



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

---

The Unreliable Narrator in Agnon's Ancestral Tales

Author(s): ESTHER FUCHS

Source: *Prooftexts*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (SEPTEMBER 1983), pp. 278-284

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20689080>

Accessed: 30-01-2017 20:26 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



*Indiana University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Prooftexts*

Therefore, in the first part he precedes like a prophet, i.e. he speaks before Christ as the prophets spoke before Christ. In this final part he speaks after Christ like an apostle, i.e. bearing the figure of the apostles who preached after Christ.<sup>21</sup>

The three parts of the psalm serve as the threefold parts of the economy of salvation. The Christian examination of the structure of the psalm provided no relationship between the David of the Old Testament and the meaning of the psalm. Rashi's exposition seems to respond to contemporary Christian exegesis in both form and content. It may not be possible to claim that Rashi knew the *Glossa Ordinaria* directly in its earliest stages of development. However, his concentration on structure of the narrators of various sections in the psalm and the consistent focus on linking the entire psalm with the narrative of David in the book of Samuel appears to refute the Christian interpretation. By joining the second psalm to the day of David's coronation Rashi set the appropriate context for the messianic interpretation of classical rabbinic literature. His innovative exegetical technique strengthened the basis for the traditional interpretation.

MICHAEL A. SIGNER  
Hebrew Union College, Los Angeles

## The Unreliable Narrator in Agnon's Ancestral Tales

In the body of Agnon's work there is a discernible and familiar group of texts which are set in the premodern world of East European Jewry and told using many of the conventions of pious narratives. This group, known as the ancestral tales, includes preeminently *Hakhnasat kala*, as well as such short works as *'Agunot*, *Vehaya he'akov lemishor*, *Agadat hasofer*, *Hanidah* and *Bilvav yamim*. Together the works have been repeatedly read in Agnon criticism as authentic hasidic tales. The keynote is Kurzweil's pronouncement regarding the *Bridal Canopy* [*Hakhnasat kala*]: "For the last time [Agnon] presents the reader with the great harmony of life, which is past and gone. But unlike the maskilim, Agnon perceives Jewish religious society mainly as positive" (p. 25).

The emphasis on harmony in the ancestral tales, I want to suggest, results from a failure to perceive the ironic distance between the implied author and the unreliable narrator. The nostalgia belongs to the consciousness of the unreliable narrator, not to that of the implied author, who embodies the authoritative point of view in the narrative. The confusion of these two disparate perspectives underlies, for example, the interpretation of "The Outcast" as an exemplary hasidic tale (Moked, p. 207) and the idealization of "Agunot" as a religious allegory (Barzel). But as Sadan, Band and most recently Shaked have demonstrated, the internal discrepancies constitute signals which preclude a naive interpretation of *The Bridal Canopy*. These discrepancies indicate the author's ambiguity vis-a-vis his protagonist (Sadan, Band) and the novel's comic perspective (Shaked).

One of the distinctive features of Agnon's ancestral tale, I would like to suggest, is its ironic point of view. This point of view has far-reaching implications

21. P. Lombard, *Commentarium in Psalmos, Patriologia Latina*, 191:73.

concerning the author's attitudes towards the represented reality of the tale (the Jewish community, its customs and values) and the representational medium itself (the narrative conventions of the ancestral tale). The ironic point of view in Agnon's ancestral tales is mediated by the unreliable narrator who embodies the naive worldview of Jewish orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> This narrator offers a glib, superficial and facile evaluation of his highly problematic story. His unawareness of the social and religious criticism implied by the work turns him into the true *alazon* or impostor of the ancestral tale.

My intention here is to describe briefly a few of the characteristic techniques which Agnon uses to drive a wedge between the authorial and the unreliable points of view: false representation, false praise, false defense and omission of censure.

"Two Scholars Who Lived in Our Town" depicts the conflict between the impoverished and proud Rabbi Moshe Pinhas and the rich and venerated Rabbi Shlomo Eliyahu. Among other things, this conflict dramatizes the economic and social tensions underlying the traditional Jewish community in Europe. By focusing on the personal, economic and social factors as the major determinants of the plot, the story stresses the peripheral function which the Torah fulfilled in Jewish communal life. The story alludes to the political power of the rich families, who would purchase rabbinic positions and control the religious functions of the community. But the narrator's concluding statement of purpose referring to "the time when the Torah was the glory of Israel" gives a radically different view of the situation:

In this tale I did not intend to tell about a miracle of a miracle man nor to tell about the zealousness of Reb Moshe Pinhas, rather, I told about deeds of two learned men who were in our city two-to-three generations ago, at a time when the Torah was the glory of Israel and all of Israel followed the ways of the Torah, which is the joy of God our stronghold till the coming of the Savior, and afterwards when we may hear God's Torah from the mouth of the righteous Messiah when he sits and studies the Torah with all of Israel. (*Samukh venir'eh*, p. 52)

The incompatibility of this statement with the story as a whole excludes the possibility that the narrator reflects the stance of the author. The naive and optimistic view expressed by the narrator cannot be shared by the implied author.

