, whereas in Hebrew they carry more "philosophical weight" and introduce questions about omniscience in narrators and the creation of story by God and by author. The quality in English suits the novel in its status as a novel of manners in which the psychological story of a young boy is played out against the backdrop of a rich and changing social structure. Its status as a large symbolic tale, in which God's knowledge plays a more direct part in the novel, suits its frequent metaphors and comparisons, and the theological layering implied by God's knowledge and activity.[3]

In this and in other instances, Halkin's translation of *A Simple Story* foregrounds aspects of the novel which confirm it as a "roman bourgeois." He thus places in the background some of the metaphysical and transcendent tones that so enrich the novel in Hebrew and which call attention to its "dual" quality, the symbolic layer above the plain social narrative. His command of the strengths and limitations of American English emphasizes the power of English to capture detail and convey social texture. English, of course, lacks biblical and rabbinic associations, so the indirect meanings which unfold from the sly talmudic quotations less frequently embellish the manifest themes. Previous translators of Agnon, like Misha Louvish or I. M. Lask, have actually tried to find equivalent rhetorical tones between the English and the Hebrew.[4] But tone is not enough, and approximation of tone succeeds less in bringing us to rabbinic and biblical idiom than to some kind of long forgotten English style which risks sounding parodic. (Below I shall address the question as to whether the broad spiritual canvas of the novel is translatable at all, and at that point I shall say something about the possibility of glossaries in Agnon's fiction.) At the least we can say that some of the metaphoric pitch of the novel has been changed by its very rendering into English, no matter what the translator does. *A Simple Story* remains strong in English in spite of the moderation of its figural and allusive drive, although the inevitable figural nature of all language and Halkin's Jewish sensibilities combine to salvage much of it anyway. The change of pitch actually leaves room for other powerful features of the novel.

Let us return to the opening of chapter 27. Hirshl's emotional collapse begins in the study house where he has gone for morning services. He seems at first to be feeling better about his fate and ready to accept his marriage to Mina instead of following his ideal love for the "ideal" Blume Nacht. But he becomes enmeshed in ironic and ominous byplay with Mina who is indulging in a difficult pregnancy. Part of this verbal joust includes the suggestion that they kill the family rooster, whose crowing has kept Hirshl awake all night. Later during the service Hirshl mutters to himself: "I suppose that a rooster barking like a dog would be as crazy as me crowing like a rooster. It's a good thing I'm screaming like a man, then, and not going 'cock a doodle do.'"

This passage and others recall folk legends of roosters and related talmudic material, which may evoke one set of associations for the reader steeped in sources.[5] For Halkin's audience, the translation captures something equally important for the plot line. The line which opens chapter 27, ("Hirshl left the study house feeling light as a feather") is both a modest echo of Hirshl's thoughts about roosters and crowing and a more vigorous association with the narrative of the novel which is about to resume and take a new turn. While the symbolic layers of the story bring the reader into a larger chain of associations around fowl and their meaning in that society, the action refers forward to the next stage of the story's action: "He could have reached the forest with three steps" (this because he was "feeling" light as a feather).

The key to understanding this forward or metonymic choice may be Halkin's decision about how best to render the final line of chapter 26: "*Ashrei she'ani tso'ek keven adam ve'eini qorei kegever*" ("How happy I am that I cry like a man and not like a rooster"). "Cock a doodle do"—which Halkin offers—suspends some of the phallic suggestion, but more importantly it, too, softens Hirshl's connection with birds, and focuses on the narrative fact of his insanity.

Hirshl is heavy-hearted by the end of chapter 26, anticipating sounds he will make, but he is light as a feather when he leaves the synagogue. This change is only possible because being light as a feather means more than that his thoughts are now less weighty. The connection with feathery creatures obviously helps Hirshl think about his own attitudes as a *gever* (man/cock), and thus he kneads himself in the Beit Midrash (chapter 26) to check in on his masculinity. By chapter 27 the story is not as dependent upon the connection with the word *gever*, and it cannot be; and in the English rendering that concern is replaced by other elements.

