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Agnon and the Feminine Metaphor

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## REVIEWS

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### **Agnon and the Feminine Metaphor**

Anne Golomb Hoffman. *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing*. Albany: State of New York University Press, 1991, 236 pp.

"Between Exile and Return": the title might seem rather tame for this intense feminist/poststructuralist rereading of Agnon. It joins a line of dialectical titles in the tradition of Agnon criticism, such as Shaked's *Agnon, a Revolutionary Traditionalist*, or Band's *Nostalgia and Nightmare*; and it conforms with this tradition in evoking the notion of a double face and a dual attitude toward some represented world.<sup>1</sup> Much of what has been written on Agnon rests on the understanding, developed in the 1940s and 1950s in the writings of Kurzweil, Sadan and others, that Agnon's depictions of the world of traditional Jewish piety are marked by ambiguity and irony. The wholeness and innocence of that world are either irretrievable, or inherently flawed, their absence concealed behind the pietistic style of Agnon's narrative personae.

Hoffman does not contradict this vision of Agnon, but in her reading, the relation between the writing and the world, or the writing and the writer's imagination, a relation that socioliterary criticism traditionally considers to be smooth and expressive, becomes opaque. The exile and return of her title are movements of meaning generated by images of texts within the fiction; the frame of reference is not a mimetic universe but a metaphorical "geography of language" and a "landscape of sacred writing" traversed by Agnon's *oeuvre*. This assertion of the tangibility and primacy of writing, which turns history and geography into figures for textuality, reverberates through the study in metaphors of wounds, body, decomposition, encrustations, and femininity that are used to describe texts and narrative operations. These drastic metaphors seek to strip writing of its traditional mystique of transcendence—to "reinstinctualize the Book," as Hoffman puts it, by revealing its function in the dynamics of human desire.

The very sound of this American and feminist discourse seems bold in the scholarly atmosphere of traditional Agnon criticism. And the title's discreet dislocation of a conventional subordination of text to life already announces very aptly, to my mind, those aspects of Hoffman's critical program that give her work its edge of originality. The first concerns her focus on texts within texts; the second, her understanding of textuality as such, influenced by Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of presence and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, and inspired by the radical association of textuality and sexuality in contemporary French feminist thought. The dual notion of an open writing oriented toward radical self-

critique and a writing that “recovers a relation to the body” is used here as an ideal, liberated horizon that Agnon’s fiction approximates in some key moments. In the particular context of modern Hebrew literary criticism, I find certain aspects of this new and controversial mode of reading not only attractive but also salutary.

Hoffman analyzes images of writing and writers, and stories about texts and the transmission of texts in order to bring out the contours of Agnon’s dialectical relationship to his own literary tradition. Agnon is unique among modern Hebrew fiction writers in adapting and synthesizing elements from the rabbinic and hassidic tradition to create modernist facsimiles of the traditional religious tale. In his early career Agnon was even mistaken for a straightforwardly pious storyteller. He cultivated this image of artistic innocence and even went so far as to trace some quasi-mythological correspondences between formative events in his own life and dates on the religious calendar (although Hoffman, alert to all manners of doubleness, reminds us that Agnon also left behind a safe record of the authentic dates). And while we know already from many previous studies that Agnon’s fiction expresses the ambiguous predicament of the modern secular writer who wields the tools of a tradition of religious faith, Hoffman’s specific focus on what she calls “dramas of writing” brings out something in this vast *oeuvre*, namely its intense preoccupation with and conflicted contemplation of its own historically determined literary identity, in a way that previous studies have not done. A dialecticism that tended to be suppressed or muted by the conventional emphasis on issues of world view or religious identity here becomes formalized. What emerges—the image of a pervasively reflexive *oeuvre*—is a remarkable turnabout from the early vision of Agnon as a writer wholly determined by tradition and lacking even the rudimentary contours of a modern, individualized consciousness.

