

S.Y. Agnon

TO THIS DAY

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN
INTRODUCTION BY

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Introduction

Published in 1951, *To This Day*, the slimmest of Shmuel Yosef Agnon's six novels and the last to be translated into English, has also made the least mark in Hebrew. Agnon critics have tended either to ignore it or to dismiss it as an episodically meandering work that ends with a trite attempt at closure.

They are wrong. Agnon, always a great literary trickster who delights in fooling his readers, has this time fooled the critics, too. Not only is *To This Day* as carefully conceived and tightly written (to say nothing of entertaining) as any of his novels, it yields to none in its brilliance and depth. If it appears to meander, this is because the loops in its course deflect our attention from the course itself; if its conclusion strikes us as trite, we have fallen into the trap Agnon set for us. And having said as much, I would suggest that, if you prefer your first encounter with a novel to be a direct one without an introduction getting in the way, you skip the rest of these remarks and return to them after reading *To This Day*.

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Suppose then that, having read Agnon's novel, you were asked to write a brief summary of it. It might go like this:

The narrator of *To This Day*, a young man in his middle or late twenties with scholarly and literary ambitions, has left his traditionally Orthodox family and native town in Austrian-ruled Galicia in Eastern Europe to settle in Palestine. After spending several years there, he has moved to Berlin—where, at the story's outset, we find him living in a rented room during World War I. Trapped in Germany by the war, he is, as a citizen of its ally Austria, eligible for military service and required to report regularly to a draft board, which has so far granted him a temporary medical exemption.

The narrator's main preoccupation, however, is finding and keeping a room in a wartime capital suffering from a severe housing shortage. His ordeal begins when he travels to a town outside Berlin at the request of the widow of the deceased scholar Dr. Levi, who wishes to consult with him about her late husband's large library of Judaica. In the course of this trip, he also encounters three other people: the former stage actress and wealthy socialite Brigitta Schimmermann, with whom he appears to have been—perhaps unconsciously—in love before her marriage; his cousin Malka, a Zionist like himself, who cannot understand what made him leave Palestine; and Hanschen Trotsmüller, the shell-shocked son of the landlady of his Berlin boarding house, now recuperating at Brigitta's rural convalescent home for wounded soldiers. Though aphasic and amnesiac, Hanschen, in a prophetic fulfillment of a dream had by his mother, mysteriously follows the narrator back to the boarding house and is reunited with his family and restored to his old room, which the narrator, now left homeless, has been renting.

All this occupies the first half of *To This Day*. Much of the novel's second half describes, in frequently comic terms, the narrator's subsequent wanderings from one rented room to another. Each room has a fatal flaw; each compels him to search for a better one that turns out to be even worse. And meanwhile, as the tide of war turns against Germany, Berlin becomes a nightmare of shortages, ersatz products, refugees, bereaved families, maimed and crippled war

casualties, shrill patriotism, nouveau-riche profiteers, and a garishly decadent *après-nous-le-déluge* nightlife of cafés and cabarets. Still, the narrator, who now dreams of returning to Palestine, remains detached from his surroundings. The sufferings of others, despite the concern he expresses for them, do not touch him deeply. When the war ends and he does return to Palestine, arranging for Dr. Levi's books to join him there, he can only think of how lucky he has been to have survived his experience safely. To his mind, the war and all its horrors pale beside his personal good fortune.

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So much for our summary. From it we can extract a number of motifs that recur throughout the novel. One is the disposition of Dr. Levi's books. Another is the narrator's flirtatious relationship with Brigitta Schimmermann. We might add to this his incessant room hunting; the oppressive atmosphere of wartime Germany; his attitude toward the war as a Jew and a foreigner; his feelings about Zionism and Palestine; his self-centered personality; and his repeated reflections on life's purpose or lack of it. Each of these motifs, moreover, intersects at numerous points with others. The narrator's involvement with the Trozsmüllers, for example, though primarily the story of how he comes to be homeless, also touches on the barbarism of war and the seemingly miraculous chain of circumstances that bring a traumatized soldier home again. Brigitta Schimmermann, for her part, is linked to the war by means of her nursing home; to the books of Dr. Levi, whose residence with its library is not far from her; to the narrator's musings about purpose and causality, since it is through her that he encounters Hanschen, and so on and so forth. Upon closer inspection, *To This Day* resembles an intricately woven spiderweb whose strands crisscross repeatedly.

