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AGNON AND GERMAN NEO-ROMANTICISM

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Notes

AGNON AND GERMAN NEO-ROMANTICISM

[Dr. Rechnitz] stayed in his room devoting himself entirely to his work. He would take up some piece of seaweed, cut it and examine it under the microscope, then attach it to a sheet of paper, fold the sheet, place it in his great album and note down its name, its habitat, and the date when he had drawn it out of the sea. . . . The sea gave forth its daily harvest, and at night, under the moon, the daughters of Jaffa took their walks by the shore. . . . But you will not find Rechnitz there. . . . That album is the bliss of his eye and soul.*

S. Y. Agnon's *Shevu'at emunim* ("Betrothed," 1943) is the story of Jacob Rechnitz, a respected botanist, and his various entanglements: with seaweed, with six young Jaffa women, and with Susan Ehrlich, his childhood sweetheart. In outline, the story tells of Jacob's divided life. Though devoted to biology—he is a rising star in his profession—Jacob often is seen taking evening strolls with the six young ladies. (Together, notes the narrator, they form a fixed constellation of sorts, the "Seven Planets.") Rechnitz is not at all torn between the two realms; apparently he enjoys them both. His botanical research is central and solid, his romantic involvements casual and complementary. The balance, however, is soon disturbed by Susan Ehrlich's sudden re-entry into his life. Visiting Jaffa while on a world tour with her father, the Consul (Rechnitz's former patron), Susan reminds Rechnitz of their childhood vow, an "oath of betrothal" (of the story's title) to one another. She makes him repeat the oath and elicits his promise to keep his word. Jacob does so, but the incident sets him into an emotional quandary. His equanimity lost, Jacob attempts to ward off the predicament by total immersion in his work (described in the introductory excerpt). The matter is held in abeyance by a strange sleeping sickness which has affected Susan. Meanwhile, the Jaffa maidens converge and press Jacob for some entertainment: one evening they snatch him from his room for a walk on the beach. In a playful mood, the girls suggest a race, the winner to be crowned with a garland of seaweed from Rechnitz's laboratory. In the midst of the race, Susan appears mysteriously among the runners. She wins, takes the seaweed wreath and places it on Jacob's head.

*S. Y. Agnon, "Betrothed," in *Two Tales*, translated by Walter Lever (New York, 1966), pp. 117–119.

"Betrothed" has received a thorough treatment by Agnon critics. Analyses and interpretations of the story run the gamut from careful tracings of motif structure, to suggestions of psychological import, to determinations of all-out allegory. My own view is to identify the story centrally as an ironic love story, to remove it from allegorical projections which seem superimposed. The patterns of ambiguity, which pervade the narrative—a complex irony which has been the main cause of the great variety of interpretations—are located primarily in the central character's areas of conflict. Rechnitz is caught between the innocent-turned-serious oath to marry Susan and his rather casual—and preferred—relationship with the other six women. His real passion has been his scientific work with species of seaweed; the uncommitted nature of his social relations has allowed him to lead a controlled existence. With Susan's willful resurrection of a long forgotten commitment, Jacob's equipose is shattered. Susan's victorious crowning of Jacob brings the dilemma to its climax, and the reader is left with Agnon's oft-used ploy of purposeful irresolution.

It is not so much a proper interpretation of "Betrothed" which has engaged my attention; rather, it is a query into the story's roots, into its literary genealogy. Most of Agnon's love stories have heavy doses of irony and ambiguity; many are only peripherally "Jewish" in character and theme (e.g., *Giv'at haḥol* [1920], *Bidmi yameha* [1923], *Tehilla* [1950], *'Edo ve'Enam* [1950]). The presence of a traditional milieu tends to be either a neutral backdrop or, more often, a reinforcing element of irony (e.g., *Agadat hasofer* [1919]). Whatever the particular blend of ingredients or thematic focus, these stories reflect an abiding interest on Agnon's part in the ironic love tale; in turn, this interest seems to infer a distinct source of his literary imagination.

The source I have been exploring is German Neo-Romanticism, an area generally overlooked in Agnon research. The term "Neuromantik" seems to include within it several distinct but overlapping trends and periods in German literature and art from about 1890 to 1920. (Agnon lived in Germany from 1912 to 1924.) The particular mode of expression, which appears most relevant for Agnon studies, is called "Jugendstil," meaning, in literal terms, the style generally attributed to authors and poets who contributed to or wrote in the manner of the turn-of-the-century literary magazine *Jugend*. Broadly speaking, Jugendstil constituted an artistic reaction to naturalism. Its writers (though by no means a unified group) were concerned not with worldly issues but with aesthetic expressibility and appeal. Their aim, in one critic's definition, was to write "harmless, stylized vignettes." Topics reflected in Jugendstil writings include the life of leisure, recreation, beauty, nature, and casual flirtations. Closely related to Agnon's works, the love stories in particular, are the Jugendstil motifs of a restrained eroticism and a purposeful vagueness.

Once placed within this particular genealogical parameter, *Shevu'at emunim* reads like a Hebrew version of a Jugendstil creation. The study of botany, for example, becomes a consuming pastime during the Jugendstil period; one writer characterizes the entire trend as "the green love of algae." Main fictional characters are pampered young women of the upper middle classes, and many are dreamy maidens who seem suspended in sleep or in a trance-like state (*Schlafbefangenheit*). Figures of water nymphs and mermaids, often

bedecked with flowers and crowns, appear frequently in Jugendstil art and literature. Main activities—in German life as well as the arts—include recreation in parks and at beaches, athletic events, and races. The sea and its underwater world of plants possess natural and secret properties which inspire both mystical and artistic possibilities. Young girls, some boy-like in manner and physique, some wearing flower garlands or bearing roses, populate the scene and participate in the leisurely, sportive events. Paintings of the period depict nymphs wearing crowns of flowers or seaweed; they rise from the sea bearing crowns aloft, their hair resembling seaweed, trailing into the water.

All these selected motifs play a role, dramatic or descriptive, in "Betrothed." Although the aspects of theme, character, or action do not in themselves embody the gist of the story, which Agnon has woven so effectively, they do evince undeniable evidence that the Jugendstil mode must be considered a central source of Agnon's romantic tales. Beyond this genre and beyond Jugendstil itself, the wide range of German Neo-Romanticism—from Impressionism, to the Gothic revival, to Expressionism—should prove to be a fertile field indeed for Agnon research.

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