ANNE GOLOMB HOFFMAN

Housing the Past in Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*

THE FICTION OF S. Y. AGNON shares with the works of such modernist writers as Joyce, Woolf, and Mann a concern with the place of the individual in the world, as well as an investigation of the ways in which consciousness perceives and organizes its surroundings. Erich Heller has noted that when no certainty exists as to the order of things, the artist feels called upon to exercise his creative powers to an extreme, for "the 'real order' has to be 'created' where there is no intuitive conviction that it exists."[1] Agnon both registers the chaos around him and presents the very central effort of the artistic consciousness to find meaningful patterns to events and phenomena. And yet, as a Jewish writer Agnon has access to a functioning tradition and order of things; he can draw our attention, in his fiction, to the spiritual wholeness of the past as a way of highlighting the inadequacies of the present, but also as a suggestion of the way in which wholeness might be restored. Thus he both expresses the impulse to forge a new order that Heller describes and at the same time maintains an ironic distance from it, recognizing its futility.

Running through much of Agnon's fiction, there is a conflict between a contemporary, abrasive individuality on the one hand, and on the other, the impulse to return to a timeless state and repair what has been torn asunder in the modern world. This tension is perhaps most poignantly expressed in the long, quasi-autobiographical novel *Oreaḥ nata lalun* (*A Guest for the Night*), considered by many to be Agnon's

PROOFTEXTS vol. 2 pp. 265–282
0272-9601/82/0023-0265 $01.00

finest work. The novel is told in the first person by a narrator who is its chief character, a situation that presents Agnon with abundant opportunities for playful manipulation of his medium. In this respect, to which critics have given all too little scrutiny, we can place Agnon squarely within the tradition of the self-conscious novel in European literature. The narrator/protagonist of *A Guest for the Night,* like his illustrious predecessor Don Quixote, undertakes a quest that is as much an attempt to find his place in a story, to establish his own text, as it is to carry out significant action in the world.

Robert Alter describes Don Quixote as an "author manqué, who is impelled to act out the literary impulse in the world of deeds, to be at once the creator and protagonist of his own fictions";[2] the words apply as well to Agnon's novel. Indeed, this fine doubleness of vision creates a curious complicity between author and reader: we both participate in and become the critical observers of the fiction. Thus the narrator of *A Guest for the Night* punctuates his account of his year's stay in his hometown both with expressions of wonder at the unity of God's universe and with a note of irony that betrays his underlying conviction of a radical disunity.

While the conflict between the past and the present, the world of tradition and modernity, makes itself felt in works such as *Tmol shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) and *Shirah, A Guest for the Night* makes a special claim on our attention because of its autobiographical aspect, its author's manipulation of a narrator-protagonist who so resembles himself. The novel comes quite close to home as it chronicles the effort of its first-person narrator, a writer, to return to the East European town of his birth in order to revitalize his life in the land of Israel: It mimics a journey undertaken by the author in 1930 which involved a weeklong stay in his hometown of Buczacz in Galicia. The development of the fiction sheds light on important issues in Agnon's creative life. By examining the character of the narrator/protagonist as well as the manner in which he contrives to tell his tale, we stand to gain insight into Agnon's conception of the role of the storyteller, the artist in relation to Jewish tradition.

The fiction that emerges out of Agnon's visit to his past combines most richly some of the major themes of his life and work—the world of Eastern European Jewry in both its physical decline and its preservation of tradition; the relation of the individual, particularly the writer, to sacred texts; the effort to regain a lost spiritual wholeness. The Torah, source of the structure and meaning of Jewish life, appears in Agnon's work as the locus for that vision of wholeness; it constitutes the perfect heritage which every infant possesses in the womb, but loses on emergence into a flawed world. I should like to examine these concerns as they come up both in the life of the author and in his writing, using as a focus this quasi-autobiographical novel.

On April 3, 1939, Agnon wrote to his friend and publisher S. Z. Schocken concerning the proofs of *A Guest for the Night*, which was being prepared for publication in the collected edition of his work:[3]

> During the year and-a-half that I wrote the story and edited it for publication a day did not pass when I did not work on it for ten and even sixteen hours. I paid no attention to my bodily health and did not listen to the doctor's warning and did not have my teeth seen to and did not go out to walk in the sun even for one hour. I shuddered on cold days and sweated on hot days and accepted everything gladly because of this story. And now I have succeeded and the story is finished and will be printed in a book.

Critics have long acknowledged the central place of this novel in Agnon's oeuvre; we glimpse here its importance to the author. Indeed, his description of his year and a half of immersion in the writing of the novel seems oddly parallel to the contents of the novel itself, the story of a man's yearlong attempt to lose the present and immerse himself in the past. With a characteristic note of self-parody, Agnon endows his devotion to the labors of creation with the aspect of myth, and invites the reader to picture him shivering and sweating by seasonal turn as he pores over his manuscript.