Hoffman explains that Agnon’s modernist reflexivity is also clearly and specifically Jewish: its problematics stem from the special status of the Hebrew language and the religious canon in Judaism, the traditional reverence toward the Torah, and the mystical belief in the Torah as a kind of cosmic text that encompasses and creates the world. Agnon’s images of texts and his stories about writing are manifestations of this Jewish “thematics of the Book,” in Hoffman’s phrase. In various configurations, they play out versions, or visions, of the problematic passage of religious writing into the art of the novelist. At the sublime pole we find the hassidic stories of wonder-working rabbis and the myths of originary presence of Jewish mysticism, with their specific emphasis on the creative force of the letters of the Torah. The vision of *shlemut* (“wholeness,” “the wholeness of our elders”<sup>2</sup> and the unity of word and deed in mystical faith) is embodied, for example, in the myth of the infant who possesses complete knowledge of the Torah in the womb (*A Guest for the Night*), in allusions to the fictional life of Reb Yudel Hassid (*Only Yesterday*), or the miraculous writings of Rabbi Adam Baal Shem (“Upon a Stone”). These texts provide an allusive backdrop in stories depicting humble personal attempts at self-regeneration, often through an act of writing, or preservation and communication of a book. The old texts are often ironized by the very remoteness of their vision in the degraded and compromised reality of the present. But, as Hoffman points out, they retain their value as objects of a yearning and nostalgic desire for wholeness. The books of the

tradition emerge in the study less as sources of allusion and intertextual play than as elusive objects of desire.

Often in the shorter works, or in whole groups of stories, meaning is polarized. Hoffman analyzes the story "The Document," in the collection *The Book of Deeds*, to show how texts stripped of their religious significance resurface as the ominous documents of modern bureaucracy, with preservation and transmission becoming an incomprehensible and oppressive necessity. The autobiographical text *Pillars of Our House*, on the other hand, is a "fantasy of language in which full presence is restored to the word." The story "Upon a Stone" negotiates, more characteristically, an ambiguous vision. It recounts an existing hassidic tale of holy writings enclosed miraculously in a rock, but neglects to name a descendant who would repeat the magical act, thus enacting "a fiction of inclusion that conceals within it acknowledgment of its marginality."

The novels display, more generally, the problematics of the Book. In her chapter on the autobiographical novel *A Guest for the Night*, Hoffman discusses a familiar theme of Agnon criticism, that of the moral predicament of the modern novelist who attempts to rebuild himself by going back to his religious origins in his dilapidated Eastern European hometown. In *Only Yesterday* she uses a moment of writing to reinterpret the novel's ending—a traditionally knotty point for critics—in terms of the Lacanian Oedipus. In *Shira*, Agnon's last and unfinished novel, she considers how a particular set of images and texts combines into a radical critique of culture and of ideologies of writing.

But Hoffman is not simply telling us that textual imagery and stories about writing express a certain attitudinal syndrome. Rather, in bringing this evidence of the entanglement of writing with life within the representational universe of Agnon's fiction, she invites us to observe that texts reflect other texts; that narratives are structures of meaning that control and manipulate cultural ideologies; and that, more particularly, Agnon's narrative structures will often not close: the gaps and absences along the plot lines and in the endings of the novels reveal the subversive logic of textuality, a logic that may "exceed its narrator's and perhaps its author's efforts at mastery" (174). This "textual unconscious" (to adapt Riffaterre's suggestive title)<sup>3</sup> glimpsed in the gaps in the text works by opposition, denying cultural distinctions, embracing the Other, assimilating man to woman, book to body, health to disease and the sacred to the profane. To a large degree, Agnon's *oeuvre* is measured here by the extent to which it "attends to" (note the nurturing metaphor), that is, does not completely repress the assimilative momentum of textuality. Moments where cultural distinctions are effaced and closure suspended intimate the rejection, or even, in Hoffman's radical view, the actual dismantling of cultural ideologies. They "give access" to "vistas" of "unbounded" and "anti-ideological" writing, constituting the real drama evoked in the subtitle.