Thus, here Halkin has sacrificed one feature of the novel in favor of more concrete reference and more narrative strength, for that is what

this novel needs when it is translated into English. Even the spelling of Blume with a Yiddish ending, rather than the Hebrew "Blumah," heightens social setting, since the Yiddish suggests the fertile flower while the Hebrew suggests the more classic and symbolic "withheld woman."

A good example of the difference between the English translation and the original novel's resonances occurs in chapter 15 when Hirshl goes to the synagogue to be called to the Torah before his marriage. Here an older man who regularly relinquishes his customary seat to the bridegroom of the week refuses to do so because Hirshl "doesn't look like a bridegroom to me" (*"eini ro'eh bo tsurat ḥatan"*). This ominous comment adumbrates the reality that Hirshl is not, in fact, fit to be a bridegroom; both the Hebrew and English versions, however, offer the simpler explanation that Hirshl is not wearing a shtreimel. In this explanation, there is a nice jab at the bourgeois outfitting that took place at the beginning of the chapter, with tailors and their trousseaus. But this social comment is less important in the Hebrew text because the complete passage involves at least one and probably several other "metalevels" to the story, mixing allusions from the Babylonian tractates of Shabbat and Pesahim. The passage begins: "'The wedding contract without discord has yet to be written,' said the ancient rabbis. In the case of the Hurvitzes and the Ziemlichs this adage was refuted, yet the discord broke out somewhere else. In the little synagogue there was a seat of honor in the eastern most corner, facing Jerusalem, that was customarily reserved for bridegrooms. This seat was not synagogue property but belonged to a certain old man who was generally happy to yield it." When the old man makes his comment about Hirshl's lack of fitness, a Jew nearby saves the day. "Why you yourself know that it is written that a bridegroom should be treated like a king. Does anyone tell a king what to wear?" The exchange is concluded by Boruch Meir's gift of a new ark in compensation for Hirshl's improper dress. This commercial exchange emphasizes the novel's ironic notion that the face of marriage can be changed by proper exchange of goods.

At this point in the novel (and retained in the translation), two quoted aphorisms introduce a rich web of associations.[6] The first is from Shabbat 130a: "The wedding contract without discord has yet to be written." Innocent readers of our time might regard this as a sardonic comment about what it is like to put on a wedding; but more important for the reader schooled in sources are the two additional associations it suggests. The curse of strife which the Gemara threatens comes from Israel's putative resistance to following the laws of forbidden family relations (without which Hirshl might have been able to marry Blume); and the very notion of a curse passed down through

generations echoes Hirshl's attachment to the curse put upon his ancestor and his uncle, which sometimes seems to be the source of Hirshl's emotional difficulties. Reading further in the passage, one encounters yet another instance of Agnon's skillful sense of context, for the Gemara also deals with laws of poultry, and thus ties this chapter to the whole bird-theme and halachic level of the story.

This kind of scholarly look at the novel naturally enriches its texture, but cannot easily be conveyed to the English reader—nor, for that matter, to the contemporary Hebrew reader. Many of Agnon's novels and stories are la'en with this potential, and the units which are obvious can carry into the English as well as into Hebrew. But while most of the associations work on the semantic level, they have to fall short on the textual and tonal levels, as is the case with the second quotation from Pesahim 110b: *"melekh poretz geder, ve'en memaḥim beyado"* (lit. "a king breaks rules, and there's no holding him back"). The meaning carries nicely into English through Halkin's rendering: "Does anyone tell a king what to wear?" But the English meaning is now more related to action, and loses the sly hints of the narrator which tap another layer in the Gemara: the passage suggests that kings are likely to behave wantonly, and there is simply no controlling them by regular social norms. (This is Hirshl's fantasy and part of his madness.) That much history and that much moral association cannot be captured in an English rendering, and here too, Halkin has chosen wisely not to push too far. The effect on *A Simple Story,* as these methods accumulate, is, as I suggest in other instances, to demythologize the novel and present a stronger story and plot instead of trying to invest all layers with equal power. Even the narrator's function is less powerful in English, as English does not suit the oracular mode.