If we look into Agnon's life to find the origins of the novel, we find that his returns to his hometown, after his departure from it in 1907, were both rare and fraught with significance. He left Buczacz in 1907 to immigrate to Palestine and spent the next six years struggling to establish himself amid the community of the Second Aliyah. In 1913, however, he left Palestine abruptly and somewhat mysteriously for Germany. At about that time, he was called home to the bedside of his sick father, visited him for a while and left; when his father died shortly thereafter, the young Agnon did not, for reasons unknown, manage to arrive home in time for the funeral. (The failure to arrive on time is a frequent theme in Agnon's fiction; in the short stories of *Sefer hama'asim* [*The Book of Deeds*] especially, lateness or sluggishness of movement denotes ambivalence about arrival or return, particularly with reference to the fulfillment of filial or spiritual obligations.)

Agnon spent the next ten years largely in Germany, only returning to Palestine in 1924 after a fire that destroyed his home in Homburg, Germany. (The difficulties of establishing and sustaining a proper home form another major motif in Agnon's work and will take up part of our discussion.) In 1930, he once again left Israel, after his home outside Jerusalem had been destroyed in the Arab riots of 1929. During his stay in Berlin, he oversaw the first printing of his collected works in the then-new publishing house of Schocken. Afterwards, he went on to travel through Poland, visiting small towns and noting, as he wrote to a friend, that the inhabitants might well have read his books and modelled their lives accordingly, so closely did they resemble his fictional crea-

tions.[4] In the course of this journey, he visited his hometown of Buczacz and remained there for the week that serves as the basis out of which the novelistic account of the protagonist's yearlong stay in Szybucz (Agnon's fictional name for Buczacz) evolved.

In the fictional version of the visit to Buczacz, the protagonist arrives unnoticed late on the eve of the Day of Atonement. He notes the deterioration of the town "after the war" and undertakes something of a rescue mission as he accepts the key to the House of Study from some of the inhabitants who are leaving to seek better lives. (That he promptly loses the key and has to seek a replacement suggests at the outset his ambivalence to the mission he has formulated.) One is afforded an intriguing glimpse into the development of the fiction and the kind of transformations that occur along the way through a comparison of the novelistic account of the homecoming with one that Agnon sent to his wife describing his arrival in his hometown in August, 1930. In the letter to his wife, Agnon describes the great to-do that his arrival caused in the town, the endless crowds that accompanied him wherever he would go, and the honors that were heaped upon him. With a characteristically playful tone, he portrays himself as the prodigal returned, made much of, feted endlessly, no time even to wipe his nose.[5] But how to go from there to the novel, where the protagonist's role as writer remains hidden and is barely acknowledged more than halfway through the book?

In the novel, the reader gradually becomes aware of the crisis in the life of the narrator that prompts him to undertake the journey, a move that involves leaving his family, his commitment to settlement in Palestine, his vocation as writer. It is this last, the crisis in the life of the writer, which has received least scrutiny and to which we shall devote our discussion.

Gershon Shaked delineates Agnon's use of autobiographical material in the novel, ranging from correspondences such as the whole trip to Galicia to less obvious parallels, and concludes that such "real-life" detail is intended to strengthen our impression of the novel as personal confession.[6] But while such details are obviously placed with care by the author, they are not immediately apparent and must be hunted out; in particular, the reader may well wonder at the narrator's offhand acknowledgment and dismissal, late in the novel, of his vocation as a writer.

Ambivalence towards writing can be felt between the lines in this subtly self-conscious novel; indeed, one might say that the narrator, Agnon's fictive persona in the novel, becomes the focus for an ongoing process of ironic inflation and deflation of the role of the writer in the world. The narrator attempts to sustain the unsustainable fiction that God's in His heaven and all's right with the world, provided one is

willing to see things that way. Here we find the central fiction of his return: Through devotion to the town, and House of Study in particular, he will restore a virtually Edenic harmony to the world of his origins and to his own life as well. Thus his sojourn in the town, as he narrates it, falls into a cycle of seasonal renewal: winter gives way to the rebirth of spring, the festivals of Passover and Shavuot; the protagonist leaves Szybucz with the fullness of summer behind him, suggesting the fruition of his quest.

At the same time, a fundamental contradiction in the protagonist's narrative activities makes itself felt. All is *not* well in Szybucz. In order to tell the story of a harmonious world, the protagonist must play God and author his own version of the universe. Only in this manner can he provide the desired structure for his telling. To conceal his narrative presumption and to play down the very artifice with which he has made his tale fit mythical patterns, the narrator fails to tell us, until almost the end of the novel, that he is a writer; he pretends that the fiction we read is not a fiction, particularly not one that he has *composed.* In part the illusion of spontaneity is maintained by diminishing the role of the retrospective narrator. Shaked notes that while Agnon uses direct address to the reader in order to create intimacy between narrator and reader, he does not otherwise emphasize the presence of the retrospective narrator so that we do not have the feeling that the protagonist knows how events will turn out.[7]

Shaked also draws our attention to the stories of wartime that are told to the protagonist in which a third person, an outsider, plays a decisive role in the life of a family, usually for the worse; we could say that the protagonist attempts to enter into the lives of the people of Szybucz as just such an outsider, but as one who will affect their lives for the better.[8] In his first-person account of his yearlong stay, the narrator attempts to sustain the illusion that his words will have some such magical effect; at the same time, through an ironic counterpoint of underlying self-mockery, he provides the means with which we may take apart that mystification and examine the impulses that form it. The writer utters the creative word and so plays God; his efforts inevitably fail, for his words fall back upon themselves, laying bare their impotence. Thus Agnon takes as his subject his very discomforts with writing and allows them full play in the narrative acts and strategies of his protagonist.

