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Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon's Transactions with the Novel

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DURING MORE THAN TWO THIRDS of his creative life, S. Y. Agnon was engaged in writing novels. He began his first novel not long after he returned to settle in Erets Yisrael in 1924, and at the time of his death in 1970 he was attempting to complete his last novel. Not a year passed in which he was not at work on one of these large compositions. His accomplishments in other forms must therefore be seen as achieved against the background of this ongoing novelistic enterprise. In the case of some novels the struggle went on for many years. The confrontation involved not only the formal and thematic conventions of the genre but its basic underlying aesthetic and spiritual suppositions as well.

Agnon wrote five outstanding novels. The first, *Hakhnasat kala* (*The Bridal Canopy*), was begun and then slowly expanded during the second half of the twenties. The novel grew out of the short pseudohasidic narrative of the same name published already in 1920 (written, it appears, at the time of the the First World War); it evolved in the framework of the traditional pious tales cultivated by the author during those years. *The Bridal Canopy* was based on an authentic hasidic tale concerning the trials and rewards of a true hasid. On this armature Agnon hung dozens of other stories which also deal with the issues of faith and the testing of faith, especially the spiritual trials of people who seek a suitable mate for themselves or for their children. This epic novel served as the centerpiece for the first edition of Agnon's collected

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works in Berlin in 1931. Until the completion of this first novel, Agnon had seen no place for a collected edition of his writings.

Even before *The Bridal Canopy* appeared in print, the kernel of Agnon's next great novel began to develop. In contrast to its predecessor, which depicted traditional Jewish reality in Galicia in the first half of the nineteenth century, the new novel dealt with Erets Yisrael at a time much closer to the present, the second aliyah period at the beginning of the twentieth century. From its inception the plot was supposed to be double: the story of a stray dog in Jerusalem and the story of a new immigrant who hopes to become a pioneer but instead becomes a house painter in the neighborhoods of the Old Yishuv of Jerusalem. The two stories intertwine when the dog bites the painter, causing him to die from rabies. The episode—which may have been based on an incident in Jerusalem in 1911—seemed to Agnon to give full expression to the tragic aspect of the era, which had already been pressed into the service of the heroic Zionist myth. But the stitching together of the two disparate stories raised immense artistic and conceptual problems. Agnon worked on the novel for fifteen years, and during this time both the formal focus and the ideational emphasis underwent changes. For all his labor, when the completed novel appeared under the title *Temol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) in 1945, the effect was still more like a perfect welding together of narrative materials than a single casting of them.

During the many years at work on *Only Yesterday*, Agnon published two other novels, works which were written quickly and apparently with less struggle. A relatively short novel, *Sippur pashut* (*A Simple Story*), published in 1935, follows the journey to insanity and back of a young man obliged to enter a loveless marriage. In *Oreaḥ nata lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*), first published in installments and then in book form in 1938–39, Agnon developed a broad narrative canvas out of his impressions gained from a short visit in 1929 to his native town, Buczacz. Its themes include the decline of Jewish life in Eastern Europe after the First World War and the author's ironic autobiographical explorations.

Not long after the completion of *Only Yesterday* in 1945, Agnon began his last great novel, *Shira*, which like its predecessor and unlike the other three novels, takes place in Erets Yisrael. At first his work progressed smoothly. By 1953 Agnon had completed (and even published) two out of three originally planned parts. The mastery over the conventions of the genre here is evident; the lives of the several protagonists are flawlessly interwoven with the wider story of the thirties and forties in Erets Yisrael. So rich and fluent was the narrative that many thought *Shira* would become the masterpiece of the entire oeuvre. While working on the two remaining parts of the novel (what

was originally conceived of as the third part broke into two), however, Agnon encountered serious difficulties, which had to do with bringing the plot complications to a convincing resolution. The protagonist is a professor at the Hebrew University named Manfred Herbst with a constricted emotional life, who carries on a short love affair with a nurse named Shira. She abruptly disappears and Herbst's relentless search for her was supposed to end with her discovery in a leper house, where he would join her forever. Agnon had this surprising denouement in hand at an early stage in the writing, but he could not manage to find a way to lead up to it naturally. After working on *Shira* throughout the fifties and sixties, Agnon finally despaired of finishing it, and shortly before his death he approved its publication in the fragmented form in which it was published posthumously in 1971.

Agnon may be said to have written two more novels, if we count as novels some of the longer narratives from the fifties written against a German background: *Beḥanuto shel mar lublin* (*In Mr. Lublin's Store,* published in 1974) and *Ad henah* (*Until Now,* 1952). But Agnon himself never defined such narratives as novels and they stand apart from the novels in the artistic and generic problems they raise. Those texts which distinctively are novels form a clearly independent block of works, for all bear signs of Agnon's struggle with the genre and its traditions, conventions, and themes.

It is a matter of critical consensus—and to my mind rightly so—that Agnon's novels *en bloc* constitute the most comprehensive and important artistic endeavor produced during the development of the Hebrew novel, from its foundations laid by Abraham Mapu in the 1850s until our own day. Some critics (such as Gustav Kroyanker) may locate the principal achievement in a large epic like *The Bridal Canopy.* Others (such as Shimon Halkin) point instead to the confessional-autobiographical novel, *A Guest for the Night.* Still others argue that Agnon arrived at the epitome of his capabilities as a novelist in the convincing psychological portrayals of A *Simple Story.* Baruch Kurzweil sees in the heterogeneous and perhaps incomplete *Only Yesterday* "the most important and successful experiment in the field of the social novel in our modern literature."[1] Others believe that the distinction belongs to *Shira,* despite its fragmentary nature, for the human richness of its narrative world and its fluency of composition. There are critics, to be sure, who prefer other writers' novelistic treatments of topics dealt with also by Agnon. (See, for example, Natan Zach's comments comparing *Only Yesterday* to A. Reuveni's novel of the second aliyah, *Ad Yerushalayim.*) It is difficult to find an expert reader, however, who is not sensible of the combined weight of the five novels and who would not regard them as forming the most profound and original confluence of Hebrew fiction and the

tradition of the European novel. Using this critical consensus as my point of departure, I wish to focus on the problematic aspects of Agnon's novelistic enterprise.

The thesis I wish to present is the following: despite Agnon's determined attachment to the genre, and despite his great achievements in it, the novel was not a "natural" genre for him. He struggled with it as with an entity that was foreign to his own nature. The signs of the struggle are visible throughout his career, even though Agnon eventually emerged victorious. In the following discussion I propose to describe some of these "symptoms" and assess their considerable literary historical significance. For, after all, the "foreignness" Agnon felt in the novel represents not so much a personal limitation as a comprehensive cultural and historic problematic—one to which Agnon was especially sensitive, more so than were other Hebrew novelists. For Agnon, other Hebrew writers took to the conventions of the novel with too much ease; their comfort is in fact a blindness to the challenge posed by the novel to Jewish literary culture.