Halkin's work enhances the physical descriptions of the novel by giving more attention to colloquial forms, along with the inevitable diminution of classical resonance which would accompany any modern reading. Thus we find the presence of contraction: "Do you think that's the reason I don't eat mushrooms in summer?" "I'm sure he'll have pity and take you in." "You'll be shown where he lives right away." In a novel of manners, such contractions can be associated with one of the important descriptions in the novel. The times in Szybusz were changing, so one might well look for signs of that change in the speech patterns of the characters. If young people go around with singers, and if the commercial traveller is more sophisticated, if there is now a Zionist club and a Socialist club, and if maids are high-hatting their mistresses, then we can assume that something like contractions and casual speech are used. These speech forms are used by people from every social class, itself an indication that the times were changing. I found the contractions wooden at first—what after all, is the Hebrew

equivalent of a Galician-Yiddish contraction?—but they made me conscious of conversation and forced me to think of Agnon's own resistance to conversational Hebrew.[7]

For the most part, the English rendering captures some verisimilitude in dialogue which is usually absent from Agnon's conversations. Some have even argued that Agnon's resistance to modernity is conveyed in archaic sounds of the interaction between characters; Halkin's English conversations are quite lively, as one can see in his translation of some sexual intimacies and especially a marvelous episode in which Tsirl and Baruch Meir, Hirshl's parents, have decided that he ought to marry the proper Mina Tziemlich. The stereotyped gender roles are played by mother and father as they discuss how to bring about the match. Halkin's treatment of this conspiratorial meeting between husband and wife demonstrates a consciousness of certain strategies which might be said to enliven the language, but, at the same time, to lose some of the archaism of the original (chapter 7, middle). Pauses in conversation, word associations, and the cancellation of some inversions, enliven the dialogue:

"We'd better see what Toyber thinks about it."

"I wouldn't dream of depriving Toyber of livelihood," said Tsirl, "but I wanted to hear what you thought first."

"Ziemlich," said Boruch Meir, "has money. That's undeniable." "And Mina?" asked Tsirl.

"Mina," said Boruch Meir, "is a lovely girl. That is undeniable too. It's just . . ."

"Just what?" asked Tsirl.

"Just that in matters like these," said Boruch Meir, "you don't really need me. I believe you're a better judge of them than I am."

"We're in perfect agreement, Boruch Meir," said Tsirl.

"So what now?" asked Boruch Meir.

"Now," said Tsirl, "the time has come to talk to Toyber.

"We're in perfect agreement, Tsirl," said Boruch Meir.

"A person should always seek advice," said Tsirl. "No one should make important decisions all by himself. One person will tell you this, another will tell you that, and little by little things sort themselves out. But just so you don't think I've been up to anything behind your back I had better tell you that I've already spoken to Toyber."

"And what did he say?" asked Boruch Meir.

"As if you didn't know Toyber."

"I'd still like to know what he said."

"He didn't say anything. He left the store."

Boruch Meir rubbed his hands contentedly and said, "Toyber just stood there and said nothing?"

"And left the store."

"Where did he go?"

"I personally," said Tsirl, "did not follow him. But I hear that he was in Malikrowik."

"And what did he do there—say some more nothing?" asked Boruch Meir.

"That," said Tsirl, "is something we can ask him when he comes for his matchmaker's fee."

"Oh, we most certainly shall," said Boruch Meir, rubbing his hands together.

Halkin's careful ear gives us "We're in perfect agreement," instead of "My opinion is the same as yours"; and the connection between sentences through the conjunction "now" ("So what now?" asked Boruch Meir. "Now," said Tsirl, "the time has come"); and the modern rhetorical sounds of: "Toyber just stood there and said nothing?" His repetitions are masterful.