Early on in the novel, when the narrator/protagonist is struck by the physical decline of the town to which he has returned, he remarks that "Even now they make books that are called novels, in the way that even now they call our town a town."[9] His words draw attention to the degradation inherent in contemporary use of words (that is, novels such as the one we read) as well as in the reality (that is, the town) that

those words attempt to describe. Thus the degradation of language reflects the lowered state of man in the world. When the narrator finally acknowledges that he is a *sofer* or writer, he does so with a reluctance which he explains by saying that the title used to belong only to those who wrote out "words of Torah" (419; *448*). Thus he calls our attention, ever so casually, to a crucial contrast between the very novel we read and the word of God, in the form of the Torah.

A writer who used to merit the title, he observes, was one who transcribed the holy word of God, language more potent in its effect than any the modern novelist can hope to produce. In order to remind us of this, and it is a necessary reminder for a modern, fallen audience, he has to insure that we become aware of the fraudulence of the story we read, the story of a man's attempt to revive the wholeness of the past. As a modern Hebrew writer, Agnon employs the sacred language in a fallen state. He must make us aware of its fallenness and of the pre-existing and timeless perfection of the language. He is all the more able to do this by drawing on traditional attitudes toward Hebrew as a sacred tongue. As an example of such attitudes, we can cite a kabbalistic perception of Hebrew dating from the Middle Ages. As Gershom Scholem notes: "Language in its purest form, that is, Hebrew, according to the Kabbalists, reflects the fundamental spiritual nature of the world; in other words, it has a mystical value. Speech reaches God because it comes from God, . . . All creation . . . is, from the point of view of God, nothing but an expression of His hidden self that begins and ends by giving itself a name, the holy name of God, the perpetual act of creation."[10] One could say that Agnon makes reference to Jewish tradition (as varied as it may be both in its sources and its manifestations) as a point of reference over and above the complexities and obfuscations of individual character.

In the novel, we find that the narrator/writer has set out to achieve reconciliation with the world of Torah that he set aside when he originally decided to become a writer. He aims for atonement with the father whose wish that he become a rabbi—a spokesman for traditional teachings—he disregarded. He returns on the eve of the Day of Atonement on which the individual repents for his sins, and, we might say, using the root meaning of "tshuvah," attempts to return to the source.[11] Nevertheless, the kind of wholeness that the narrator/protagonist seeks appears to be an impossibility for him, perhaps by virtue of his very existence as a writer. In the fiction of this first-person novel, we view him as the author of the chronicle we read. If that is so, then he has not renounced the self-assertive impulse to order his own universe. We have before us the record of his engagement in that form of creative self-assertion which he ostensibly seeks to renounce. As a result, we can say that his journey to reconciliation cannot succeed because the goal of the quest conflicts with the very artifice of its structure.

The wholeness that the narrator seeks belongs, however, to a number of characters in the novel who either have remained within tradition or have returned to it, with appropriate self-abnegation. Such characters suggest a time when the world had not been torn apart by the "horrors" of war to which the narrator and others refer so often in the novel. One suspects, however, that the phrase "before the war" (also something of a refrain) refers not just to modern European history but to the history of the protagonist whose rebellion—"warfare" in its own right—tore apart the world of his fathers.

A major figure in the novel, Reb Hayyim, illustrates a return akin to that which the narrator attempts, but one that reaches fulfillment because of its unambiguous nature. Reb Hayyim had been an outstanding student of the Torah whose brilliance as a youth diverted him from Torah study for its own sake and caused a dispute that disrupted the whole town. (It is interesting to note that Haberman, in an essay about Agnon's father, draws attention to the occasion when Agnon's father gently but persistently pointed out to a Torah scholar that he had created the occasion for argument where none existed in order to display his own brilliance.)[12] Reb Hayyim returns to the village after a long exile due to war (a separation analogous to the narrator's years away from Szybucz) and he is completely transformed: he lives the life of a saint, asking nothing for himself, performing the most menial of chores in the House of Study. It becomes quite clear that his self-abnegation represents atonement for his former brilliance; indeed his death in the latter part of the novel confirms the renunciation of self inherent in his solution.

Reb Hayyim's silence contrasts markedly with the volubility of the narrator, who continues to engage without pause in the construction of the fiction of his existence as he would like it to be. Reb Hayyim, who speaks no more, undertakes tasks, such as stoking the fire in the House of Study, that serve to demonstrate a renunciation of individuality. The protagonist, by contrast, never gives up the activity of storytelling, the effort to order his universe, and so he can never complete the gesture of return that he has initiated. In the novel, insofar as the example of Reb Hayyim can be applied to the narrator, we can see that it is impossible to *narrate* a completely successful *return* (to be both artist and Reb Hayyim) because return implies the cessation of narration.