Thus Hoffman has veered away with great determination from the mimetic idea of the novel, with its notions of epic amplitude, verisimilitude and closure. I am tempted to describe her energetic project itself as a repressed Other emerging from the tradition of mimetic Agnon criticism. At her best, she effects a radical transposition of well-known mimetic interpretations of gaps and ambiguities in

Agnon's fiction—there are several particularly infamous such gaps—into a different critical language molded around the ideas of the instability of the sign, the autonomous psychoanalytic dynamics of textual “intercourse,” and writing as a precarious controlling of the play of signifiers. Thus, whereas many traditional interpretations might disregard ambiguity, or resolve it quasi-allegorically,<sup>4</sup> or consider it (as does Miron, for example; see my discussion below) a flaw deriving from Agnon's emotional ambivalence about novelistic form, Hoffman, on the other hand, will celebrate moments of ambiguity as a surfacing of the repressed madness in the text and a subversion of “fictions of closure, impermeability and fixed boundaries” (176). Hoffman frequently communicates this vision in the eloquent and aphoristic summations that come at the close of her chapters: “Agnon's writing engages a linguistic universe that resists assimilation to either the sacred or the mundane, while sharing in aspects of each” (122); “The text is not wholly open to the reader's construction, but neither is it closed or invariable” (122); “Agnon has forged a particularly modern scripture whose very fraudulence in one sense renders it authentic in another” (103); “Agnon's writing offers itself to the reader with an invitation to explore the discontinuities, contradictions, as well as the glimpses of a lost wholeness, that constitute its richness” (183).

Although I am troubled by the ideological coloration of Hoffman's suggestive and figurative prose, as well as the single-mindedness of her theoretical vision, I admit that the single-mindedness leads to some brilliant formulations, and that even readings whose general outlines seem ideologically biased invariably contain sidetracks and byways of great interest. Let me pause over two of her analyses of full-length works.

The first concerns what is perhaps the most controversial and interpretively “encrusted” (to use one of Hoffman's favorite metaphors) moments of novelistic breakdown in Agnon, namely the Balak subplot in *Only Yesterday*. Let me remind you briefly of this moment: Yitshak the Jerusalem house painter paints MAD DOG playfully on the back of a street dog; the amiable dog, now shunned everywhere, becomes “really” mad; it spreads fear through the streets of Jerusalem and sparks an allegorizing furor nationwide; it seeks out and bites Yitshak, who dies of the rabies; the blessing of rain comes to Jerusalem. One could hardly avoid detecting a movement of atonement and propitiation here, and critical debate has raged over issues devolving from it: Is the rain conciliatory, or rather, bitterly ironic? Does it complete the novel's ethical/religious framework, or is it alien, paganistic? What about the discrepancy between Yitshak's meek personality and the horror of his sacrificial death? How does the fantastic story of the philosophizing dog affect one's understanding of the novel as *The Realistic Epic of the Second Aliyah*? Behind these questions lie expectations of verisimilitude and an anxiety of closure that Hoffman does not share. Instead (I bring you only the central argument in her detailed and very insightful discussion of the novel), with a literal-mindedness evocative of Lacan's brilliant tackling of “The Letter” in his analysis of Poe's story,<sup>5</sup> she points out that Yitshak's is an act of writing—a mad writing “demonic in its randomness” (129). Balak the thinking dog who perambulates through Jerusalem in search of someone who would explain the writing on its back is an unmoored, “floating signifier” in search of its own signified. As an expression of the suppressed instability of the sign, the mad writing enacts an oedipal fantasy of transgression; it enacts an overturning of the paternal imposition of meaning.

Thus Yitshak's transgression is not a negligible but (in an impersonal sort of way) a radical one—he dies, and the novel closes with intimations of the repression of that death and of the moments of madness in the text: "The moments of excess in the novel are atoned for or repressed in the closure of the novel, whose rigid oedipal scheme of filial sacrifice attempts to contain the madness in the writing" (148).