One final comment on the narrator is appropriate here.

Agnon's literary style in his dialogues often puzzles readers. Is his narrator intentionally speaking in the same voice as the characters? Or is there a larger message about speech when he uses such techniques as indirect interior monologue? Halkin's English rendering presents one of the best opportunities for pondering this question, since the indirect interior monologues are more clearly delineated in the English. (See pp. 19 and 20 for a good example of the technique in the development of the personality of Blume's mother, Mirel; and the various instances of Hirshl's breakdown for the effect of the English in describing Hirshl's thinking process.)

Halkin's sense of setting is no less acute. It seems to have forced an occasional addition to the text: "Blume boarded the wagon and left for Syzbusz. When she reached her cousin's house she sat down on a chair *in the entrance hall* with her belongings beside her." (In a translation closer to the Hebrew, the text would read: "Blume boarded the wagon and journeyed to Syzbusz. She arrived at her relatives' house, entered, put her things in a chair, and sat down next to them." In any event no entrance hall appears in the Hebrew version.) Similarly, Halkin has Blume's cousin Tsirl "come upstairs" from the store, where the Hebrew novel does not mention "upstairs." (Both of these passages are in the first chapter of the novel, where setting is established.) With this addition, Halkin has underscored an important fact of the novel's setting; since—in fact—the family home is upstairs from the store. We know the store is downstairs geographically, and the lives of the Hurvitz family are entirely supported by the store. The addition of the detail not only adds a sense of place to the story but might be said to

emphasize something the hasty reader would miss: the physical location is symbolic of the store's status as support. Every day Boruch Meir and Tsirl Hurvitz go downstairs to work and then they return upstairs at end of day. The ambit in which they travel is narrow indeed, a fact noted explicitly by the narrator on several occasions and with specific reference both to store and apartment. But only Halkin has Tsirl come upstairs at this point, and he thus compensates for the inability of English to support the narrator's declarations about the narrowness of the Hurvitz's lives. The narrator, as noted, is a stronger figure in the Hebrew original.

This "strategy of locus" is maintained throughout the translated edition. It is correct enough in its own right, and it supports the aspect of *A Simple Story* which is "roman bourgeois," while not in itself diminishing the metaphysical impulses of the story. In other words, the intensification of place, of colloquialisms and of concrete action is not always carried out at the expense of the resonances of tradition and myth that variously hover in the background of the novel or dominate the foreground action. Where possible, for example, rabbinic citations are still introduced through such phrases as "the ancient rabbis said." In addition, much of that layer of the story is part of the narrative and functions more metonymically than metaphorically (or as static symbols). In spite of Halkin's emphasizing the naturalistic transition between chapters 26 and 27, the rabbinic references are not totally lost: Hirshl still crows like a rooster, and his standing on one leg still evokes a legend in Berakhot 7a of the cock standing on one foot. (Whether "*Oleh'al regel*" can retain its playfulness even in the Hebrew is debatable, after all.) Tsirl's and Baruch Meir's hope that a life of rabbinic study will atone for a family misdemeanor remains part of the narrative. Many of Agnon's mythic motifs are an intrinsic part of the story itself—beyond the allusions and associations, and where this is the case, Halkin has retained much of their strength. In one instance where the oracular voice of the narrator is too good to sacrifice, Halkin places the voice in parentheses: "(This remark may seem to demand an explanation, perhaps even an illustration. The problem is, though, that any illustration will just lead us back to Hirshl and Blume.)" This effort, ingenious as it is, misses the sense of the Hebrew that "there is no *mashal* for Hirshl and Blume because they are the perfect *mashal*" (end of ch. 5; and see the beginning of chapter 13 for another instance where *mashal*-making occupies the narrator's attention). Halkin sometimes maintains a part of the punning from the Hebrew:

"*Yoda'at Tsirl lehitnaheg im habriot. Ḥanutah ḥonenet da'at, milekuḥoteha lokaḥat lekaḥ.*" (p. 60)

"Indeed, Tsirl knew how to get along with people. She ran a ship shape shop, knew the customs of each customer." (p. 8)

But some of the resonance must be sacrificed: Blume Nacht's mother has to give "her soul back to its master" when she dies, since no approximation in English would get hold of Agnon's simple "*heḥzirah nishmatah leba'al haneshamot.*" Classical Hebrew language and especially biblical narrative and liturgy encourage that kind of repetition, so what is apposite in Hebrew cannot be so in English.