The narrator refers to himself throughout the course of the novel as the guest or sojourner, echoing the book's title, and emphasizing the transient nature of his return. It is this built-in status of guest that insures his ongoing detachment, a necessary artistic detachment, one could say, from the mission of return and reconciliation that he has undertaken.[13] It is his guest status that insures his capacity to survive his visit and to render the account of it (fictionally speaking) that we

read. At the same time, Agnon makes clear the deleterious effect of this stance on his attempt at integration.

One could see Reb Hayyim as a composite figure whose story encompasses both filial rebellion and return to the father, displacement and replacement of the Torah as the center of Jewish life. The narrator attempts to ally himself with Reb Hayyim. But it is Reb Hayyim who does the chores, while the narrator, through fictions of identification with Reb Hayyim, attempts to gain a form of spiritual credit for his service. It becomes evident that this use of Reb Hayyim as a surrogate serves, ironically, to distance the narrator from the very mission he has undertaken. Reb Hayyim, whose return achieves completion, leaves the condition of sonhood to join the father and it is the role of the father that he occupies ultimately in relation to the narrator.

The idea of completion—housing oneself in the world and achieving spiritual structure—forms a central motif in Agnon's work. Critics have commented at length on the significance of house imagery in his writing. It becomes apparent that the Agnon protagonist cannot find ease in a structure that he himself has not created, whereas the structures that are of his own making are inevitably flawed and incapable of affording shelter. One finds an interesting sidenote to these concerns in a letter Agnon wrote to a friend in Palestine in 1921, when he was still in Germany:[14]

> How envious I am of him [the friend to whom the letter is addressed], that he has returned to the land of Israel. How my soul longs to go up to join you, but something in my heart prevents it. If the land were abandoned, heaven forbid, I would leap to be there, but now I do not know my place there.

One can find here the suggestion of an essential component of Agnon's creative dilemma: there must be room for him, a broken-down house which he can restore. He is a man destined never to be at home; that becomes the very condition of his creativity: on the one hand, breaking away from the old in order to establish itself in newness and self-sufficiency, and on the other, telling the tale of the effort to put back what it has just taken away.

The nature of the restorative task that the protagonist faces in *A Guest for the Night* is signalled in the fictional name Agnon bestows on his home town: "Szybucz" derives from a root meaning to err or make crooked. Baruch Kurzweil has commented on the manner in which the deeply flawed reality of Szybucz announces itself to the narrator and to the reader in the form of the three figures who greet the narrator on his arrival: a man with a rubber hand, another with a wooden leg and a

third, the town beggar, who snorts "Money! Money!" through a hole in his face where his nose should have been. Kurzweil concludes that these three represent the town that is itself half-living and half-dead.[15] We can go on to say that they also point in the direction of the restoration that the protagonist is about to undertake.

Recurring images and allusions in the novel link this mission with the notion of *tikkun* or repair of that which has been broken, a familiar theme, particularly in Jewish mystical thought. In a similar vein, the narrator draws attention to the spiritual obligation of the individual to rebuild the Holy Temple, so to speak, within his lifetime. Furthermore, the journey back into the past takes on something of the air of a mystical quest, as the narrator meets guide figures such as the old locksmith who fashions him the key with which he can enter the holy House of Study. The narrator notes, indeed, that there are special words which can open doors and grant one access to treasure (words which function as keys, we could say) and we can speculate further that one impulse motivating his journey is the wish to recapture just such a magical use of language.

And yet, much later in the novel, the narrator encounters a childhood friend who presents him indirectly with a view of his mission that is undone by irony. He meets Aaron Schützling, salesman of patent medicines (that is, the "little protector," as his last name suggests, who supplies false cures in a manner suggestive of the biblical Aaron). When asked to picture future generations, Schützling offers the narrator a vision of restoration turned inside out, for he points to the three flawed figures who greeted the narrator on his arrival: "In the future to come all creatures will walk on their false legs and gesture with their rubber hands and snort 'Money! money!'" (316–17; *340*). One can see, then, that the narrator must keep from becoming Aaron, the purveyor of false solutions; as the narrator of his own experience, he alternately resists and yields to irony, to a view of his mission that reduces it to just such a pathetic level as Aaron's. One could say that the narrator, as well as the author behind him, hovers between the figures of Moses and Aaron and is defined more by the tension between them than by an identification with either; the creative activity of writing, the building of verbal structures, is seen, alternately, as the transmission of God's word and as the manufacture of a golden calf.