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The "symptoms" of Agnon's difficulties with the novel can be divided into "extrinsic" and "intrinsic" categories, in accordance with the distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of a literary work. The first of the extrinsic signs is revealed in Agnon's biography as a creative artist. Why did Agnon delay so long in turning to the novel? His career as a writer began already in the middle of the first decade of the century, and his apprenticeship was served during his first stay in Erets Yisrael between 1907 and 1913. During these years, in which his narrative talent was consolidated, he felt no inclination at all towards the novel. He devoted his efforts to the pseudopious tale (*Agunot*), and to the impressionist and symbolist novella (*Givat haḥol Leilot*). The first masterpiece to emerge from these years, *Vehaya heʿakov lemishor* ("The Crooked Shall be Made Straight," 1912), should in fact be read as representing a choice against the novel in favor of the conventions and style of the traditional pious Jewish tale. Agnon seems here to be offering a traditional Jewish epic as an alternative to the European novel, which had been the model adopted by Hebrew writers from Mapu onward. During the ten years spent in Germany (1913–1924), Agnon's narrative art reached a peak. He was never to write with greater brilliance and integrity than those revealed now in such pious tales as *Agadat hasofer* ("The Tale of the Scribe," 1919) and *Sippurei Polin* (*Tales of Poland,* 1925) or in the lyric novella *Bidmi yameha* ("In the Prime of Her Life," 1923). Even as late as this there is no sign of novel

writing, and we can point only to a stirring of intention represented by the historical novella *Hanidaḥ* ("The Banished One," 1919), a story which Agnon had planned would grow into something more. The turn to the novel began only with his return to Erets Yisrael in 1924, some twenty years after the beginning of his public career as a writer. This is an unprecedented delay. Most novelists, Hebrew or European, experiment for a time with shorter forms to develop their narrative skills and then move on to the novel. In Agnon's case the delay was not only much more extended, but did not depend on the process of maturation which had already culminated in *Vehaya he'akov lemishor.* Agnon's activity as a consequential and distinguished novelist constituted in fact a second literary career, which began when the writer was already in his forties and after he had gathered his work into a collected edition in four volumes in 1931.

A second extrinsic symptom relates to the difficulties Agnon experienced in two of his major novels, *Only Yesterday* and *Shira.* Recent research on the structural transformations in the revision of *Only Yesterday* reveals not only Agnon's ingenuity in attempting to solve compositional problems but also the state of perpetual spiritual-ideological crisis in which he worked.[2] He encountered a seemingly endless series of new possibilities and new difficulties, which he examined one by one with infinite patience and a capacity to avoid hasty decisions. When from time to time he detected signs of a dead end, he would distance himself from work on the novel and turn to less difficult artistic projects, only to return later to the same difficulties that had silenced him before. This attests, of course, to Agnon's great spiritual strength and strict artistic discipline, but it reveals as well a kind of disorientation. This is a lack of direction we do not find in the shorter works, no matter how complex they may be.

It is true that three of Agnon's other novels were written more easily. *A Simple Story* and *A Guest For the Night* in fact were written during the "rest periods" that Agnon awarded himself in the course of his extended work on *Only Yesterday.* Yet it must be stressed that the novels presenting the most difficulty are also the most important from the point of view of artistry and ideas. Together with *The Bridal Canopy, Only Yesterday* and *Shira* comprise the giant trilogy Agnon hoped to place at the center of his entire oeuvre. In these works he tried to engage the art of the novel in all of its dimensions: to create an abundance of imaginary characters with full individual emotional lives, and to describe an entire society in specific historical periods; to connect the particular with the general, personal lives with history, the individual soul with collective culture. In these novels, moreover, Agnon sought to present a conception of the historical transformations which stirred and eventually changed the life of the Jewish people from the beginning

of the nineteenth century onward. *The Bridal Canopy* was designed to be only a first level in a structure whose foundations were rooted in the traditional folk life of Eastern Europe and whose higher levels reached not only to the foundation of Zionism and the beginning of settlement in Erets Yisrael, but to the future stages of Jewish existence. Agnon thus set out to exploit the full potential of the novel as a genre, for it was by means of the novel that European culture in modern times has expressed its perception of its own dynamic. As has been noted from Marx onward, the essence of the genre is predicated upon a dialectical conception of the world which juxtaposes continuity and change in the life of the individual and continuity and change in society, and which supposes the world to be in motion toward the future. Consequently, the greatest difficulties Agnon encountered appeared precisely in the two novels set in Erets Yisrael, rather than in those dealing with a Jewish culture whose historical destiny was already sealed even before the destruction of Eastern European Jewry in the First World War and its aftermath. There exists, then, an essential connection between these difficulties and the "open" character of the historical reality formulated in *Only Yesterday* and *Shira.* Agnon had trouble writing these novels because he had trouble establishing a relationship with this reality and determining his own stance towards its future development. The novel as the genre that expresses dynamism, change and confrontation with the future—this is what was "alien" to him, and stood against a narrative perfection based on a finished past. Precisely for this reason Agnon stuck with the novel, for it was only through this vehicle that his art could break out of its impasse.

The third symptom might be considered either extrinsic or intrinsic. The novel was not the only literary form in which Agnon organized a long narrative sequence. His first large composition *Bitsror haḥayim* (*In Life Eternal*) extended to 60 folios (that is, almost 1000 printed pages). This work was finished and Stiebel Publishers had even announced its impending publication, when Agnon's house in Homburg went up in flames in 1924 and all his books and manuscripts burned. The author, who mourned this personal and professional loss all his life, did not disclose much about the content and design of *In Life Eternal.* Consequently our knowledge of it is not very extensive. Nonetheless, it is clear that this work was written not as a novel but as a series of portraits and chronicles of personalities and events. It was meant to serve as a memorial for an entire world of people and institutions (hence its name, which alludes to the *El malei raḥamim,* the prayer for the dead). Agnon here commemorated the life of traditional Polish Jewry, and in representing Jewish reality followed traditional Jewish literary genres—the *mayse-bukh,* the *geste* (Jewish exempla romances), and even the community ledger or *pinkas:* these registers recorded outstanding

events in the life of the community and also contained portraits of important rabbis, scholars, and leaders. The organization of these materials into cycles with open midrashic interconnections, which Agnon adopted from those models, stood in sharp contrast to the novel's insistence on a plot which concentrates on a central conflict and its resolution. As in his pious tales, here Agnon turned his back on the novel and presented himself as a Jewish chronicler, inscribing in his notebook the sacred records of the people of Israel.

The structural and thematic influence of this lost beginning is clearly evident in *The Bridal Canopy,* for example, in Agnon's penchant for interpolative narrative which exceeds the norms of picaresque narrative proper. Agnon's early work in Jewish genres also alerts us to the author's fundamental hesitation in adapting the novel to his art. Perhaps Agnon realized this genre was unsuited to his work and so turned to the *pinkas* or *mayse-bukh* model after failing to develop *The Banished One* into a novel. In any event, the early efforts at large narrative composition acquire twofold importance, for in the last twenty years of his life Agnon returned from "closed" narrative patterns to the model of the "open" *pinkas* or chronicle. While he struggled unsuccessfully to complete *Shira,* he began writing massive story cycles, which he produced chapter by chapter until his death, and which in effect could have continued indefinitely: the great chronicle of Buczacz, *Ir umeloah* (*The City and Its Fullness,* which appeared as a posthumous work in 1973 though many parts were also published during his life); the midrashic-metaphysical autobiography *Hadom vekise* (*Footstool and Throne*), which recounts the history of the author's soul from the creation of the world till the days of the First Temple (Agnon managed to finish only a small part of this enormous and rather bizarre project; see the chapters collected in the volume *Lifnim min haḥoma,* 1976); the cycles *Korot batenu* (*Family Chronicles*, published in its entirety in 1979), *Sippurim naim shel yisrael besht* (*Pleasant Tales About Israel Baal Shem Tov*), *Sefer takhlit hamaʿasim* (1962) and so on. In the fifties and sixties Agnon invested his principal creative effort in narratives of this type, based on the midrashic-*pinkas* model.