A similar discrepancy between the implication of the tale and the narrator's concluding statement of purpose can be found in "The Tale of Rabbi Yosef, or Torah for Its Own Sake." It is a tale of economic plight caused by a Jewish competitor who manages to evict Rabbi Yosef's family from their own store. The focus on the economic wretchedness of the family also ridicules the protagonist, Rabbi Yosef himself, who relies on a divine miracle and on his wife's hard labor. According to the narrator's statement, however, the tale was meant only

1. Leah Goldberg was the first to distinguish between narrator and implied author in her analysis of "Two Scholars Who Lived in Our Town." She bases her distinction on linguistic and historical discrepancies in the story. Arnold Band refers to the unreliable narrator in one of Agnon's non-ancestral tales, "In the Flower of Her Youth." The distinction here is facilitated by the gender and age of Tirza, the protagonist first-person narrator.

to tell the story of Rabbi Yosef of Jerusalem who studies Torah for its own sake: "And our intention has been but to tell the tale of Rabbi Yosef, one of the dignitaries of Jerusalem, who used to learn the Torah for its own sake" (*Elu ve'elu*, p. 429).

By praising what he knows to be absent qualities, the ironist manages to emphasize and ridicule the impostor's drawbacks. A good example is the introduction to Chapter Eleven in book One of *The Bridal Canopy* in which the narrator claims that his sole purpose is "to praise Rabbi Israel Shlomo of blessed memory. Therefore I introduced a man by his name, in order to start a conversation about him" (*Hakhnasat kala*, p. 123). But the tales about Rabbi Israel Shlomo highlight the leader's egocentricity and his indifference to the community. The community leader is more concerned about Lasunka, his cat, than about impending pogroms. He is busy plotting and competing against other rich Jews, in order to maintain his superiority and secure his political authority. As much as the stories contribute to Rabbi Shlomo Israel's disgrace, they ridicule the point of view of the unreliable narrator who insists that the denigrating stories are eulogies. By presenting pettiness as magnanimity and by praising what is worthy of ridicule, the narrator undermines his own credibility.

The unreliable narrator of *The Bridal Canopy* lavishes praise on yet another dubious character, the cantankerous and egocentric Rabbi Ephraim. Oblivious to the latter's shameless harassment of the city's hasidim and his humiliation of his wife, and of Reb Yudel, the narrator congratulates himself for being able to recount Reb Ephraim's "good deeds": "Blessed be He who gave such a son to Abraham our father, of blessed memory, and blessed be he who helped us recount his good deeds" (*Hakhnasat kala*, p. 112). In the introduction to the second chapter of "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," the narrator states that the chapter will show how the protagonist Menashe Haim enhances the good traits of the people of Israel. But exactly the opposite is achieved by this chapter, which goes on to depict the indifference of the avaricious community toward the poor. An ironic effect is likewise achieved when the narrator gives effusive praise to God, "the merciful Protector of man," while describing Menashe Haim's misery. The praise satirizes the unfeeling and unself-conscious narrator and by implication, turns into a caustic criticism of God, who all but ignores the poor and the needy.

The ancestral narrator of "Up and Down" explains the disasters which have befallen the protagonist, Rabbi Hanan Abba, as expressions of God's mercy: "The Lord of mercy does not start by affecting one's mind. The Holy One, blessed be He, waited until Reb Hanan lost his possessions, and only then, obscured his wife's mind" (*Elu ve'elu*, p. 159). The narrator ignores the injustice involved in meting out harsh punishments to righteous and innocent people. In this naive theodicy, God's mercy is demonstrated in the gradation of the disasters he inflicts on human beings. The scope of the ironic distance is in direct proportion to the intensity of the narrator's enthusiasm. In "The Outcast," the narrator castigates the protagonist for not appreciating God's mercy and justice:

Who will open your eyes Gershom, complaining about your Lord. Didn't your grandfather, Avigdor, write come and see the greatness and praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, for in her youth your mother fell into the

river and was saved from death so that she leaves sons after her, and you sit and doubt God's blessed ways and add straw to the fire of Hell. (*Elu ve'elu*, p. 30)

But the narrator's omission of God's final failure to rescue Gershom's mother from death casts doubt on God's ways and on the naive theodicy of the ancestral narrator.