Interspersed in the protagonist's narrative are references to his intention to rebuild his house in Israel. On a personal level, he vows (in words that echo Genesis and Deuteronomy) that he will return to Israel to build a house there, a vow that necessitates a successful sojourn in Szybucz. Second, however, that house assumes broader significance through its association with the whole of Judaism. The house that the

protagonist wants to build (or rebuild) becomes identified with the House of God, an association that transforms what might otherwise be a purely personal mission. It is of no little significance in this respect that the narrator's birthday falls on the ninth of Av, the date on which the first and second temples were destroyed; it is, additionally, the date that Agnon chose to designate as his birthday.[16]

We know that Agnon suffered greatly from the loss of his house in Homburg by fire in 1924, a fire that consumed his already extensive library as well as the unfinished manuscript of his autobiographical novel *Betsror haḥayyim* (*Eternal Life*). (One wonders if *A Guest for the Night* constitutes a fulfillment or replacement of that lost novel.[17]) He later referred to the fire as God's punishment for his having left Israel, an observation that indicates at least the enormity of the loss, however much it may simplify or render naive the author's piety.[18] And when, in 1929, his house in Talpiyot outside Jerusalem was destroyed, he undertook the journey that formed the immediate impetus for the novel. His letters to his wife, publisher and friends during this period testify to his difficulties in finding the proper home for his family.[19] One could say that he regarded the home he created ultimately in Talpiyot as a fitting compromise: One can see Jerusalem from its rooftop, yet it is not part of the holy city itself. Thus its location seems to reflect the author's view of himself in relation to the center of Jewish spiritual life.

Within the novel, the narrator alludes obliquely to this house-building mission in its larger sense when he cites a passage from the Talmud that expresses a central preoccupation of his quest: "If the House of God is not built within a man's lifetime, it is as if it has been destroyed in his lifetime" (295; *316*). The saying makes clear the obligation of the individual to continue the existence of the House of God within his own spiritual life, but it suggests as well the destructive nature of the failure to adhere to that spiritual structure. In other words, to choose another path means not simply to choose another path but to destroy the House of the Jews.

The narrator recalls his youthful rejection of the wisdom contained in the holy books of the House of Study and marvels, on his return, at the wealth of knowledge that he is now able to find in them. He cites a legend about the spirits of departed scholars who continue the studies they engaged in when they were alive. This enables him to formulate his custodianship of the House of Study as a rescue mission that will save the books from oblivion, revivify tradition so that it is not just the dead who study, and reunite him with the past. Thus his return is presented as a correction to his youthful assertion of his own importance over the value of tradition in the form of father, Torah, House of Study.

The impulse to restore and make whole what has been broken remains amid the evidence of the impossibility of that effort. And yet moments occur, particularly through a kind of transient identification with Reb Hayyim, in which the narrator achieves a degree of reconciliation and even self-transcendence. One such episode occurs after the death of Reb Hayyim, when the narrator enters the House of Study to study Mishnah in his memory. Perhaps because of the nature of the moment, he is able to identify fully with Reb Hayyim and to experience the loss of self and of time that constitute complete atonement:

> I raised my voice until the voice of Torah conquered the voice of time. . . . A man should always try to pray in public since the prayer of many can be heard, but at that hour that man forgot that there was a public and there were many, but the Holy One blessed be He filled, as it were, the entire world. And that man made himself small until his existence ceased. (411–12; *440–41*)

He achieves here a brief period of return and seemingly full participation in Torah to the extent that his temporal identity is subsumed within this larger structure.

Interestingly enough, this moment of mystical participation in God through Torah finds its echo in the life of the author. In 1913, following the death of his father (for whose funeral he arrived too late), Agnon wrote to a friend, another writer, describing the huge outpouring of public grief in the town as well as his own inability to break down and mourn openly.[20] Only when he enters the House of Study to read passages of Mishnah in memory of his father do the barriers to his resistance dissolve so that he is able to rejoin his father, as it were. It would seem to me that the resistance that produced his lateness to the funeral gives way before the overwhelming impulse to undo the separation between himself and his father, a separation that extends also to the struggling young artist's efforts to stand on his own, to create his own works.

The kind of return embedded in this moment goes back, very far back in its impulse to reverse and undo the very process of individuation, in this instance the process of the formation of the individual as artist. At the time of the 1913 letter, that formative process is still in its early stages; the youthful letter writer is concerned still with his capacity to break away and sustain his independent existence. By contrast, the fictional world of the novel, written during the thirties, allows its author greater freedom to play with the idea of return and to plumb far more deeply the impulse to go back.

In the novel, entry into the House of Study is described as entry into a timeless sphere, virtually a return to the womb; the narrator suggests this and provides us with a rich vein of material for our discussion when he compares his resumption of study of the Torah to the

fulfillment enjoyed by the embryo lodged in its mother's womb "who is taught the entirety of the Torah and as soon as he comes to the air of the world an angel comes and strikes him on the mouth and causes him to forget the entirety of the Torah" (106; *108*). The legend of the wise infant or embryo recurs in a variety of contexts and with illuminating variations through the course of the novel. As it is used in the novel, it offers an important prototype of mystical experience in its depiction of utter union with God.