Halkin properly avoids trite approximations. Indeed, even his description of Tsirl's behavior with customers might be obtrusive if it were not buried in the middle of the paragraph. Here the discerning reader gets a hint of the dexterity of Agnon's language through the occasional approximation, which tells just enough about the narrator's personality. It is also possible to see this as a translator's private jest, an assigning to himself of a tour de force as did Baruch Hochman in "Agunot" with his English rendering that "feasts become fasts."[8] Does this little effort give the translator a private chuckle, a moment of intimacy with those readers who will know the Hebrew and the English and who will become part of a temporary conspiracy? Other even more graceful touches are sacrificed entirely, as they would have to be. For example, the first chapter records the death of Blume's mother. Her neighbors assure her that Boruch Meir will take care of her. "*Lo yikhbosh raḥamav,*" they say, thus echoing literally what her mother Mirl says on her deathbed: "*Muvtaḥani bo shelo yikhbosh raḥamav*" ("I am sure that he will take care of you"). "That's just what my mother said," responds Blume to the neighbors, in the Hebrew and English versions. But since it is precisely what Mirl said in Hebrew, and not in English, only the Hebrew reader shares in the intimacy. Or, more correctly, only the reader who knows both languages can appreciate the precise intrusion of the author Agnon. Halkin discretely avoids the temptations of such a play, preferring instead: "I'm sure he'll have pity and take you in." The narrator's personality is dropped here, and some sense of the author's dexterity is as well.

Although in general the translation sacrifices some of the analogical mode where similes and other figures abound, the analogical mode is retained where it counts: Hirshl remains "like his uncle" in both senses; Blume continues to stand for flowering if not constraint (*ba-lum* in Hebrew), Mina for petty bourgeois pieties and convention, and she is "tsiemlich" (so-so); the goose ceramic on the Tziemlich table is still an ornithological motif mirrored in Hirshl's nervous breakdown. The declamatory authority of the narrator, (sustained by all of the comparisons and *meshalim*), is even preserved in the famous passage where Boruch Meir and Tsirl are counting their money at the end of the day: "Could there be a greater pleasure in life than sitting at night in one's store with one's profits laid out before one?" (p. 43 in English). But just as often Halkin gives these parallels up, and sacrifices the narrator's

ability to make broad philosophical pronouncements. Blume no longer looks "like one who is" (in the Hebrew), but rather, in the English, "she holds her bags as tho' they were all she had" (p. 14). Even this mild simile is lost in English.

While the stronger similes of the Hebrew may make the reader of the two languages a bit nostalgic for the parables and similes, I developed a heightened appreciation for them by reading the English where some are missing. I recognize the quality of Halkin's decisions when it came to throwing them out, and I thus experienced an important principle enunciated by Walter Benjamin: not only to appreciate what is valuable in both languages, but to appreciate the search for an arch language behind them both.[9] Let us examine a description of Hirshl: "Hirshl is an only child, born when his parents are no longer young." In Hebrew the text reads: "*bekhor uven zekunim ke'eḥad.*" While the English Hirshl loses some of that attachment to two archetypal children (*bekhor* and *ben zekunim*), the Hebrew version describes Boruch Meir and Tsirl less specifically. The emphasis on the parents through the English rendering is entirely proper for the novel at this point, and an English approximation of the sounds, through a sentence like "oldest son of old age," would have called too much attention to the language. Each rendering captures what is important to each language community.