In Agnon's oeuvre then two long narrative patterns serve side by side, competing yet integrated one with the other: that of the *pinkas* or midrash or geste preceded the novelistic one and served as an alternative to it. When Agnon finally took up the novel, it is as if he submerged the first kind of narration into the depths of his work. There it continued to exert influence in, for example, *The Bridal Canopy*, which contains collections of tales on the theme of piety and marriage, and in *A Guest for the Night* and *Shira,* which also feature chronicle cycles or interpolated narratives about a variety of characters. Similar qualities mark other compositions as well, beginning with Agnon's original,

distinctively modern work, e.g., *Sefer hama'asim* (*The Book of Deeds*, 1932–1950), and ending with traditional scholarly anthological works such as *Yamim noraim* (*Days of Awe*) and *Sefer, sofer, vesippur* (*Book, Scribe and Story*, 1938). After Agnon exhausted his ability to deal with the novel in *Shira*, the *pinkas* returned to the surface of his work. There it spread and flourished like a plant whose growth crowds out a natural rival. The implicit and explicit competition between the notebook model and the novelistic model in Agnon's work is symptomatic of the author's essential unease in the "alien" genre, his—if I may use with some modification the title of the well-known essay by Sigmund Freud—*Unbehagen in dem Roman.*

3

From here we move on to the outstanding intrinsic symptoms, that is, those manifest in the body of the texts themselves. Only three are included here.

The first and most pronounced asserts itself at a highly sensitive point in the novels: the moment of closure. The structural difficulties and problems arising there are known to everyone well-versed in the history of the genre and they have been discussed at length in the theoretical considerations of the realistic novel.[3] At the moment of closing the novelist faces the decisive difficulty of imposing the laws of art over reality. Art demands a conclusion not only for technical reasons but also for the sake of establishing aesthetic wholeness, while reality knows no such sharp or smooth endings. Up to this point the author has worked at creating full fluent narrative seeming to flow from the continuity of life itself; now, however, he has to break that continuity without destroying his fictional world. The closing is perhaps the most important link in providing integrity and a final indication of meaning in the entire narrative. Through it is established the difference between the classical, traditional novels and innovative structural experiments. A non-ending usually reflects a world view which denies any general order or comprehensive meaning in reality; even among twentieth century writers there are not many who dared to truly leave their narratives "open" with no resolution or summation at the end.

In light of these issues, Agnon's obtrusive difficulty takes on special significance. Curiously, this phenomenon occurs conspicuously for the first time in the novel with almost perfectly wrought structure, *A Simple Story*. This text ends with a summary of the protagonist's story: Hirshl Hurwitz, who had become deranged, later recovered from insanity to take on a life of compromise and limitations which, after all,

is the common fate of humanity. This conclusion, nonetheless, does not resolve the story of the heroine, Blume Nacht. A relative of Hirshl's and also his true love, Blume had been living with the Hurwitz family—to some extent regarded as an additional family member and to some extent exploited as a servant. Upon learning of the plans for Hirshl's marriage of convenience to Mina Ziemlich, Blume leaves and shuts herself up in the house of Akavia and Tirza Mazal. There she denies herself almost all contact with the external world and evades the various suitors who are entreating her with their love. The reader (like the narrator and protagonist of the novel itself) wonders frequently what the meaning of this behavior can be and what will finally become of Blume. But Agnon ended the novel without easing these qualms. Blume Nacht's story is cut off abruptly and the reader senses that the traditional satisfaction expected at the close of the novel will be denied, or at least diminished. This ending also undermines the structural balance of the entire novel, for the closing does not parallel its counterpart, the opening or exposition. The novel commences with a description of Blume's orphanhood, her journey to the Hurwitz house, her ambivalent reception there and the development of her love affair with Hirshl. The reader devoted to the conventions of the realistic, well-rounded and structured novel expects that at the summation Blume will return and stand again at the center of things. This, of course, doesn't happen, and the narrator himself is alert to the problem. Consequently he seals the text not with the final dialogue between Hirshl and Mina, but with an addendum, a kind of apologetic inscription: "Hirshl and Mina's story is over, but Blume's is not." Apparently he is promising that the disturbed narrative balance will be righted in a separate book, which will focus on the fates of Blume, Getzel Shtein and other characters whose stories have remained hanging in air. Nonetheless, the narrator immediately hedges on his promise, hinting in a final remark that he will never complete this project: "Much ink would be spilled and many quills broken before we were done. God in Heaven knows when that will be."[4] Agnon indeed never wrote the sequel, and his comment at the end of *A Simple Story* serves more to correct the narrative imbalance of the novel than to announce a continuation. In any event, the remark testifies openly to the narrator's discomfort with his ending.

After *A Simple Story, Only Yesterday* confronted Agnon with acute problems of closure. These did not result from fragmented accounts of the characters' lives. On the contrary, the text emphasizes finality and completion as the novel ends with the death of the protagonist, Yizhak Kummer. This conclusion is the more striking since it is the only time in Agnon's novelistic production when death, the most "natural" end to any story, is exploited for the sake of closure. Even so, a whole series of

theological and ethical questions are left unresolved in the work. Troubling first of all is the question of religious meaning in Yizhak's arbitrary death and his "fate" which lay in wait for him from the moment of his first trivial contact with the dog, Balak. What interpretation can be attributed to the serenity which prevails in the world after Yizhak's demise? How is the reader to understand the break in the drought and the falling of welcome rain on the scorched fields? Were the thirsty, cruel "gods" of the earth and sky in need of a human sacrifice in order to answer the prayers of the people and put an end to their famine and thirst? Agnon could not in any way have accepted such an assumption, which debases the religious order of the universe to the level of cultic order in the world of pagan myth. Nevertheless, this is the only answer implied by the manner in which he ended his novel. Naturally the question arises, too, what can we learn from this absurd and shocking ending about the meaning and value of Zionism and the pioneering enterprise in Erets Yisrael? All these questions weighed oppressively on Agnon. As is well known, he even added to the text an epilogue in which he tried to address these problems if not to solve them. He hints that what was "spoiled" or "ruined" in the generation of the protagonists will be righted in the next generation; their children will be bound together by the ties of love and marriage.[5] But the author's artistic sense stood him in good stead, and in the final version of *Only Yesterday* he avoided such a cloying and inferior ending—which in fact does not provide any genuine response to even one of the problems posed. All the same, Agnon did not dare to leave his readers mired in ethical stupefaction and religious doubt without any promise of a future solution. As in *A Simple Story* he discharged the obligation to provide conceptual balance in the plot by adding an epilogue and the announcement of another story: "So is completed the tale of Yizhak Kummer; the tales of his friends will be told in *Ḥelkat hasadeh* (*The Plot of Land*)."[6] This book was never written.