Torah is language, but as the word of God, it far surpasses human language, let alone written human language, such as even the novel that we read; we can recall here the narrator's disparagement of himself as a writer who is unworthy of the title. Thus the completeness of the embryo's participation in Torah knowledge contrasts poignantly with the divisiveness and fragmentation of human life, human narrative actions. The moment of birth, then, involves emergence out of perfection into a flawed state of being and can be seen as an occasion for mourning. But of course, as the moment at which individuation begins, birth signals the onset of the process of formation of identity, the first moment in the history of the artist. It is the moment at which time begins, and indeed the novel exists in time; as a text that follows the patterns of human life, it lacks completeness at any given moment.

The wise infant legend suggests an image of the narrator lodged in the body of the Torah, at one with the Creator. Were we to piece together the childhood memories that the narrator intermingles with his tale, we would find that they reflect a view of development as separation, going away. This perception finds its source in Genesis, in the account of man's oneness with God in Eden before the fall and his gradual separation through the exercise of choice and willfulness. If the wise infant legend constitutes something of a myth of prenatal union, we can go from there to examine the narrator's childhood recollections of awe at his godlike father praying with the other men in the synagogue, surrounded by an aura of light. And then we find a most illuminating moment in the protagonist's description of the beginnings of Torah study with his father. Under his father's tutelage, he would find one verse of Scripture beginning with the first letter of his name, and then another with the second letter and so on. (This is the only place in the novel where we are able to piece together the given name of the protagonist and it turns out to be Agnon's.)

It would seem that this educational activity for the child alludes to the manner in which the religious poets of the past would interweave their names into their verses praising God as an indication, as Barzel puts it, of their participation in their subject matter.[21] Of course, we can see that while the protagonist as a child was engaged in literally meshing his identity with the Torah, he cannot be said to have done so

on the artistic level of the religious poets who created their *own* verses. They achieved the perfect balance between praising God and demonstrating their art, whereas the child, under his father's guidance, produces a structure—a verbal pattern—that is only nominally his.

The narrator describes his later attempt to write his own words in the House of Study at a time when he was supposed to be studying the Torah. There we find the initial manifestations of the artist as individual apart from tradition. In fact, this portrait of the artist as a young man bears a number of points of resemblance to Agnon's beginning years as a writer. The novel contains a passionately Zionist poem, *Yerushalayim,* supposedly written by the protagonist, but actually composed by Agnon in his youth; narrator and author join in their embarrassment at the youthful excesses of the artist. Shaked analyzes Agnon's early writings and finds the credo of an artist who wants to redeem the flawed content of reality through the form his art would give it. He traces Agnon's development so that we can see how the mature writer maintains this form-giving impulse but cultivates an ironic detachment towards it; he produces works that are modern rather than romantic, that draw upon the tension between form and content rather than attempting directly to resolve it.[22]

The impulse towards restoration of a lost wholeness is a recurring theme in *A Guest for the Night,* however, and towards the end of the novel, the legend of the wise infant resurfaces twice in ways that buttress the underlying claims of the protagonist's quest. The first involves the birth of an infant who is, in many ways, the protagonist's spiritual heir. As the first birth in the town in many years, the infant signals new life. At the circumcision at which the protagonist serves as godfather (filling the role his own grandfather used to play), he looks at the newborn baby and perceives in him the living out of the legend of the infant's knowledge of Torah when it is in its mother's belly. The child brings closer to life the legend which the narrator had earlier applied, in a metaphorical sense, to his own return to the House of Study. At this later point, he finds in the actual infant, his namesake, a fitting representation of the rebirth he would like to believe he has undergone. Indeed, he gives his namesake the copy of the key to the old House of Study and suggests that he is passing on the unifying power contained in it.

In one of its most delightful variants, the wise infant legend takes the form of the story of a medieval poet or *payyetan* who as an infant in his cradle was shown heavenly visions. For this specially gifted infant, the loss of childhood wholeness and Torah becomes the impetus for artistic creation; the pain of loss supplies the material out of which a new perfection is fashioned. This poet composes lamentations for the ninth of Av, the historical date of the destruction of the holy temple,

and as we have noted, the birthdate of both the novel's protagonist and its author. Thus the legend serves as corroboration within the fiction of the artist's role as representative of his people and as rebuilder of that which was destroyed.

The narrator cites this version of the legend towards the end of the novel just after he reluctantly admits that he is a writer. Thus it is scarcely without significance that, in this version, the emphasis falls on the artistic vision of the infant rather than on his knowledge of Torah. We can say that the tale of the infant *payyetan* is a mildly secularized version of the legend of baby and Torah: It retains the religious context since the *payyetan* or religious poet sings God's praises, but it places its emphasis on his creativity. As such, the *payyetan* version of the legend is more suited to the narrator who has tried to place his synthetic vision in the context of the word of God.