Similarly Boruch Meir's beginnings in the store are described innocently in English: "He himself had started out in the store as a shopboy and was now its wealthy proprietor and the husband to its first owner's daughter." Here Halkin has made no attempt to capture Agnon's language—one of the most sonorous passages in the entire novel, recording, paradoxically, the most banal of facts: "*Shamash katan hayah Boruch Meir bakhnisato leḥanut vehayom hu ḥenvani gadol veḥanut zo sheshimesh bah keshamash shelo hi uvat adonav hi ishto.*" Nor could Halkin in any way have imitated the resonance from rabbinic lore (Bet ha-Midrash 4:80 and elsewhere), where zaddikim are the mainstay of the world, substituted in Szybusz by "homeowners are the mainstay of the world." The joke cannot translate (see chapter 35).

The cosmic preoccupations of *A Simple Story*, where the operations of God have a bearing on the operations of the tiny community and its stores, support the idea that its householders, *balebatim*, are its mainstay in the ultimate sense. Here, too, Halkin has had to sacrifice some of these interplaying forces. Boruch Meir's father-in-law is a taciturn merchant who views the business of business as the most important thing in the world. In the synagogue one can gossip, but not in the store. So he says, "A store is not a synagogue," whereas in Hebrew his declaration carries much more significance: "*Lo harei ḥanut keharei bet hamidrash.*" The oracular tone of the Hebrew is a kind of cue inviting readers to reflect on just that: the way in which a store is and is not like

a synagogue; the way in which householders are and are not mainstays of the cosmos. And that invitation to comparison encourages reflection on the entire enterprise of comparison which dominates the Hebrew novel. Something is definitely lost in English, as stubborn Hebrew chauvinists would have it. But here too, the absence of the oracular voice strengthens the narrative, since Shimon Hirsh Klinger's Hebrew voice sounds a bit too much like our narrator's voice anyway. A symbiosis between character and narrator is lost in English—and in some way to good effect.

Halkin has tried not to lose the aphoristic quality of the Hebrew novel entirely; but he seems to understand that the aphoristic sounds of Hebrew do not always work in English. In English we have some of the same struggles with language and values that many feel was part of Agnon's struggle. But the struggle in English is different enough to have flawed Lask's effort in his translation of *The Bridal Canopy* and to excite our sensibilities through Halkin's translation.

Halkin's translation reminds us of the burden of all translations from any one language into another. Of course the issues seem richer when the two languages in question have the unique power of English, and the unique history of Hebrew. As a large question, and as a reflection of the grand issues raised by Benjamin, George Steiner, and others, Halkin's rendering is an important case study. But it is still as a specific novel that his work must be judged. In the Agnon novel before us, the translation or the translator's work stands between the two possible nuances of the story: the oracular and evocative world of the Hebrew language, and the more concrete presence of the Galician town where the story takes place, with the individual adventures of its particular citizens. To a large extent, the English translation represents some strategic decisions which do not change the "sense of the material," but which do change the tone, intention and feeling.[10]

It is obvious that an American audience will not read Agnon with the weight of tradition that hovers behind so much of the action, and especially so much of the narrator's commentary. It is not quite as obvious that a Hebrew-speaking audience of the 1980s will not as well. This makes the question of translating *Sippur pashut* so interesting—and, paradoxically, points up the fact that involved Jewish readers in the American audience may be more interested in that "weight of tradition" than many in an Israeli secular audience.

But the American audience might need a glossary, and the Hebrew readers trained in the tradition and who carry the glossary in their minds will not. Yet those filled with rabbinic study may be missing other things. In Agnon criticism one too often sees concern about how little our contemporary non-Hebrew reader can relate to the suggestion of Gemara, Targum and Tosefta; and less about whether the

reader who is part of the world of rabbinics can relate to psychosocial growth, the management of a store, or the chicken markets. Fewer people still comment on such things as the narrator's ironic jokes on the reader (see Halkin's afterword). In Agnon's narrative universe, such disparate worlds also "hover" in the background and give the reader two or even three novels for the price of one. They are potentially integrated, however, even if we recall them separately from time to time. In rabbinic lore the management of business is not very far from family curses, which is why the Klinger ethic is so convincing. And marriage is a business deal. Halkin's decisions have been good ones, it seems to me, in relying on the story—the narrative—to carry the English reader.