In *Shira,* as I said before, Agnon knew the concluding goal toward which the story was supposed to lead, but he could find no convincing artistic path to it. In order to join Shira in the leper house, Manfred Herbst would have had to change the entire structure of his personality. He would have had to break away from his family, from his scientific work, and from the entire way of life familiar to him in provincial, academic Jerusalem. Furthermore, he would have had to relinquish his erotic hedonism and the narcissism which characterized him in general but his relations with women in particular. In short, he would have had to cease being *l'homme moyen sensuel* and discover deep within the strength to live solely on a metaphysical level, basing his existence entirely on love which brings with it no contact of the flesh (Shira, after all, suffers from leprosy). Such a turn of events can,

perhaps, persuade us of authenticity in the symbolic story *'Ad 'olam* ("Forevermore"), written while Agnon worked on *Shira* and originally designated to be part of the novel. In that text the protagonist does indeed repair to a leper house. The scholar, Adiel Amzeh, goes there in search of a manuscript he needs to vindicate his entire scientific work by placing it on a basis of verified, critical truth. Nonetheless, in a realistic-psychological novel like *Shira,* such action offers little credibility. Herbst is an unlikely candidate for this kind of self-sacrifice, and in order to make the conclusion seem more natural, the author had to arrange some profound but plausible turnabout. His efforts did not pay off, and the closure which seemed entirely justified in "Forevermore" remained an unattained and perhaps impossible goal in *Shira.* The problem was severe enough to paralyze the entire process of completing the novel and for this reason, no doubt, more than any other, *Shira* remains not a whole fictional sculpture, but a kind of torso of a novel.

When Agnon did achieve full closure in his novels, he did it by way of a narrative and conceptual tour de force, a kind of ironic *deus ex machina.* This kind of technique in effect indicates the underlying problem with closure no less than did the abrupt, divided conclusions of the other novels. In *The Bridal Canopy* for example, the hasidic tale obliged the novel to close with the discovery of the treasure in the cave (by means of the rooster, Reb Zorach). Intervention by powers from above thus brings to a resolution the problem of a match and a dowry for the daughters of Reb Yudel Hasid. These events in turn make possible the sealing of the novel with a detailed description of the wedding ceremony and the Jerusalem scholar's "Song of Letters," which promises that reliance on Torah and its letters will bring a solution to any problem. The modern reader knows that this ending is implausible. To be sure, earthy, humorous symbolism is incorporated into the naive description of miracle (the young girl chases after the "cock," the rooster penetrates the cave and finds gold there—an allusion to achieving marriage the "natural" way, the way of a man with a maid); still, the celebration at the end of the story is nothing other than an indication that similar resolution is lacking in the reader's own world. There reality does not accept dictates imposed by the twenty-two letters of the holy tongue.

A comparable case occurs in *A Guest for the Night.* This novel concludes with a "miracle" undermined and trivialized through irony. The original key to the Beit Midrash, lost at the beginning of the story, is now recovered by the protagonist. The key had fallen through a crack in the bottom of his suitcase, and only upon returning to Erets Yisrael does he clean out the suitcase and find it. Having caused him much pain and sorrow, the lost key had come to symbolize the failure of his mission to preserve the legacy of the Beit Midrash culture and

transplant it into the new Jewish life in Erets Yisrael. Finding the key, precisely in Erets Yisrael, can be explained as promise for renewal of the tradition in the holy land, but it may also serve to underscore that the protagonist-narrator has not managed to achieve the same goal in his native town (the key returns to him only when he no longer has any need or use for it). In any case, Agnon points out his character's blindness, his susceptibility to chance or to the influence of forces hidden from view, that set awry all his rational good intentions. The discovery of the key in *A Guest for the Night* is the modern, diminished and parodic parallel to the discovery of the treasure in *The Bridal Canopy,* and this ending similarly seals its novel with complete but ironic closure. It is as if the narrator by this means said: We humans are not capable of ending our affairs sensibly or meaningfully. We are forced to leave the outcome of events to forces above or below us. What, however, is the identity of those forces? Divine power, fate, chance, the subconscious? In these works, then, the structural-technical difficulties directly reflect the conceptual-spiritual problems Agnon encountered when he turned to the novel.

A second intrinsic symptom: the agitation evident in Agnon's artistic progression from one model of the novel to another. There are, of course, many points of contact between Agnon's novels. All the same, no one novel is based on the same structural model or fundamental poetic suppositions as any other. By contrast a basic unity often does characterize the complete works of many distinguished novelists, and for this reason it is possible to speak about "the novel" of Henry James or Charles Dickens, or the Dostoyevskian novelistic structure, or the basic model underlying most of William Faulkner's novels, from *Sartoris* on. These concepts indicate a complex set of themes and structures recurring in the principal works of that particular author and persisting because they aptly and completely express the author's world view and his artistic approach to the narrated events. Since such patterns often govern the novelistic work of one literature or another for an entire era, or operate in the capacity of a well-defined subgenre,it becomes possible to formulate powerful generalizations about the conventions of the English Victorian novel or the French novel of the second half of the nineteenth century or the Spanish picaresque of the seventeenth century.

Agnon's novelistic production is not based on any such personal or collective model. Each one depended on a different historical paradigm and all together the five novels can be seen as a kind of compendium or essential summary of the novel and its typological poetics from the beginning of the seventeenth century until today. *The Bridal Canopy* is patterned after Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* a text which combines traces of chivalric legends with aspects of the scholastic anatomy. *A Simple Story* is

a distinctively Flaubertian novel, a prime example of the realistic psychological novel carefully based on causal sequence. In it the influences of social convention, heredity, education and family interaction converge in precise and well-orchestrated fashion to determine plot development. *A Guest for the Night* is very close to the modern novel of consciousness in which memory, association and the protagonist's flow of conscious existence fill the place that social and psychological causality filled in the novels of previous generations. *Only Yesterday* combines the model of the historical period novel with grotesque, metaphysical kafkaesque narrative. *Shira* takes as its point of departure the realistic family novel, develops into a period novel, and attempts to digress, too, into metaphysical symbolism. This extraordinary overview and powerful illustration of three hundred years of development in narrative models testifies, from one perspective, to Agnon's virtuosity: his remarkable capacity for development and change, his inclination toward artistic experiment, and his tendency to combine structures and themes from different literary realms in unusual ways. From another perspective, this same phenomenon simultaneously attests to some disquiet or unease with the novel. The author hastened to free himself from each of the models after a single experiment in it, or through his experimentation he broke the very devices of that model and tried to build an additional model on it. This restlessness indicates Agnon's difficulty in accommodating himself to the genre he placed at the center of his work.

A third "intrinsic" symptom: Agnon's deep ambivalence about the novel is manifest explicitly in the words of contempt or criticism about this genre that appear frequently in the texts themselves. As such comments teach us about the protagonists or the narrators who express them, they teach us also about fluctuation and instability in the artist's own view of the genre. I will cite here only one example, that of Dr. Langsam in *A Simple Story*. This example bears special importance, because Langsam is clearly a figure of considerable authority in the author's estimation. To some degree he even embodies a kind of alter ego to Agnon himself, since he studied medicine in European cultural centers just as the writer learned the art of fiction there. But Langsam retreats from his European scientific orientation and cures the mentally ill in his institute not by means of analysis or even medication. Instead he calms them with warmth, passive sympathy, and patience, and—resembling Agnon—he also recounts to them stories of the abandoned Jewish town of his birth. It is interesting, therefore, that precisely this same Langsam holds novels in absolute contempt. He remarks: "What's in them? . . . Mostly a lot of descriptions of ladies' fashions. That's all very well if you're a tailor or a jeweler, but what do you do if you're not?"[7] Despite this attitude, Langsam sees to it that Hirshl, his patient