Nevertheless, restoration of the sort that the protagonist attempts is parodied in a minor figure in the novel, Lebtche Bodenhaus, who sits in his room, beneath a picture of Moses, aptly enough, translating the Pentateuch into rhymed German verse.[23] But while Lebtche appears initially as a caricature of the naive artist and his faith that all's right with the world, he also tells a harrowing tale of confrontation between man's healing powers and the brutality of the real world: During the war a doctor put back together, with ingenious bits of prosthesis, a soldier who had been torn apart in battle; forced to release to the world his fragile and dependent patient (whose life might now be said to constitute a work of art), the doctor attaches a card with instructions for proper care to the young soldier's neck. Shortly thereafter, however, the patient is thrust from his seat in a wagon by a German soldier and is left on his own to perish. Thus Lebtche, whose occupation at the time of the novel expresses a childlike faith in art, offers a tale of the power of art to make things whole again and of the impotence of that art once it ventures forth into a world populated by German soldiers.

While Lebtche appears initially as a gentle parody of the artist, he touches upon a central aspect of the protagonist's attempted transformation of reality. The power of imagination is the healing power which the artist brings to the world; its energies may be directed towards the task of repairing the broken ark in which the Torah resides in our time. If the artist could truly summon it forth, he would be able to restore the flawed figures who greet him on entry into Szybucz. But while art can fashion a rubber hand or a wooden leg, these devices fail to provide their "wearers" with substantial remedies for the "horrors" that necessitate their contrivance.

Indeed, the sickliness of the imagination—its inability to translate its beautiful schemes into life—finds its embodiment in little Refael Bach, the son of the villager with the wooden leg. This child is described in terms that suggest that he is both an incarnation of the infant in the

Torah legend, or more aptly, the poet/*payyetan,* and at the same time, a creature incapable of sustaining normal life: "At first glance he appeared as a child and at second glance like a youth, and at third glance neither like a child nor a youth, but as a container of skin and flesh into which the Creator had stuck two burning eyes" (131; *136*). With these eyes, little Refael sees visions of life and death and spins tales of fantasy which suggest holy visions; he does so, however, from a sickbed which he cannot leave.[24] There is irony in his name, for Refael means "God heals" and all the protagonist's efforts to "heal the broken instruments of our spirit" cannot bring Refael out of that bed into life. Thus, the child suggests the potency of the imagination or spirit, and yet its inability to move out into the world and cure the ills of the age.

Thus notions of regeneration are counterposed to the sense of the secondariness of writing, of its lack of life or potency. It is just this latter devaluation of writing that punctuates the novel and undercuts the mythopoeic impulse. The narrator proceeds from the legend of the infant poet to note that he and those of his generation no longer possess the strength of such as this *payyetan.* We have strayed from the activity of writing down what our master laid before us, he says. Nothing that was created in the first six days of the world was meant to undergo any change from its original function, a precept, he notes, that certainly applies to writing.

The narrator's failure to complete his reconciliation is suggested in the novel's concluding description of his return to Palestine and resumption of family life. He settles, as indeed he must, for symbolic solutions, for compromises that point up the incompleteness of his quest. When his wife finds the original old key to the House of Study in his baggage, the narrator dismisses its importance and so undercuts his yearlong effort to construct the story of his mission to save the House of Study. He cites the legend that, one day, all Houses of Study will come to the land of Israel, but allots himself a passive role as he declares his intention to watch and wait for that to happen. This renunciation of an active role and acceptance of the observer's stance (always implicit in his role as *guest*) is echoed in the manner in which he disposes of the key. It is too heavy for the heart to bear, he notes, and so he locks it away in a box and carries with him, instead, the key to the box. He settles for a representation of a representation, in effect for the rendition of the story that we read.

The novel, then, posits repair as it demonstrates its own state of disrepair. It attempts to go beyond itself while acting out the limitations or, one might say, the conditions of its being. The infancy legends point to timeless perfection; the narrative itself resides in time and so constitutes and de-constitutes itself endlessly. In this, I find it to be very

much the novel of the artist, the occasion for the working through, the playing out of the role of the creative figure. The artist has the capacity to glimpse past wholeness, but he cannot yield himself up to it without undoing his very nature as artist and so losing himself.

It is interesting to consider, in this respect, Agnon's contributions to *Sefer Buzcacz* (*The Book of Buczacz*), a memorial volume completed after the destruction of the town's Jewish community. As a memoir it is not the occasion for the expression of conflict and so, at the outset, he very pointedly excludes his personal mythos from the endeavor:[25]

> Out of a love of order, to give each thing in its place, I will tell in another place how I left my town and for what reason I left my town and what I found in all those places for whose sake I left my town. Here in this place I will tell of what I found on the day that I returned to my town and what happened to my town between my departure and my return.

By virtue of this exclusion, the memoir becomes the occasion for a portrayal of the wholeness of the town and its harmonious relationship with the Creator. Once the competitive artist-creator is out of the way, Eden can, in fact (or at least in fiction), be restored. Indeed Agnon places the town within the context of a very old legend: He describes the worthiness of the citizens of Buczacz to receive the Messiah, who was on his way there and would have arrived had he not been misled en route. (The Zohar suggests that redemption becomes possible if only one Jewish town is entirely repentant.)[26] Utterly destroyed in reality, the town becomes the myth, the book of its past, the roster of its inhabitants and their achievements. *A Guest for the Night,* by contrast, is the book of the artist, who feeds upon the town as a central source of his creativity, but continues, endlessly, to play out the terms of his separation from it.