Scanning this web for its patterns, we might rephrase our summary as follows:

On the eve of World War I, a young Eastern-European Jew leaves Palestine, to which he has gone to live for Zionist reasons, and moves to Berlin. Although he has presumably done so in the hope of broadening

his horizons, all he himself can say is that the “notion” to return to Europe somehow “got into” him. Perhaps he has difficulty acknowledging his guilt at abandoning the Zionist cause; perhaps he cannot admit to himself that he is seeking not only intellectual and cultural adventures, but sexual ones as well, such as his liaison with Lotte Trozsmüller. For all his wit and quickness of mind, he is far from an introspective individual, a point he himself makes more than once, as in the long “shaggy dog” story that he relates to Brigitta Schimmermann, the anti-Freudian moral of which is that it is a waste of time to probe oneself too deeply.

Indeed, no longer the religiously observant Jew he was raised as, yet retaining a strong love and nostalgia for Jewish tradition, the narrator seems to have no real understanding of the battle going on within him between his allegiance to his Jewish faith and identity and his craving for a broader realm of experience. This battle can only be expressed by people and events outside himself—and if one pole of it is represented by the captivatingly worldly Brigitta Schimmermann, the other is associated with Dr. Levi’s library, a rare repository of the Jewish past and its wisdom that stands to be lost. Because of their geographical proximity, Brigitta’s nursing home and Levi’s library exert a joint attraction whose separate pulls the narrator is unable to distinguish. By reading between the lines—and Agnon must *always* be read between the lines if we are to slip through his net rather than be caught in it—it is even possible to conclude, as does the Israeli critic Nitza Ben-Dov in her perceptive study *Agnon’s Art of Indirection*, that the narrator’s initial journey to Dr. Levi’s widow, which sets *To This Day* in motion, is also motivated by his desire to find Brigitta.*

And yet toward Brigitta, the narrator is deeply ambivalent. While drawn to her, he is also scared of her, there being no other explanation for his forgetting to ask her at what restaurant they are to meet after he is overjoyed to run into her in the Leipzig train station and be invited to lunch with her. (The restaurant’s turning out to be

* Ben-Dov, however, is mistaken in my opinion in treating Brigitta as the epicenter around which the whole of *To This Day* revolves rather than as one of its two antipodes. In doing so, she skews the novel’s symbolism and structure.

named “The Lion’s Den” is yet another knot in the novel’s web,* as is an additional mental slip that occurs at its end, when the narrator repeatedly tries phoning Brigitta at her nursing home only to discover that he has been dialing the wrong number.) In part, he fears the sexual feelings she arouses in him; in part, her German patriotism, whose betrayal of the humane cultural values she espouses is embodied in such details as the toy cannon placed by her on an open volume of a Russian author and pacifist like Tolstoy.

Throughout the novel, eroticism and the violence of war are intertwined in the narrator’s mind. Both are depicted as fundamentally German or Gentile traits that spring from a single libidinous source where love and hate, tenderness and cruelty, and sexual and military conquest arise together; both suggest to the narrator, who is a vegetarian, an animality that he associates with the eating of meat and with the butcher shops, besieged by German women brandishing ration books, that line the street below one of the rooms that he rents. The theme of raw meat runs even more strongly through the comic episode of the goose liver given him by his cousin Malka. Intended as an innocent gift, the bloody liver that he can neither enjoy nor get rid of is the perfect symbol of his own repressed sexual and aggressive feelings.

It is significant that, although there are also Jews in *To This Day* who are mindless supporters of the war, the only principled opposition to it apart from the narrator’s comes from other Jews—especially from the bibliographer Isaac Mittel, who foresees Germany’s defeat

* How cunningly this knot is tied is apparent when one considers that the Hebrew for “The Lion’s Den,” *me’on ha-arayot*, can also be punningly read to mean “the home of forbidden sexual relations.” This play on words is of course untranslatable, as is a great deal of Agnon’s unique prose—which, an idiosyncratic literary construct based on rabbinic Hebrew and often turning its back on the spoken language of Israel, is in effect an imaginary dialect of its own. In seeking to find a direct English equivalent for it, many of Agnon’s translators have ended up with something that is neither Agnon nor English. Here, as in my previous translation of Agnon’s novel *A Simple Story*, I have avoided such an approach in favor of an idiomatic English that strives to convey the special flavor of Agnon’s style in more roundabout ways. There is, to borrow Nitza Ben-Dov’s apt phrase, an “art of indirection” to translating Agnon as well.