The incongruity between the iconoclastic implications of the narrative and the narrator's unreserved praise of God undermines the judgment, the judged, and the judge himself.

A parallel technique to false praise is false defense. By defending a worthless character or cause, the unreliable narrator stresses the addressee's flaws and his own poor judgment.

The narrator of "And The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" presents the outrageous conduct of the Jews of Buczacz vis-a-vis Kreindl Tsharne as mere "procrastination":

God forbid that the people of Buczacz neglect to do a *mitsva*. But this is the rule they go by, whatever can be done tomorrow can be delayed till after tomorrow, and even the morrow after this time. (*Elu ve'elu*, p. 115)

The defender contends that the Buczacz community does not slacken in their religious observance, they only prefer to put off their duties. But what is entailed by this procrastination of acts of charity if not the slackening of religious observance? The internal contradiction exposes the untenability of the defense and the incredibility of the defender. Thus, the implied author manages to satirize the community of Buczacz and its self-righteous image.<sup>2</sup>

In "The Kerchief," the narrator defends the "sons of Abraham our father" against a possible charge of egotism and lack of generosity: "God forbid that the sons of Abraham our father do not deal justly with the poor, but the angels of Satan were following this poor man and spreading a curtain over the eyes of Israel, so they would not see his needs" (*Elu ve'elu*, p. 265).

The speciousness of the defense is exposed by the incongruity between the realistic context and the supernatural explanation. Blaming the evil angels for the sins of Israel may perhaps be valid in a fairy tale but it defeats its own purpose when introduced as cogent explanation into a realistic narrative.

The implied author of *The Bridal Canopy* uses the device of false defense against both the protagonist and narrator: "God forbid that Yudel used magic, but Reb Yudel's heart was filled with the love of Israel, and for the sake of 'love thy neighbor as thyself' permitted himself to reveal the magic to him [Reb Nutu]" (*Hakhnasat kala*, p. 222). The narrator refers in several instances to the protagonist's use of magic. In each instance, however, he opts for a different explanation, in order to justify Reb Yudel's theurgical activities, which in many cases border on witchcraft. In the quoted passage the narrator denies that Reb

2. The irony is both more subtle and more scathing than is assumed by H. Weiss (pp. 145-47) who maintains that the major alazon in the story is the protagonist. Menashe Haim is victimized by social injustice and his own naiveté. He is criticized by the unreliable narrator, who is in turn ridiculed by the implied author.

Yudel indulges in magic, only to go on to admit that Reb Yudel transmitted his findings to Reb Nuta. The internal contradiction exposes the inconsistent logic of the defense. Moreover, the narrator presents a commonsensical piece of advice (offering half an apple to a wife) as an act of magic. He could defend the protagonist much more effectively by pointing out this fact, but instead he misrepresents Reb Yudel's deeds and offers a clumsy defense. Thus, ensnared in the multiple traps of the implied author, the true victim of irony turns out to be the narrator rather than the protagonist.

The narrator's unreliability is reflected in many cases, not through his assertions or denials or through what he says, but through that which he ought to say but fails to do so. The narrator's simplistic and superficial treatment of problematic issues and, inversely, his emphasis on peripheral trivialities, indicate his limited perception and poor judgment.

The narrator of *The Bridal Canopy*, for example, sees fit to criticize his protagonist for negligible details. He does not do it, however, in regard to more substantial flaws, such as Reb Yudel's indifference toward his wife and daughters or his unlawful use of the charity money earmarked for Pesele's dowry.

The short tale, "Shabtai," presents a critical problem: the conflict between religious and state law. The protagonist, Israel the coppersmith, counterfeits coins in order to provide for the Sabbath. The narrator avoids the problem by omitting the proper name for Israel's activity: "Israel did not want to turn his Sabbath into a weekday so he entered wherever he entered and took seven pieces of copper and minted them and stamped into them a form and made of them seven coins, just like the state does" (*Elu ve'elu*, p. 341).

The detailed description of forging coins scrupulously omits the definition of the actions and its unlawful ramifications. The euphemistic presentation dramatizes the narrator's unawareness of the legal and realistic problems engendered by the protagonist's actions. These problems transcend the confines of the narrator's worldview, exclusively concerned with the religious aspect of reality. Hence, in the narrator's judgment, Shabtai is not a criminal but a righteous man who well deserves his final supernatural redemption. The ancestral narrator attempts to prove the perfect compatibility of the teachings of Judaism with historical reality; omission of censure is the only way by which he can achieve his goal.