It is to the credit of this interpretation that it evokes some impressive psychoanalytic investigations of moments of writing in fiction inspired by Lacan.<sup>6</sup> The fit between theory and textual reality is mutually illuminating: on the one hand we get a dramatization of the Lacanian knot of the Oedipus, the unconscious and the linguistic sign (so vivid that we almost believe we are beginning to understand Lacan), and, on the other hand, the coherence of the text in its literal integrity has been enhanced. For, certainly, this is not the first time that "Monsters from the Id" have been evoked in connection with Agnon's demonic dog; but the new emphasis on the "madness in the writing" illuminates not only the specificity of the central moment of indelible "inscription" but a large number of fictional details. I particularly liked the light shed on the fate of the Grunem/Feysch pair: fanatic preacher and author of writs of excommunication are silenced and struck dumb by the dog.

Finally, note that the edgy psychoanalytical terminology, which has been rather reductive and intrusive in traditional Freudian interpretations, here expresses an impersonal symbolic structure, a dynamism in the text that could take many names. One could name any number of mimetic or formal elements in this complex novel, from Zionism to religious Judaism to real, present and absent paternal figures and down to the very pose of piety adopted by the narrative (one almost wishes Hoffman had investigated *this* image of repression a bit further, rather than withdrawing into a more traditional and, to my mind, unnecessary analysis of the novel's various paternal figures) as agents of repression; one could consider the Balak interpolation an eruption of mad writing within the novel's paternalistic discourse. Hoffman's analysis sparks several of these very intriguing lines of thought.

But the vision of reflexiveness and indeterminacy has its limitations. I am troubled by the diffuse aura of reference given to the term "indeterminacy," and by its emotional coloration through the study. A catchword for anything qualified, tentative, complex or complicated, it refers to ironic effects, visions of a flawed *shlemut*, movements of dialectical signification in texts, or the eerie impression that stories left unfinished by their author make on us. Often, it is praised as the negation and abolition of obscure, sometimes figurative agents of oppression. A variety of ideas of origin—Jewish mysticism's myths of wonder-working texts and prenatal knowledge, the Lacanian/Freudian positing of a pre-Oedipal, archaic state of undifferentiation, the feminist notion of a reinstancualized writing that "fuses" book and body, the repressed madness of textuality—are invoked to color the notion of indeterminacy with connotations of liberation. And although Hoffman cautions against the radical feminists' "valorization of the pre-Oedipal," as well as against the simplistic understanding of the concept of indeterminacy as a "free" play of signifiers, her prose plays out, almost hypnotically at times, a

shimmering drama of liberation. To a person unfamiliar with the writings of the radical feminists, the prose seems odd indeed: we read about the “emergence of instinctual rhythms that would otherwise remain bound in syntax and the structure of predication” (34); about “fictions of closure, impermeability and fixed boundaries” to which the liberated, “erotized” [eroticized?] and “anti-ideological” text “opens itself up” (176); of a “turn away from metaphysical oppositions” that “alters the reader’s sense of texts as bounded entities that can be described objectively” (151); and the ominous “exhaustion” of “a certain kind of narrative” (172). We feel an antagonism directed diffusely against “boundedness,” “centeredness,” closure and invariability (how can one *not* declare oneself the enemy of *that*—and live?) in the name of another metaphorical cluster that includes, by tautology, the unbounded, the permeable, etc. One feels compelled—as Virginia Woolf once complained—to make a charitable contribution. Is there not some excessiveness in saying that “in Agnon, the borders of the text disappear” (p. 182), and an unnecessary circumlocution in the statement, found on page 27, that “we may not be able to read the writing on the old Commandant’s documents, but we can write the reading that is our interaction with the text and glimpse in that reading traces of our own archaic script”?

This prose turned out to be rather challenging for me (I am the Average Reader, see). But I tell myself that I am probably overly “bound by the structure” of academic discourse. It may be that, between bits of incisive analysis, I should relax to the beat of instinctual rhythms. After all, Hoffman is attempting, quite ambitiously, to transpose our mainstream (paternalistic?) literary discourse into the radical terms of an overarching and sexualized textuality. And certainly there is no denying the attractiveness of the feminine metaphor for texts: of writing that is “an invitation to explore,” writing that “opens itself up to a movement of . . .,” writing that “teases us with the gaps and discontinuities . . . that constitute its richness,” etc. I only wish that this figurative relationship were not treated so frequently as if it were literal, with texts being described actively as dislocating and dismantling things, inviting, heaving, or being “cultivated and pain-filled”; and I wish, furthermore, that the feminine definition of textuality were less apparently dependent upon that negative horizon, where we find enemies massed in great clouds of simplified contours (patrocentrism, fictions of closure, the middle-class values of traditional realism?). Sprung from a feminist agenda, this definition seems, in turn, to be directed mainly at feminist assenters.