unable to get over a lost love, should read these same books. He even quizzes him on the love stories and checks to see if he has understood their content. Is he trying to bring Hirshl to a psychological and aesthetic "catharsis"? to a fictional-artistic sublimation in order to cure his broken heart? Is he trying (with his remark on ladies' fashions) to lead the patient back to normality which accepts erotic compromises and limitations and protects itself by means of controlled emotional-sexual illusion in the framework of literary imagination? There is a further complication as well: Langsam's routine and superficial relation to novels jars with the fact that those same novels remained in his possession after his wife committed suicide. She was an enthusiastic reader of love tales who finally became deranged by an affair (that is, in Hebrew a *roman*) which took place between her and some philanderer with a wooden leg. When we become aware of these details the soul doctor appears as a man who did not understand his wife's psyche nor could he cure her—perhaps because he didn't read novels and so didn't come to know her emotional world influenced as it was by this literature. In addition, we see him as a man who didn't learn to arouse his wife emotionally and sexually and therefore drove her into the arms of a crude and superficial lover, whose entire power consisted of his ready virility (symbolized by the ever stiffened wooden leg). In this connection Langsam's contempt can be explained as a self-defense, a repression of the painful truth about his intimate life. This is an outstanding example of the double signal Agnon emits almost every time the problem of the novel and its intellectual and ethical value comes to the thematic surface of his narrative. This signal, like many of the previously mentioned characteristics of Agnon's novels, suggests the narrator's tense and ambivalent relation to his genre.

4

How then are we to interpret and assess the significance of this ambivalent relationship?

It is possible to approach each of the points raised till now and discuss it as a particular case. Some of the problems indicated explain themselves in specific literary historical contexts. For instance, we may invoke a cultural, sociological explanation and attribute Agnon's delayed engagement with the novel to literary circumstances predominant in the early part of the century. As is well known, the genre in this period found itself in a widespread state of crisis. The classic, nineteenth century concept of the novel was exhausted. Its fundamental poetic suppositions did not suit the new aesthetic sensibilities of the era and the notion of character underlying it did not jive with the new

psychology of William James, Henri Bergson and Freud. Focus on description of physical, socio-historical settings for human action now seemed to detract from the main thing, i.e., conveying reality as it is perceived by the senses and consciousness of the individual. Both philosophy and the natural sciences as well now placed in doubt the positivistic assumptions which had determined plot sequence in the novel. No longer was it possible to assume iron control of causal processes responsible for every permutation of physical and emotional reality and so make possible a full rational explanation of any such occurrence. As a result, just as the neoclassical epic had faltered and gradually disappeared during the eighteenth century, the novel was now losing the privileged position it had enjoyed as the principal literary genre of the nineteenth century. Rising to greatness were the until now secondary genres, the short story and the autobiography. Unlike the novel they were not committed to conveying causal sequence and extended human actions, and so were more suited to expressing the new outlook of the times.

In Hebrew literature the voice of the novel feil virtually silent. As the central genre of the late Haskalah (developed, for example, by Mapu, Smolenskin, and Braudes) the novel was tied closely to the Enlightenment movement and was forcefully rejected along with it. From the beginning of the 1890s until the First World War only two fully committed novelists were active in Hebrew literature, Y. Bershadky and A. A. Kabak, and they did not represent the artistic and ideational trends that increasingly were gaining prestige. More important were writers such as M. J. Berdichewsky, I. L. Peretz, H. D. Nomberg, Y. H. Brenner, G. Shofman, U. N. Gnessin, and so on, who worked in other genres. Brenner rebelled openly against the novel and wrote anti-novels. In these he annulled or violated all the conventions of time and space common to the nineteenth century novel. In fact, his long narratives, and especially *Mikan umikan,* (1911), served as part of the most conspicuous contribution Hebrew literature made to the formation of the modern twentieth century novel. During the first decade of the century, though, those narratives still had not seemed like birth pangs of a new novelistic genre corresponding to a new artistic and intellectual climate; rather, they were viewed simply as signs of protest and opposition over the grave of the old novel. Brenner himself strongly rejected any description of them as "novels."

Agnon entered into literary productivity as this moment of crisis was forming. And, like most of his contemporaries in Hebrew literature before the world war, he turned away from the novel to other genres more suited to the period—symbolic legends, for example, and impressionistic novellas which did not attempt to portray social and historical reality but rather successions of changing emotional situations and

states of consciousness. The critic and writer Yaakov Rabinowitz likened the new trends in Hebrew literature to a needle, that is, a sharp, refined instrument that may penetrate deeply or rise upward (suggesting exaltation). This was not, by opposition, an image of thickness, fullness, or sure and solid footing on the ground of reality.[8]

After the war the novel flourished anew. The great historical shock that had encompassed masses of people proved it relevant once again to view the individual within the wider framework of societal concerns, against the background of objective historical events which of necessity reach into his world and change his emotional life as they change the social and material conditions of his existence. In the meantime, the great pioneers of the modern experimental novel paved new roads in the genre, lending it contemporary spiritual force. Joyce, Proust, Gide, Mann, Musil, Biely and others created for their literatures a series of new compositional and structural models. In the 1920s hundreds of novels were written, some innovative and some less so, that exuded a vitality and strength unequalled since the days of the genre's greatness in the mid-nineteenth century.

Hebrew literature, too, witnessed a new flowering of the novel. In the days of the third aliyah a literary establishment was forming in Erets Yisrael that began to sustain not just sophisticated readers with mastery over several languages, who sought out Hebrew literature for its distinctive qualities (for instance, Agnon's few readers in Germany—people like Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig). The new literary center had to meet the needs of a "natural" reading public, one wider and more popular, for whom Hebrew was the mother tongue or the only reading language. This public demanded novels from the Hebrew publishers of the period, and the publishers responded with an abundance of translations from world literature (Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Stendahl, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Hamsun, Romain Roland, and so on). In addition they encouraged Hebrew authors themselves to write novels. The great upheavals that shook the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe—on the one hand, the war and the Russian revolution and, on the other hand, the expansion of the Zionist enterprise following the Balfour Declaration—led to a general feeling that the period of exile had ended for the people of Israel and that a new period in national history was beginning. This perception fostered a desire for literary works of large scope providing historical panoramas and new perspectives on the future. Critics demanded emphatically that the "needle" of Hebrew literature become a "pyramid," dense and solid at its foundation, erudite only at the tip. One after another now, both within Erets Yisrael and without, writers appeared who turned to the novel at a relatively early stage of their career (A. Freiman, Yehuda Burla, Hayim Hazaz, S. L. Blank, and

others). More veteran writers, such as A. Reuveni, turned from the short story to the comprehensive period novel. A. A. Kabak celebrated the triumph of the genre with a series of contemporary and historical novels formulated from the perspective of messianic Zionism.

Agnon could not but sense this turning point in the development of Hebrew narrative and the expectations of its readers. His awareness of it began while he was still in Germany (as is demonstrated by his aborted attempt to write *The Banished One* along the lines of a broad historical novel). With his return to Erets Yisrael, however, he understood more acutely and urgently that from now on he would have to confront, on its own territory, a reading public not willing to be satisfied with refined, sophisticated short stories like "The Tale of the Scribe" or lyrical, ironic novellas of ambience such as "In the Prime of Her Life." This audience demanded broad fictional materials characterized by fullness, detail, and descriptive and thematic solidity. There is no doubt that Agnon decided now to write such narratives—a novel about the past (*The Bridal Canopy*), a novel closer to the present (*A Simple Story*), and a novel dealing with Erets Yisrael and the development of the Zionist endeavor (*Only Yesterday*). To be sure, he did not intend to cater to the taste of the reading public which enjoyed the pathos of Kabak's historical Zionism or the Darwinistic naturalism of A. Reuveni; instead, he meant to struggle with this public and present it with a kind of novel hitherto unknown to it. Agnon decided to write novels—but using his own concepts, in a way that would afford some direct continuity with his art. His turn to the novel at the end of the twenties can thus be explained—if only partially—within the framework of the literary-historical and sociological context outlined above.