The ancestral narrator of "Shabtai" resembles in this respect the child narrator in Agnon's stories. The first-person narrator in *Sidur tefilati* maintains that God weeps for His sons' martyrdom: "And when the Holy One, blessed be He, remembers his sons who sacrifice their lives for the sake of the Torah, he weeps and saturates the earth, and the gardens ornament themselves with blossoms and flowers and the forest flourishes" (*Elu ve'elu*, p. 241). The narrator's insistence on God's merciful omnipotence reinforces His impotence vis-a-vis the martyrs' suffering. In this case, the praise serves as blame: Why is it that the omnipotent God of nature fails to rescue his own martyrs? The ancestral narrator, however, anxious to prove God's justice and glory, is unaware of the discrepancy in his own description between the idyllic natural setting and the historical framework of human suffering.

Most of the ironic techniques are often combined in Agnon's ancestral tales. Thus, for example, in *The Bridal Canopy* omission of censure merges with false praise in Paltiel's paean to divine Providence. In order to illustrate the way

in which God never failed to rescue his family, he describes the wretchedness of his father and the sickness of his mother, neither of whom was rescued by God. Paltiel's enthusiastic presentation is subverted by the bleakness of the represented reality. The reader cannot accept his judgment as authoritative and objective. The false praise ironizes the dramatized narrator. At the same time, the omission of censure undermines the authority of the impersonal and anonymous narrator of *The Bridal Canopy*. The latter's silence in this highly problematic context, which sorely requires critical intervention, intimates that the narrator is unaware of the contradictions in the stories. His silence implies consent, and his consent subverts his own authorial reliability.

The unreliable narrator in Agnon's ancestral tales impersonates the naive religious attitude which, eager to defend its premises, ignores the problematic nature of the relationship between theological didacticism and empirical reality. By imitating the point of view characteristic of the ancestral tale, Agnon parodies its ideological propositions and artistic conventions. There are indeed various other techniques alluding to the ironic distance between author and narrator, and other perspectives from which it can be examined (e.g. temporal-spatial or stylistic). This article focused on the ideational aspect of this distance, stressing mainly discrepancies in value judgment and meaning within the framework of the ancestral tales. The recognition of the ironic distance between implied author and unreliable narrator is an important step towards appreciating the full impact of Agnon's ironic range. This step will lead the reader to yet another labyrinth of incongruous points of view, underlying the distance between the implied author and the reader, and culminating in the self-irony of the ancestral tale.

ESTHER FUCHS

Department of Oriental and African Languages  
University of Texas at Austin

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agnon. Shmuel Yosef. *Elu ve'elu*. Tel Aviv & Jerusalem, 1964.
- . *Hakhnasat kala*. Tel Aviv & Jerusalem, 1964. Translated as *The Bridal Canopy* by I.M. Lask, New York, 1967. All page references are to the Hebrew.
- . *Samukh venir'eh*. Tel Aviv & Jerusalem, 1964.
- Band, Arnold. "The Unreliable Narrator in *My Michael* and 'In the Flower of Her Youth'" (Hebrew). *Hasifrut* 3 (1971): 30–34.
- Barzel, Hillel. *Sipurei ahava shel S.Y. Agnon* [Agnon's Love Stories]. Ramat Gan, 1975.
- Goldberg, Leah. "S.Y. Agnon: The Author and his Hero" (Hebrew). In *Le'Agnon Shai*, edited by E. Urbach. Jerusalem, 1966.
- Kurzweil, Baruch. *Masot 'al sipurav shel Shai Agnon* [Essays on the Stories of S.Y. Agnon]. Tel Aviv 1975.
- Moked, Gavriel. "Levels of Meaning in the [Narrative] Technique of 'The Outcast'" (Hebrew). *Moznayim* 27 (1968): 201–10.

Sadan, Dov. *'Al Shai Agnon* [On S.Y. Agnon]. Tel Aviv, 1978.

Shaked, Gershon. "The Great Believer: Studies in *The Bridal Canopy*" (Hebrew).  
In *S.Y. Agnon: Mehkarim ute'udot*, edited by G. Shaked & R. Weiser. Jerusalem,  
1978.

Weiss, Hillel. "Vehaya he'akov lemishor" in his *Parshanut lahamisha misupurei Shai Agnon*  
[Interpretation of Five Stories by S.Y. Agnon]. Tel Aviv, 1974.