Hoffman’s interpretation of yet another instance of nonclosure in Agnon, the famous last chapter of his unfinished novel *Shira*, displays, for all its interest and thoroughness, some of these negative traits. Again, some brief background: Agnon had abandoned work on *Shira* after working on the novel throughout the fifties and sixties. After his death a final chapter, finished several years previously, was included in the published book in a separate appendix. A circumstantial gap remains between the point to which he brought the story (“Manfred Herbst I will show you, Shira I will not show you, for her traces are not known and no one knows where she is”) and the resolution offered in that chapter, in which Manfred has found the nurse Shira and has joined her in a Jerusalem leprosarium. What does the fragmentariness signify? Was the last chapter rejected, or is its relegation to an appendix simply the acknowledgment of an incidental gap still separating it from the rest of the story, as Miron (see below) seems to think? Hoffman’s answers

to these questions follow from her general argument about the book. She follows a line of images and accounts of lepers, wounds, dismemberments, sexual perversion and violence in the novel. Following Shocken<sup>7</sup> and others, she argues that this imagery is fundamentally transgressive. It confuses gender, explodes the notion of normalcy, and embraces and mingles together all the mythologized Others of European culture: lepers, Jews, women and the body—or rather, “The Leper,” “The Jew,” etc. She argues convincingly that this other reality dislocates more than just the personal, bourgeois and academic lifestyle of the protagonist, Manfred Herbst; it constitutes a subversive commentary on a whole cultural enterprise embodied in the “German-Jewish Book.” More drastically, “Agnon’s text enacts the move away from a logocentric schema in the direction of the rediscovery of a [maternal] matrix that is devalued and suppressed in culture, but that resurfaces here in a fragmented narrative of fascination with the body” (151–52).

The novel, says Hoffman, resists closure and therefore remained unfinished. In fact, it is “characterized more by permeability than by boundedness” (?); just as its hero Manfred Herbst is “the parody of an archetypal masculine that has exhausted itself,” so the novel “exhausts a particular type of narrative” (logocentric narrative?). The suspended ending is “a striking alternative” to the closure intimated in the discarded chapter, producing “a fragmented narrative that evades and exceeds its narrator’s and perhaps its author’s effort at mastery.” “*Shira*’s status as unfinished text, teasing us with the disappearance of its eponymous heroine, its gaps and fragments, offers access to an experience of the text that exceeds and evades our grasp”; it also “offers a development of anti-ideological writing . . . that valorizes the permeable or undecidable without repudiating structure. *Shira* chronicles an indeterminacy in the text to which the name of woman is attached” (151, 172–76).

It has always seemed to me a great pity that *Shira* was left unfinished; I have always cherished the transfiguration in the final chapter, gap or no gap, as one of the great novelistic endings of all times; consequently, there is an emotional basis for my discomfort with Hoffman’s enthusiasm for the fragmentariness of the text. But to argue as I do (with others) for the powerful correctness of the ending is only another way of saying that the novel tends very consistently toward its final, transfiguring moment, and is not nearly as ideologically self-conscious and “turned back upon itself” as Hoffman considers it to be. The story is so much better *with* the ending that to devalue that ending reveals a kind of preconceived preference for absences that turns on a confusion between closure as a formal convention and closure as a metaphor for repression, denial, close-mindedness, etc. To reach the vision of a tantalizing, open writing, certain details and distinctions in the story that point toward closure have been devalued, amounting almost to a misreading. They revolve chiefly around Manfred Herbst’s capacity for spiritual regeneration: his dissatisfaction with family life, his stumbling search for Shira and for illumination, and the difference between his scholarly pursuits, which now in his middle age are indeed exhausted, and, on the other hand, his dawning wish (obscure, ridiculous, yet persistent) to write a tragedy. These—the academic books and the unwritten tragedy—which Hoffman treats equally as manifestations of “male exhaustion,”<sup>8</sup> seem marked with different values in the novel. Finally, there is a fit between Herbst’s emotional realignments and the



European Holocaust occurring in the fictional background. The vitality and responsiveness of both his exiles and his returns go undetected by Hoffman.