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at an early stage when the nation is still drunk from its military triumphs and his own son has yet to be killed in battle. As opposed to Jews and learning, Jews and gunpowder, Mittel observes, do not go together. Nor do Jews and the erotic. While several of the female characters in the novel are Jewish, all the women who openly display their sexuality, such as Lotte Trotsmüller, the Trotsmüllers' Aunt Clothilde, or Frau Munkel and her daughter Hedwig, are Gentile. The revulsion they provoke in the narrator, like that provoked by the war, is the age-old revulsion of the Jew for the "goy." It is also, however, a revulsion for the unacknowledged "goy" within himself that has drawn him to Berlin in the first place.

Despite the differences among them, the Jews in *To This Day* fall into two categories, native-born German Jews and East-European Jewish immigrants and refugees, between whom there is tension and mutual scorn as well as a fraternal bond. In this respect, Agnon's novel is sociologically faithful to the times. German Jews tended to look down on the *Ostjuden*, as they called the Yiddish-speaking newcomers from the East, as uncouth, uncivilized, and unscrupulous, while the latter considered the *Yekkes*, as they referred to them, to be Jewishly ignorant, gullible, humorless, and absurdly proud of being German when most Germans did not consider them as such. In the one scene in *To This Day* in which the two parties confront each other, the *Ostjuden* represented by Yudl Bieder and his friends, and the *Yekkes* by the businessman Kitzingen, each amply confirms the prejudices of the other.

The narrator, who numbers both German and East-European Jews among his friends, sees the good and bad side of each group. The character he most admires, Isaac Mittel (whose name means "middle" in German), is in fact a blend of both, a Polish-born Jew who came to Germany at a young age and has lived most of his life there. Mittel combines the *Ostjude's* Jewish knowledge and ironic perspective with the *Yekke's* cultivation and probity, and he maintains an intelligently sane point of view throughout the novel. Not even his coolness toward Zionism detracts from the narrator's esteem for him, for it is not the defensively hostile anti-Zionism of the German Jewish patriot

but the honest skepticism of a man who wonders how Zionism can succeed, and suspects that Jews are better off as a minority that does not put all its eggs in one basket and has its faults tempered by others.

Mittel's is one of two voices in the book to express such doubts about Zionism. The other belongs to Malka, an intellectually simpler person but one who raises an equally salient question. In inquiring why her cousin has left Palestine after living there for only a few years, she asks how a people like the Jews, who have spent their history wandering from land to land (or from room to room, in the symbolism of *To This Day*), always seeking better opportunities, can ever hope to settle down in one place. Although the narrator, unwilling as usual to contemplate his own behavior, prefers to change the subject, he knows Malka has a point. Having himself chosen homelessness in Berlin over a home in Jaffa that, however now romanticized by him, was indeed pleasant to live in, what can he expect of the Jewish people as a whole?

Berlin and Jaffa are as much opposed in *To This Day* as are Brigitta Schimmermann and Dr. Levi's library. In a sense, these two pairs of opposites are one. Levi's library is out of place in Germany because an increasingly assimilated and intermarried German Jewry has no use for it, just as it has none for the Hebrew books collected by Isaac Mittel, whose own son cannot read them. Only in a Zionist, Hebrew-speaking society, Agnon's novel implies, can Jewish culture find a permanent asylum, so that rescuing Levi's library and returning to Palestine are a single challenge. While the Zionist project may or may not be the only viable option for the Jewish future, it is certainly the only one for the Jewish past.

We can now restate our summary of *To This Day* once again. Set against the background of World War I Berlin, Agnon's novel, we might say, is a story about Jewish exile and Jewish home-seeking; about Diasporism and Zionism; about Eros and Thanatos; about Christian civilization and the Jewish critique of it; about chance and causality; about self-knowledge and self-deceit; about a young Eastern-European Jew, a sharp observer of others who is peculiarly blind to his own self, in whom all these elements play out; and about

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how he finally chooses, after a long period of unconscious struggle, the Jewish and Zionist side of himself.

Indeed, who but a blind man could look back on the events leading up to this denouement as does the narrator? Here is his own summary of them at the novel's end:

Consider what happened to a man like me. Living in cramped quarters without pleasure or sunlight, he received a letter from Dr. Levi's widow asking to consult with him about her husband's books; traveling to see her, he found her hopelessly ill; returning to Berlin in frustration, he had nowhere to lay his head, his room having been given to another; finding another room that he liked, he was soon driven from it and forced to wander from place to place, from room to room, and from tribulation to tribulation, his worries multiplying without cease. And yet just when it seemed that he could no longer bear one more of them, God had mercy and delivered him and returned him to the Land of Israel. Is not all that seems for the worst, then, really for the best? And the best of all I've saved for last, which is the house this man built in Palestine. Not being one for grand notions, he knows that he built it not for himself but for Dr. Levi's books, which needed a new home.