But there is still room for a third kind of translation. The sacrifice of the similes and metaphors is enough of a loss for me to encourage a translation which tries to hold on to the metaphysical play of the novel. One change which particularly saddened me may indicate why I would like to see the effort. Near the end of the novel, a reconciled Mina and Hirshl are reflecting on the birth of their new baby, and trying to figure out appropriate names: "*Yesh shemot sheyesh lahem perush, veyesh shemot she'ein lahem perush,*" announces the narrator, in a reminder to readers to think about "meanings" when looking at the names of all the places and people in his story. (This recalls Hirshl's ruminations on names in the earlier chapter 9.) The English rendering that "some names make sense and others don't" loses majesty entirely, and some ambiguity as well. (Few English readers will take the idea of "sense" beyond its casual meaning, and the Hebrew reader doesn't have to because of the weight of the word "*perush.*") A glossary might open up some of the narrator's propositions.

Surely the absence of the allusions can inhibit the opening of propositions, and may inhibit the reader's textual dexterity, or even a piece of the narrator's personality. Consciousness about the act of reading is one of the grand themes of this novel in the Hebrew, because of the suggestion that the world is grounded in the comparisons by way of which we see the world. Some of this may be lost at first reading. But on second reading, this quality might have been retained in the translation enough to point us to the potential of the Hebrew. The reader is reminded that we compare ceaselessly: the store and the synagogue share a great deal; people and poultry have a lot in common; and in one way or another, we still have to ask whether our names are aptonyms. The task in both the English and the Hebrew renderings of *A Simple Story* is to find out just how this is so. A modest glossary might have helped.

To quote Hillel Halkin's own concerns in another context: How would the author have liked what I do?[11] I think Agnon would have

liked this translation very much. That may be less than important. Benjamin's sometimes obscure but always magnetic essay may provide a more important criterion. Does the English maintain this novel's relationship to an arch language? Does a backdrop of metacommunication or language remain within this novel? We can say it does if we understand the word "language" in the sense beyond classical allusion and towards common human experience.

Similar decisions must be made throughout this or any translation. One category of decision may be said to relate to the world of the original setting, and another decision to the reader. This, in turn, is related to metonymic vs. metaphoric modes of representation. The reader, I contend, is bound to be more comfortable with the narrative and metonymic mode. In either case there are several criteria which may be used to choose one word or one phrase over another. The more accurate approximation may only be one of the issues involved in that decision. Translation and translators are always "between." In the discussion above I suggest that we are between metaphor and action, or as Benjamin put it, "between poetry and doctrine;" and in teaching, we are between some "pure" ontology of experience and the day-to-day experience of the learner.[12] In the Agnon novel before us, the translator or the translator's act stands between the two possible nuances of the story: the oracular and evocative world of the Hebrew language, and the more concrete presence of the Galician village which is the setting for the story.

To a large extent, the English translation represents strategic decisions which do not change the "sense of the material" but change the tone, intention and feeling, and, as I hope I have suggested, not all to the bad. English readers, and the Hebrew-English reader especially, now have a chance to appreciate not only the unity of the Agnon novel but some of the different components of it that make it such an achievement.

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NOTES

1. For a full description of the story and a discussion of its provenance, see Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Berkeley, 1968). Band's apt title captures Agnon's sense of past, in general, and highlights the fact that this and other novels were written some decades after the period in which the story is set. That timing alone presented Agnon himself with problems of translation from one period and place to another period and place. Readers might also be interested in Baruch Hochman's chapter "Backwater, Buczacz," in *The Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Cornell, 1970). David Aberbach has written on the psychological themes of *A Simple Story* along with themes in other works in *At the Handles of the Lock* [the allusive name of the volume in which the story appears in Hebrew] (Oxford, 1984).