Why should a critique of certain ideologies in *Shira* be defined so strongly (and fuzzily) as “a development of anti-ideological writing”? And why should formal closure mar this development? The novels of classical realism (say, the stories of Balzac, which have enjoyed particular critical attention on this very issue) seem to consist of just such—and often just as unconscious—enterprises of ideological “dismantling,” even though they do provide strong formal closures.

Hoffman’s discussion of *Shira* brings out a connection made routinely and all too easily in her study between the representation of the problematics of writing and/or writers and, on the other hand, novelistic self-deconstruction. There is a certain loss of the specificity of novels, in their various subgenres, involved in this sweeping perspective. For example, it strikes me as rather misleading to invoke Cervantes and Sterne, and Robert Alter’s book on that tradition, in connection with *A Guest for the Night*, and to say that “Agnon’s exploitation of a structure in which narrator is protagonist places him within the tradition of the self-conscious novel in European literature” (an insufficient condition?) or that (p. 81) “while Agnon’s narrator may move further in clocktime than does Tristram Shandy, *A Guest for the Night* is no less complex in its attention to . . . time than is Sterne’s novel” (isn’t the fact that he does move further in clocktime a fundamental difference, somehow?).

That Agnon wrestled with novelistic forms and ideologies is an established critical fact; it underlies, for example, Shaked’s investigations of Agnon’s proliferating subplots, as well as attempts to connect Agnon with narrative traditions on the periphery of European realism. But his may have been a rejection not of closure but of what he perceived to be the novel’s secular dangers. This is what Dan Miron suggests, in his essay “Negotiating a Foreign Genre: Agnon’s Transactions with the Novel,” published in this journal in 1987. And as I read Miron and Hoffman side by side on the issue of *Shira*’s problematic ending, I realized (while sitting, greatly fascinated and balancing myself precariously, on the fence) that I was witnessing one of those Moments: the deployment of two entirely different, although perhaps equally compulsive models of reading, hereby dubbed the Israeli/mimetic vs. the American/feminist/poststructuralist. I bring you Miron’s view because I think that while his instinctively accurate reading brings out the excesses of Hoffman’s vision, his theoretical blind spots also make her project understandable.

Miron considers *Shira* a “realistic/psychological” masterpiece: “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*.” Blithely oblivious to what Hoffman considers a “teasing” and inviting openness, Miron considers the last chapter, instead, to be the story’s inevitable but—unfortunately for modern Hebrew literature—unreached goal: “Agnon knew the concluding goal toward which the story was supposed to lead, but he could find no convincing artistic path to it because [in such a novel] such action offers little credibility . . . the author had to arrange some profound but plausible turnabout in order to make the conclusion seem more natural. His efforts did not pay off . . . 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." But the problem was not simply technical. Agnon was ambivalent about the ideology of novels:

the novel as a form expressing dynamism and future change—this was what was "alien" to Agnon. . . . He set out to perform a great act of *tikkun* or religious reformation in the world, and like all who attempt *tikkun* he put himself in the heart of the danger. . . . He perceived a foreign quality in the novel, because . . . it was the prime vehicle of expression for secular humanistic European culture. . . . In *Shira* he drew dangerously close to acknowledging the far-reaching secular conclusions implied by the narrative. Not by chance did sex and art become embodied in a single character and single name: "*Shira*," that is, poetry. This figure . . . is the sacred martyr of humanistic faith. 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. If Agnon 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 (26).