By the same token, it may be possible to explain the structural problems of Agnon's novels, and especially the problem of closure, in terms of modernism and the modern novel. The expectation of partial or full closure in nineteenth century fiction indicates the narrative horizon and also the intellectual horizon of the classic novel. It expresses among other things the notion, tacit or acknowledged, that human activity may be conceived as a chain of causes and effects. Just as the chain begins with some initial act, disrupting stasis and creating a dynamic out of the resulting conflict or breach, so it must end at a point in which the movement of this mechanism stops (the return to stasis via the resolution of conflict or the closing of gaps). The modern novel rejected this linear-causal picture of events in society or the mind of the individual. It tended to describe emotional events not as a series of psychological impulses or stimuli and their results, that is, as actions and agents, but as a "stream of consciousness" flowing without pause and not given to clear divisions. It tended, too, to describe sociohistorical events as a giant vortex governed to significant degree by arbitrary

and incidental forces. The modern novel, then had to distance itself from structural conventions like complete closure. Examples of plots that disrupt story action "in the middle" or confuse it by means of a seemingly arbitrary conclusion abound in twentieth century narrative. In Hebrew fiction endings such as these were presented for the first time in works like Brenner's *Baḥoref* (*In Winter*) and Gnessin's *Beynotayim* (*Meanwhile*). Agnon, it may therefore be argued, followed in the path of the modernists. He constructed endings that departed from basic spiritual and structural assumptions of the nineteenth century and this process accounts for the problems of structuration in his novels.

5

It would be possible to offer specific explanations of this type for each one of the symptoms of Agnon's previously mentioned difficulty and perplexity, and each one of the explanations could hold an undeniable measure of literary historical truth. Such explanations, though, provide no full answer to the questions raised in connection with the symptoms separately, much less the overall problem in its entirety. Those who claim that the lack of closure in Agnon's novels reflects his essential modernism must respond to several questions, to wit: why do these difficulties first show up precisely in *A Simple Story*, the work that takes upon itself all the rules and structures of the well-rounded nineteenth century psychological novel? Furthermore, why does the author insist so on the complete and tight closure of most of his short stories and novellas, including distinctively modern texts like "*Shevuat emunim*" ("Betrothed"), "*'Ido ve'enam*" ("Ido and Enam"), and "*'Ad 'olam*" ("Forevermore")? We should take into account, too, that Agnon considered himself unneedful of explanations or disclaimers in a variety of narratives, both short and long, which do indeed effect a modernist, anarchistic or absurd perception of reality by relinquishing closure of the usual type (e.g., *The Book of Deeds* and *Until Now*). Why then, by contrast, is distress always felt and a need for apology always evident in the conclusions of *novels* lacking closure?

A number of objections can be raised to the argument that connects Agnon's delayed engagement with the novel to the general development of the genre in European and Hebrew literature. Basically any attempt to "explain" Agnon by means of circumstances external to his work and his unique spiritual world will of necessity lead us to a dead end. While a knowledge of the historical and literary trends within which Agnon worked is necessary to understand his art and appreciate him against the background of his time, such information in itself does not account for his accomplishment nor define his autonomous sin-

gularity. It will be more productive to consider all the aforementioned symptoms together in a unique Agnonesque gestalt. Explaining them means therefore fitting them into a composite picture which must be based on a hypothesis no less broad and comprehensive than the gestalt itself.

In brief, I would contend that Agnon identified the novel as an "alien" genre, separated by a fundamental cultural-aesthetic gap from his own work and, likewise, from authentic Jewish literary tradition. This assumption immediately raises serious problems. After all, Agnon from the first did not only write stories patterned after pious Jewish books or hasidic legends. He also wrote distinctively modernist novellas that bear marked signs of influence by contemporary European writers (for instance, Knut Hamsun). How, then, may we present the novel, specifically, as if it were "foreign" to Agnon's Jewish heritage? Moreover, precisely during the first twenty years of his literary production in which he refrained from writing novels, Agnon did not see himself as a "religious" man. True, he made extensive literary and aesthetic use of pious folk texts, but so did other secular writers (including Peretz and Berdichewsky), who turned to those texts for literary reasons or because of their national *Weltanschauung*. The religious period in Agnon's life and work began after his return to Erets Yisrael, that is to say, exactly at the time when he undertook his first novel. His turn to the genre, therefore, did not contradict his heightened identification with Jewish heritage; instead, it served as a literary expression of this affinity, or, at least, arose together with his commitment to religious observance. How shall we explain this contradictory situation?

These objections, to my mind, admit of a full explanation. Agnon set out to confront the genre for the very reason that it was foreign and so his efforts in it could serve as a test or trial. Agnon set out to perform a great act of *tikkun* or religious reformation of the world, and like all who attempt *tikkun* he put himself in the heart of the danger, where he was most apt to be hurt. From an objective point of view Agnon indeed based many narrative works, both short and long, on foreign European models. This fact, however, has no great significance in our discussion, where the subjective truth of the author himself has determining force. Agnon perceived a foreign quality in the novel, because this was the most popular European literary genre and the prime vehicle of expression for secular humanistic European culture. Through it European man of modern times documented his spiritual journey: departing from the medieval world of religious certainties he set forth into empirical experiment with reality, the meeting place of natural laws and his own will. It was especially in the novel that he presented his own image as someone who can realize his potential,

establish direction for his life and endow that life with significance according to human measure and human inclinations. In addition, the novel was also the genre which placed the category of erotic love in the central arena of human values. The fulfillment of this love (consisting not only of sexual attraction, but also a "oneness of souls") is what allows man to achieve true happiness. (From this conception comes the popular identification of the novel—*roman* in Hebrew—with a love affair or romance—also, in Hebrew, *roman*).

Hebrew literature, from Mapu on, is closely bound up with the novel, for the very reason that in this genre it was possible to fully express a humanist, anti-traditionalist position. For example, the Hebrew novel elevated erotic love to a superior human value as part of a scathing attack on the norm of matchmaking—a practice not dependent on love which was accepted throughout traditional Jewish society. This literature also celebrated the individual who strives for self-fulfillment and who does not fear a break or even sharp and open battle with the Jewish community. Combatting religious mystification of the facts of life, this genre advocated critical, rational behavior (to the degree that this does not contradict basic human feelings) and pointed to the link between initiative and achievement, between actions and progress. It extolled a new Jewish pragmatism and in general encouraged initiative and change—economic, social, and spiritual. These, and not the "magic wishing ring" of Jewish messianism, were seen by the major nineteenth-century novelists of the Hebrew and Yiddish Enlightenment as the only viable means of redemption from historical distress.