2. See Lev Ḥakak, "The Motif of the Cock in *Sipur pashut*" [Hebrew], in *Hasifrut* 4 (1973): 713–25.

3. On comparisons, my own essay "Figurative Language in Agnon's *Sippur pashut*," *Prooftexts* (1981): 311–15 may be helpful. There have been many discussions of the layering in Agnon's novels. A number have been especially helpful to me: Gershon Shaked, "The Explicit and the Implicit in the Short Story: Interpretations and Some Remarks on Methodology in the Analysis of Two Non-Realistic Stories by S. Y. Agnon" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 3 (1971): 255–80; Joseph Ewen, "The Dialogue in the Stories of S. Y. Agnon" [Hebrew], ibid., 281–94; and Amihud Gilead, "Notes on the Basic Assumptions of Literary Interpretation" [Hebrew], *Hasifrut* 3 (1972): 488–96.

4. *The Bridal Canopy*, trans. I. M. Lask (New York, 1937). Lask's introduction is a good discussion of the difficulties of translating *Hakhnasat kalah*, and even justifies the awkwardness of his effort to capture the texture through English archaisms (p. xviii).

5. For consideration of this material, I am grateful for discussions with Eugene Mihaly on Hungarian folklore, and Alice Greenwald for some iconographic implications. The reference in Berakhot 7a and some of its implications came from Dr. Mihaly. Readers might be interested in (and amused by) Charles Caniel and Page Smith, *The Chicken Book* (San Francisco, 1982), which traces bird themes from throughout world literature.

6. (Shabbat 130a) "It was taught, R. Simeon b. Gamliel said: Every precept which they accepted with joy, such as circumcision, they still observe with joy. While every precept which they accepted with a quarrel, like the forbidden degrees of consanguinity [that is, the Mosaic law by which they were forbidden family relations], they still perform them with strife, for there is no marriage contract which does not contain a quarrel. . . . Once an evil nation decreed that Israelites could not don tefilin . . . ; yet Elisha put them on and went out into the streets. Someone saw him . . . as he overtook him, Elisha removed them from his head and held them in his hand. Elisha saved himself by explaining that he had in his hands the wings of a dove." (Earlier on this passage deals with whether birds are subject to the laws of meat and milk.)

(Pesahim 110a) "R. Joseph said: The demon Joseph told me that Ashmedai the king of the demons is appointed over all pairs of drinkers. And a king is not designated a harmful spirit. Others explain it in the opposite sense: On the contrary, a king is quick tempered and does whatever he wishes, for a king can break through a wall to make a pathway for himself and none may stop him. . . . It once happened that a certain man divorced his wife, and she went and married a shopkeeper. Every day her first husband went and drank wine, and she exercised her witchcraft against him."

7. Robert Alter, "Agnon's Last Word," *Commentary* (Jan. 1971).

8. "Agunot," trans. by Hochman in *Modern Hebrew Literature*, ed. Robert Alter (New York, 1981).

9. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator." This essay has become increasingly important in the past decade for those who are thinking about translation. It is available in the paperback edition of *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969).

10. The critical categories are from I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism*. The most succinct presentation of his paradigm is based on the protocols of his Cambridge classes, and is summarized in Hazard Adams, *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York, 1971).

11. Hillel Halkin, "On Translating the Living and the Dead: Some Thoughts of a Hebrew-English Translator," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 73–90.

12. Benjamin, but see also George Steiner's *After Babel* (Oxford, 1975). Steiner's general discussion is more extensive than Benjamin's, and has some immediate implications for students who, like me, are interested in the pedagogical implications of translation theory. Steiner deals with Benjamin and the question of "Ursprach" in chapter 2.