Characteristically, Miron clinches his insight with a fact gleaned from Agnon's literary history: "after Agnon exhausted his ability to deal with the novel in *Shira*, the *pinkas* [Jewish community ledger, a form Miron considers to have been more "natural" to Agnon] returned to the surface of his work. There it spread and flourished like a plant whose growth crowds out a natural rival."

So much is different here: the interpretation and even mere perception of the unfinished form; the role assigned to the psychology of the real Agnon (Miron consults it frequently); the evaluation of *Shira's* place in the tradition of realism; the name assigned to Agnon's ambivalence (Miron's has the distinct advantage of being culturally specific, rooted in Agnon's Jewishness). Miron is evaluative: he is concerned with writing as an "achievement" (*heseg*); Hoffman is not: on this point her feminist penchant for diffusive states combines very nicely with her American tact.

The two describe the male character differently and even disagree—and this is quite amusing—about the meaning of the final embrace in the leprosarium.<sup>9</sup> Even the literary context they draw around Agnon has a different "feel": Miron considers Agnon a "modern religious writer" and invokes Yiddish, the *pinkas* and *mayse-bukh* as his natural forms; his Agnon views the European novel from afar as a zone of rakish enterprising, and approaches it gingerly with a mystic's sense of descent into sin; Hoffman's Agnon leaves the novel, that bourgeois thing, far behind him and soars, in spite of himself, into the boundless horizon of a Derridean *écriture* where Kafka and Jabes (a comparison with whom occupies the first part of her book) hover.

Notice Miron's metaphors: he uses spreading and low-growing plants to invoke writing as the pliable, natural, and integral product of the soil of the creative imagination. Elsewhere he has written about realism as a "natural

flow" disrupted by modernist dissonances.<sup>10</sup> The complications always seem to occur on a level removed from the writing, in the values and themes of the work that derive quite often from the author's personal conflicts, which are significant, in turn, as the conflicts of a whole literary generation. His "novel" is, further, a "sculpture": a distinct, fully coherent and self-enclosed form of representation measured by golden rules of composition. Deviations from these rules result in problems of composition. Where Hoffman sees the novel as a disheveled and unruly thing "dismantled" by internal tensions, he views it as such a triumph of naturalness and integrity that, for him, the unfinished novel can only be a "torso": something truncated that can only have meaning as a piece of what one must imagine it would have become had it been allowed to complete its natural growth.

Yet notice the instinctive poetical aptness of Miron's image of the torso, which reverberates with *Shira's* own images of dismemberment.

If Miron's understanding of Agnon's emotional conflict and of the novel *Shira* seems to me instinctively and brilliantly correct (the result, I think, of his meticulous, imaginative and erudite re-creation of the Jewish literary heritage and cultural climate that brought forth Agnon), his theoretical certainties could stand, well . . . a little shaking. It is perhaps in reaction to certainties of this kind that Hoffman glorifies dislocations and diffusiveness, holding up the image of an erotic writing surging with desire, a writing whose problematics cannot be abstracted from itself and that breathes through its gaps and teasing inconsistencies. One (being a woman) rather likes this image; and one wishes that Hoffman had engaged in more dialogue with the tradition of Agnon criticism.

DEBORAH STEINHART

## NOTES

1. Critics spoke of the "double bottom" of Agnon's fiction, his Sphinx-like face, his "dialectics of simplicity"; Shaked named the chapter on Agnon in the 1983 volume of his *History of Modern Hebrew Fiction* "The Crossroads" (*hatsomet*), suggesting convergence as well as bifurcation. Agnon negotiates a passage between artistic generations, between tradition and modernity, religious faith and art. For a discussion of these and other views of Agnon's "doubleness" see Hillel Barzel's Theoretical Introduction in *Shai Agnon, Selected Critical Essays on His Work*, ed. Hillel Barzel (Tel Aviv, 1982 [Hebrew]), p. 19 ff.