These trends in modern Hebrew literature were alien to Agnon from the start, though not primarily because he identified with the world of tradition and religion. What bothered him especially was the simplistic optimism of these ideas and their faith in the power of human and national will—in short, their positivist self-assurance that disregarded the subtle complex of difficulties, mistakes, blindnesses, and just plain foolishness that abound in all realms of life. From the start his stories presented a kind of character entirely different from the archetypal figure of Hebrew narrative. Instead of the energetic, ambitious, intellectual youth, self-aware (or believing himself so because he engages in carping self-criticism), a devotee of literature who is good with words, who tests his strength to direct his own destiny and grant his life meaning, Agnon created passive male and female figures; these are characters lacking in self-awareness and wit; quiet, retiring and unambitious, they wander aimlessly in the paths of life without even realizing that they are drifting. Agnon examined in fine detail the bonds of love and found there mainly stumbling blocks and error, misunderstanding and the sorrows of desertion. His few protagonists who do go confidently on their way in matters of love

(e.g., Tirza Mintz-Mazal, in *In the Prime of Her Life*) blunder and fail more than any of the others. To be sure, erotic failure is in general a central theme of Hebrew fiction at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, Agnon's protagonists fail at love in a way other than the heroes of Berdichewsky, Brenner and Gnessin. The young hero typical of their fiction regards his shattered sexual self-confidence and unsuccessful attempts at romantic fulfillment as a "Jewish" weakness, a legacy of the ascetic Beit-Midrash culture. Agnon's protagonists fail because of the frailty of eros itself. Romantic attachment, by its very nature, depends on the exact convergence of two complex experiences and so is more liable than any other kind of relationship to become strained and eventually to break. Tortuous and irrational, this particular human attachment can develop in orderly fashion only if regulated by forces beyond it (i.e., by established ritual and religious norms), and by itself can in no way serve as a guiding norm to establish fitting rules of conduct. Berdichewsky's and Brenner's protagonists regard themselves as strong, willful men, who fall on the sword of erotic failure, while Agnon's protagonists appear from the first as weak people whose erotic failure is only an expression of their general weakness. Agnon created these characters not (as has been claimed recently in psychoanalytically oriented criticism) because they conformed to certain lines in the structure of his own personality; he chose them, rather, because their personalities and destiny expressed what seemed to him a grain of universal, existential human truth.

This truth can be stated essentially in a rather simple formula: man "by himself," as he relies only on his inner strength, or even as he tries to fortify himself through human attachments whether personal (love and family) or general (national and social movements) is susceptible to blindness, failure and ultimately a life of some accommodation to quiet despair. Only by taking on the burden of values and commandments whose authority does not depend on himself, that is, only through religion, does man find a standard which allows him to set his life straight and direct it beyond self-defined goals and desiderata. Even this step does not guarantee redemption, for people are endlessly susceptible to self-deception and may distort even the precepts of religion. In the name of piety and study of Torah, the rich father may deny his daughter her true love appointed on high. The scribe, exercising his occupation in purity, can go astray by dint of this very purity; if he expects to be perpetuated through offspring without having sexual contact with his wife, he sins both against God and the laws of nature as well. Nonetheless, the standards of religion are liable to aid man in his path to *tikkun*, that is, in setting the universe right and so hastening redemption.

With these views Agnon turned first to semi-traditional and semi-

pious literature. In his impressionist-modernist narratives he dwelt mainly on the errors and failures, ironies and deceptions that plague contemporary man (who is man "alone"). By the same token, in the semipious legends and tales Agnon dwelt on errors and failures, at the end of which a gate as it were opened onto the light, the experience of *tikkun*. We should note, though, that in these early works Agnon creates no compelling connection with the world of religion. That world actually serves only as a kind of corrective illustration and background for the experience of man "alone" in his blindness and error. It is no surprise, therefore, that at that time the novel seemed to Agnon unsuited to both the modern and traditional aspects of his work. Neither was compatible with the positivist assumptions inherent in the novel nor the rules of causality which identify character as destiny. If the author at first considered *The Banished One* a novel, this is perhaps because in that narrative he turned—for the only time in his early work—to the familiar theme of the individual who breaks with family and community to follow his own heart. A kind of contact is created here between Agnon's fiction and the tradition which saw a supreme human value in the fulfillment of individual will, even if that fulfillment costs the individual his life. The contact, though, was superficial and maybe also simulated. The protagonist of *The Banished One* is not a modern, critical man who aspires to live an independent spiritual life, but a traditional man with a high degree of spirituality, who breaks with his earthly (and flawed) community in order to join a holy community of Hasidim. He rebels against his grandfather, the strong leader, not to assert free will of his own but to obliterate his own will before the will of the zaddik Uriel "The Seraph." *The Banished One* when all is said and done, could not have been written as a novel.

6

The novel, though, was the main, normative fictional form against which Agnon felt he had to test himself. This feeling was shared by other authors of his time. Many invested the best of their efforts in short fictional forms, but carried in their hearts a desire for supreme literary self-realization in a large, culminating work which would reveal comprehensive meaning in their imaginative world. Thus Brenner's fiction helped erode the status of the novel, but a novel is what he finally wrote with *Breakdown and Bereavement*. Berdichewsky managed in his last days to realize a long-standing dream by writing *Miriam*. I. L. Peretz planned to write a novel describing Jewish life on both sides of the ocean (and for this purpose even contemplated a trip to America).

The difficulties Agnon encountered with the novel were greater, however, than the difficulties of these other artists. A comparison with Berdichewsky is especially instructive. Berdichewsky was Agnon's rival and harsh critic, yet the two shared a fundamental affinity of the artistic imagination. Both yearned to create a fiction that would in some wise synthesize authentic Jewish epic tradition and modern European literature, and for this purpose both turned to pious tales, moralistic folk narrative and hasidic legends, drawing from them themes, stylistic paradigms, and plot structures.Significantly, Berdichewsky like Agnon also found an alien quality in the novel, which made it seem to him a stimulating and provocative, but unattainable genre. Throughout the period of his main literary activity, from the end of the l890s until his death in 1921, he dedicated himself to writing a novel that would capture the entire spectrum of concerns treated in his fictional work. The struggle to achieve a synthesis between European and Jewish values and narrative structures led at first to the composition of short novels (*Beseter raʿam, Bayit tivneh, Darey reḥov) which more closely resemble traditional chronicles on the subject of sin and punishment than novels. After this Miriam* provided an original and unusual—though certainly not complete and harmonious—combination of traditional Jewish community records and the heroine novel (which features a woman who takes fate into her own hands). These syntheses, far as they remain from true inner cohesion, would not have been possible were it not for an essential closeness between Berdichewsky's humanistic European culture and his perception of Jewish tradition. He rejected the monolithic, harmonious conception of Judaism which defines itself simply as an identification with religious faith and life in accordance with Torah. He found in the tradition continual evidence of antinomies, explosive desires and rebellious individualism, and he insisted on a dualism, Sinai and Grizim, the law which is inscribed in stone and a freedom which is not. This duality made it easy for him to find an affinity between the novel and Jewish literary heritage. Even if he was obliged to formulate the moral of his works in the language of the devout Jewish moralist, still he could place at the center of the novel figures like Shlomo the Red or Reuben ben Shimon Raphaeli, and even like Miriam herself, who work toward human self-realization, the fulfillment of desires, success, fortune, intellectual freedom, and spiritual independence.

Here emerges the principal difference between Berdichewsky and Agnon, who could not progress very far along a similar artistic trajectory. For Agnon tradition and its literature were identified with Torah and the way of life prescribed by it. Agnon wanted to write within the tradition and not in conflict with it nor through a nostalgic appropriation of it (such as is evident in much modern Hebrew

literature before him). This desire prevented him at this stage from approaching the novel, and brought him instead to various substitute narrative modes like the *pinkas* or the *mayse-bukh*.