Thus we see that the journey of return has involved the virtually impossible effort on the narrator's part to abandon his separate identity as a writer, a writer who no longer transcribes what his master laid before him; he undertook, through devotion to and indeed immersion in the House of Study to break down the terms of his isolation and rejoin the life of Torah, to abandon his use of language in order to recapture the lost or hidden alphabet of creation. The novel that we read, however, testifies to his failure. I am reminded of a medieval variant on the Midrash of the wise infant that Scholem cites. Why, asks Eleazar of Worms, a thirteenth-century Hasid, does the child forget his knowledge of Torah? "Because, if it did not forget, the course of this world would drive it to madness if it thought about it in the light of what it knew."[27] Agnon stands in the middle between forgetting and remembering, unable to complete either movement and perhaps defining himself through the tension between them; his novel is the product of that tension, the necessary forgetting that goes into the life of the

individual in the world and the longing to remember, to go back and recapture. It is perhaps in this sense that Agnon has forged a particularly modern scripture whose very fraudulence in one sense renders it authentic in another.

Excel Division
Fordham University,
The College at Lincoln Center

NOTES

The research for this article was funded in part by a grant from the Research Council of Fordham University.

1. Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind: Essays in Modern German Literature and Thought* (New York, 1975), p. 170.

2. Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley, 1975), p. 21.

3. Letter to S. Z. Schocken, *Catalogue of Exhibition in Honor of S. Y. Agnon*, ed. M. Beit Aryeh (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 33–34.

4. Postcard to Eliezer Maier Lipschitz from Zamosc, 9/3/30, from the Archives of Agnon's papers in the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem, Israel. I am deeply grateful to Emuna Agnon Yaron, and to Rafael Veiser, of the Library, for making this and other material accessible to me and for their generous assistance.

5. This letter is part of the correspondence of S. Y. Agnon and his wife that is currently being prepared for publication by Emuna Yaron. I would like to thank Mrs. Yaron for giving me access to these letters.

6. Gershon Shaked, *Omanut hasipur shel Agnon* [The Narrative Art of Agnon] (Tel Aviv, 1973), pp. 265, 270.

7. Shaked, p. 256.

8. Shaked, p. 236.

9. *Oreaḥ nata lalun* (A Guest for the Night), *Kol sipurav shel Sh. Y. Agnon* [The Collected Works of S. Y. Agnon], 8 vols. (Jerusalem, 1968), 4:46. In order to remain as close as possible to the Hebrew, I have used my own translations. To aid the reader, however, subsequent references (which will be made in the text) cite the page numbers of the Hebrew first and then of the English, in italics, e.g., 46; 45. *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish (New York, 1968), p. 45.

10. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1954), p. 17.

11. Baruch Kurzweil, "Oreaḥ nata lalun," *Masot 'al sipurei Shai Agnon* [Essays on the Works of S. Y. Agnon], expanded ed. (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 54.

12. A. M. Haberman, "R. Shalom Mordecai Czaczkes: Father of R. Shmuel Yosef Agnon" [Hebrew] in *leAgnon Shai: Devarim 'al hasofer usfarav* [For S. Y. Agnon: Essays on the Author and His Works], ed. Dov Sadan and Ephraim Urbach (Jerusalem, 1969), p. 85.

13. Arnold Band notes this positive side of his guesthood. *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Berkeley, 1968), p. 323.

14. Letter to Sh. Ben-Zion, 1/14/21, in *Yedi'ot Gnazim* [News from Genazim] 4 (1970): 591.

15. Kurzweil, pp. 51–52.

16. Band, p. 5.

17. Gershom Scholem refers to the lost novel as Agnon's "artistic autobiography." *Devarim bego: Pirkei morasha uteḥiya* [Not in Vain: Chapters of Legacy and Renewal], 2 vols. (Tel Aviv, 1976), 2:470.

18. Quoted by A. M. Haberman in "From the Mouth of S. Y. Agnon" [Hebrew], *Davar*, 24 May 1974.

19. Some of these letters are contained in the Archives of the Jewish National and University Library and some are being prepared for publication by Emuna Yaron.

20. Letter to Fishel Lachover, *Yedi'ot Gnazim*, 4 (1970): 587.

21. Hillel Barzel, *Bein Agnon leKafka: Meḥkar umashveh* [Agnon and Kafka: A Comparative Study] (Ramat-Gan, 1972), p. 199.

22. Shaked, pp. 16–19, 25, 28–29, 36, 40–41.

23. Even his name suggests the pathetic nature of his "house-building" efforts.

24. Refael is strongly reminiscent of the *yenuka* or figure of the Wise Child who plays a large role in the Zohar. Cf. Isaiah Tishby, ed., *Mishnat hazohar* [The Teaching of the Zohar] (Jerusalem, 1948), pp. 19, 66 ff.

25. *Sefer Buczacz* [The Book of Buczacz], ed. Israel Cohen (Tel Aviv, 1968), p. 9.

26. Scholem, p. 250.

27. Scholem, p. 92.