2. This significant term, *shlemut zkeneinu*, is misspelled *zikneinu* throughout (p. 73, pp. 372–73), in one of several unfortunate mistransliterations (*parshat* for *parashat* [70], *Meshlemut le'avodah* for *mishlemut la'avodah* [216], *meBraslav* for *miBraslav* [219, 221], *kipnei* for *kifnei* [133, in Reb Grunem's famous phrase, *Pnei hador kifnei hakelev*, "the face of the generation is like the face of a dog"). I wish American transliterators would be less cavalier with the Hebrew vowel system.

3. Michael Riffaterre, "The Intertextual Unconscious," *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1987): ii:371–85. The term refers to a mechanism whereby key names resurface in fragmented and displaced form along the Proustian narrative.

4. Hoffman wisely refrains from discussing the allegorical branch of Agnon criticism. Meshulam Tukhner, whose 1968 book *Pesher Agnon (The Meaning of Agnon)* represents this approach at its most dogmatic, is not mentioned in her references.

5. Jacques Lacan, "Seminar on the Purloined Letter," trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*, eds. Muller and Richardson (Baltimore, 1988).

6. Hoffman's references have guided me to some important collections of Lacanian readings of the text. Of these let me mention as particularly compelling the essays by Shoshana Felman, Barbara Johnson and Ross Chambers in *The Purloined Poe*; Felman's reading of Balzac's "The Girl with the Golden Eyes" in "Rereading Femininity," *Yale French Studies* 62, 1981 and her reading of "The Turn of the Screw" in "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," *Literature and Psychoanalysis, the Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. Shoshana Felman, Baltimore, 1982; and Robert Con Davis's "Critical Introduction: The Discourse of the Father," in *The Fictional Father, Lacanian Readings of the Text* (Amherst, 1981).

7. Schocken's excellent essay mentioned by Hoffman, "The Leprosy Motif in *Shira* and 'Ad 'olam" (*Shai Agnon, Studies and Documents*, eds. Shaked and Weiser, Jerusalem, 1978) is particularly relevant to her discussion. Schocken, like Hoffman, follows the central articulations of the motif of leprosy to show how it develops into a paradoxical expression of purity; the assimilation involves, for Schocken as for Hoffman, the rejection of culture—Schocken describes it rather quaintly as "the rejection of the way of life of civilized people" (*dehiyat hatarbut shel adam min hayishuv*). The motif foreshadows the final embrace in the leprosarium, which Schocken considers to be a state of redemption, or grace, *geulah*. He argues for accepting the final chapter as the novel's authoritative closure on the basis of this perceived continuity.

8. Hoffman treats male exhaustion again in a recent article (*Prooftexts*, September 1991) on Yaakov Shabtai's novel, *Past Continuous*. As her title, "Constructing Masculinity," suggests, Hoffman explores the avenues of masculine self-definition as represented in the three male characters, who all fail in one way or another to resolve their oedipal struggle. Here, too, I find the feminist focus disturbing, since the novel depicts an unraveling of personality and self that transcends gender. Perhaps one should consider the novel's unique syntactic structure—one continuous sentence—not an expression of the male characters' helpless interdependence but rather, the emblem of the inexorable unraveling of the fabric of life by death.

9. For Hoffman, "embracing the disease" signifies "sealing the compact with the other that is empathy" and "recovering a relation to the body." In this scheme the physical contact, when the sweat of Shira's leprous hand covers Manfred's, is obviously of essential importance. Miron has a different perspective: "Herbst would have had to cease being *l'homme moyen sensuel*," he says, "and discover deep within the strength to live solely on a metaphysical level, basing his existence entirely on love that brings with it no contact of the flesh. After all," he explains reasonably, "Shira suffers from leprosy." This pragmatism contrasts sharply with Hoffman's fiercely ideological position. A further encroachment of the mundane is Schocken's suggestion (in "The Leprosy Motif," p. 230) that Herbst may have wanted to join Shira in the leprosarium so as to become infected with her disease, thereby allowing his wife Henrietta to sue for a divorce, since he did not have the courage to divorce her himself.

10. See Miron's study of intertextuality in Gnessin in "Hooks in the Nose of Eternity" [Hebrew], U. N. Gnessin: *Studies and Documents*, eds. Miron and Laor (Jerusalem, 1986).