Nonetheless, the model of the chronicle or *pinkas* could not serve as a true substitute for the novel for several reasons. It would not be accepted by a wide reading public; it lacked dynamism and movement; and it could not offer the excitement that comes from identifying with fully realized fictional characters. But there was a deeper reason as well. The *pinkas* model had functioned as an *avoidance* of taking on the literary norms of the time. These were in the main the norms and assumptions of the novel (free and active will, individual self-realization, the fulfillment of national hopes in a rational and voluntary way, full erotic love, and so on.) Only by means of the novel itself was it possible to confront these assumptions and thus contend for the soul of the modern Jew. Orthodox Judaism had customarily been content to avoid such engagement and simply denounce the new literature. But Agnon was not prepared to cut himself off from the vital and alert part of the Jewish public which alone was interested in serious literature and in Agnon's work in particular. He sought a way of drawing close to the novel but keeping his distance at the same time and thereby keeping hold of religious principles that had grown stronger with his return to Erets Yisrael. To this end he had to find a way to the novel. In Agnon's encounter with the novel there was also something of a cultural mission. As a modern religious writer Agnon was keenly aware of the "damage" he thought was done to Hebrew literature at the hands of Mapu and Mendele, when it was married to the European novel and accepted not only structures and themes but spiritual values as well. The way to rescue the Hebrew novel from its "error" was not to evade it but to Judaize it and bring about its *tikkun*.

By basing *The Bridal Canopy* on *Don Quixote*, Agnon began his novelistic career by confronting these matters head on. In all its thematic and structural details *The Bridal Canopy* contradicts the basic spiritual presuppositions of the genre. If the novel stands primarily on the humanist affirmation of individual men each with his unique consciousness, Agnon chooses to concentrate his first novel on a model, exemplary man, a medieval figure with virtually no individual consciousness. The novel, moreover, called for a critical stance by the individual towards the conventions of society and emphasized his right to free movement within the social system in accordance with his personality and abilities. Agnon, on the other hand, creates a protagonist who is uncritical toward the norms of his society and who seeks not at all to change his place in the static social order. Will in the novel is often expressed in directed geographical movement, from which derives the pattern of the quest. In contrast, Agnon's Reb Yudel

is a man who yearns for absolute stasis. Mobility is forced on him, but his movement in geographic space lacks all meaning for him. While the novel emphasizes the critical stance of the individual toward received opinion, Agnon's hero interprets reality entirely in terms of scripture and its commentaries. The novel emphasizes the right of the individual to free emotional-erotic attachment with a member of the opposite sex according to the inclinations of the heart rather than the rules of the social order. *The Bridal Canopy* is based on a self-evident affirmation of the traditional institution of marriage in a way whose outcome is no less grotesque than the matches in Mendele's *The Beggars' Book.* (Yudel's daughter Pessele is a sexually ripe woman matched with a young boy who is carried to the bridal canopy almost like a baby.) The novel sees in the activity of the individual, as also in the activities of human groups, the source of change for personal or collective destiny. The human endeavor and rational capability of man to determine his own path, to correct his mistakes and to direct his efforts with exactness are what allow him to save himself from situations of distress. Agnon fashioned a story in which all man's deeds bring only an intensification of distress. Salvation comes from miraculous intervention.

Agnon's answer to the novel, then, was a kind of counter-genre. Just as Cervantes had made *Don Quixote* a reversal of the picaresque novels *Lazarillo de Tormes* and *Guzman de Alfarache,*[9] so *The Bridal Canopy* stood the humanist novel on its head. *The Bridal Canopy* represents both an investigation into the very sources of the European novel *and* a completely new departure. As such, *The Bridal Canopy* was a complete realization of Agnon's intention of *tikkun.*

Yet in the novels that followed, the signs of struggle became more pronounced. We can bring our discussion to an end by reflecting once more on the problem of closure. The plot of *The Bridal Canopy* could still be brought to full closure thanks to the brilliant and absurd Jewish tour-de-force which expressed the triumph of irrational faith over any other principle. In the later novels the problematic status of the closure became the main manifestation of the widening gap between the Jewish religious point of departure and the psychological, social and ethical reality of the contemporary Jew. This is the reason for Agnon's return at the end of his life to the *pinkas* model which requires no closure at all. The novel gradually became impossible for Agnon because the oppositions it contained could not be accommodated and therefore brought to conclusion.

It was in *Shira* that Agnon drew dangerously close to acknowledging the far-reaching secular conclusions implied by the narrative. In the reality of contemporary man—*l'homme moyen sensuel* like Manfred Herbst—only one power exists capable of imparting wholeness and continuity to a fragmented existence, and this power is not the power

of God but the power of sex and love which emerges from within man himself. By the same token, there is only one force capable of imparting wholeness and continuity to the verbal formulation and recounting of these experiences, and this force is not the force of the Torah but the force of poetic art. Not by chance did sex and art become embodied in a single character and single name: "Shira," that is, poetry. This figure, the greatest, most interesting and persuasive of the women figures in all Agnon's work, is the sacred martyr of humanistic faith, which denies God and recognizes only human existence. The entire book had to serve as her canonization, just as it had also to unfold the story of her passion and the story of her miraculous influence on Manfred Herbst, blind and obtuse man, whose eyes are suddenly opened by the force of her love, as if on the road to Damascus. Damascus here, naturally, is the leper colony. Accepting the wholeness offered by eros and poetry as one possible fulfillment for contemporary man meant exile to the leper colony.

As we have seen, Agnon did not know how to arrive at this exile without losing contact with the spiritual, personal source from which he set out in his path as a man and as an artist. For this reason he abandoned *Shira,* his most favored novel, and went on to works written in the *pinkas* model instead. If he had succeeded in ending *Shira,* his voyage from the tradition of Jewish pious literature to that of the European novel would have ended in brilliant artistic triumph, which, however, from Agnon's own point of view, would have constituted a major capitulation as well—a sinking into the rising tide of the destructive, alien, spiritual principle.

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NOTES

Some of the ideas in this paper were presented at the World Congress of Jewish Studies, 8 August 1985, and subsequently appeared in *Yediot Aḥaronot.*

1. Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot 'al sippurei Shay Agnon* [Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon] (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1962), p. 104.

2. See Sarah Hager's study, "*Only Yesterday:* The Formation of its Structure and its Unity" [Hebrew], in *S. Y. Agnon: Meḥkarim ute'udot* [SYA: Studies and Documents], ed. Gershon Shaked & Rafi Weiser (Jerusalem, 1978), pp. 154–94.

3. These issues were astutely assessed as early as in E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel.*

4. *A Simple Story,* trans. Hillel Halkin (New York, 1985), p. 230.

5. See Gershon Shaked, "The Deserted Plot of Land: Some Comments on a Missing Epilogue" [Hebrew], *Moznayim* 32:2 (1971): 115–23.

6. *Temol shilshom,* in *Kol sippurav shel S. Y. Agnon,* vol. 5 (Jerusalem & Tel Aviv, 1966): 607.

7. *A Simple Story,* p. 190.

8. Cf. Y. Rabinowitz, "On the Hebrew Short Story," in *Masluley sifrut* (Tel Aviv, 1971), Vol. 1, pp. 63–76. See also pp. 77–89.

9. See Claudio Guillén, "Genre and Countergenre: The Discovery of the Picaresque," *Literature As System* (Princeton, N.J., 1971), pp. 135-158.