Although coming from someone who is far from stupid, such a conclusion, at the end of a cataclysmic world war, strikes us as inane, especially since the narrator has told us (a seemingly minor detail when first encountered) that he has read Voltaire's *Candide*, the classic European satire on the belief in a benevolent universe, and is or should be aware that he is echoing its final, mocking lines. In them we find Voltaire's hero, who has wandered the world and witnessed great natural disasters and every kind of human brutality, living with his old love Cunegonda in the pastoral setting to which they have retired. With them is Candide's childhood tutor Dr. Pangloss, Voltaire's caricature of the German philosopher Leibniz, who earlier in the novel has instructed Candide:

It is demonstrable that things cannot be otherwise than as they are; for as all things have been created for some end, they must necessarily be created for the best end. Observe, for instance, that the nose is formed for spectacles, therefore we wear spectacles. The legs are visibly designed for stockings, accordingly we wear stockings...and they who assert that everything is right, do not express themselves correctly; they should say that everything is best.

Now, at the book's end, Pangloss tells Candide:

There is a concatenation of all events in the best of possible worlds; for, in short, had you not been kicked out of a fine castle [in which Candide was raised] for the love of Miss Cunegonda; had you not run the Baron [Cunegonda's brother] through the body; and had you not lost all your sheep [loaded with a fortune in gold], which you brought from the good country of El Dorado, you would not have been here to eat preserved citrons and pistachio nuts.

To which Candide replies laconically, "Excellently observed, but let us cultivate our garden."

Yet while there is a hint of irony in this reply, suggesting that Candide, although too polite to say so, has come to realize how fatuous Pangloss is, no such irony is detectable in the final remarks of the narrator of *To This Day*. What, it seems fair to ask, is Agnon up to?

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One thing he is *not* up to is identifying unequivocally with these remarks. Indeed, he has already distanced himself from them midway in the novel by introducing the character of the narrator's old friend Shmuel Yosef Bach, who proposes quite a different conception of reality. By means of the scene with Bach, Agnon accomplishes three things. First, by having the narrator tell us (in no other place is this mentioned) that he, too, is named Shmuel Yosef, Shmuel Yosef Agnon the author signals us that we are reading an autobiographical novel.

Secondly, through Bach's informing the narrator of the anti-Semitic atrocities committed by the Russian army and Ukrainian peasantry in Galicia, he makes us aware (here, too, for the only time) that there is a dimension of specific Jewish suffering to the war. And thirdly, by attributing to Bach a philosophy of life diametrically opposed to the narrator's at the novel's end, Agnon alerts us to the fact that the latter's point of view is not necessarily his own.

What is Shmuel Yosef Bach's philosophy? Explicated in a book that he is writing and thinking of calling *On The Repetition of Things*, it is reminiscent of Nietzsche's doctrine of "eternal recurrence." Life, Bach declares, has neither purpose nor direction. Rather, it consists of an endless series of random events that sooner or later (there being only so many possibilities) repeat themselves in what appear to be meaningful patterns—and it is in these imagined patterns that we mistakenly see a guiding hand in the affairs of the world, though in reality they are an illusion, an attempt on our part to impose a cognitive order on sheer chaos.

Ultimately, Shmuel Yosef Bach and Shmuel Yosef the narrator must be thought of as a single person, as is borne out by Bach's background, which is similar to Agnon's own. Whereas Bach's family, we are told, descends from the renowned rabbi Yeshayahu Hurvitz, (d. 1631), Agnon's family claimed as its ancestor the equally renowned Shmuel Idels (d. 1630); whereas the Bachs own a fabrics store, Agnon's parents owned a fur store; whereas Bach's father is an admirer of the medieval poet and biblical commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra, Agnon's father was a devotee of Ibn Ezra's contemporary, the philosopher Maimonides, and so on. In effect, the two Shmuel Yosefs are two sides of the author, with whom they shared a single life from birth until one of them left Galicia for Palestine and the other did not.

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This happened in 1908. In that year an aspiring Hebrew author named Shmuel Yosef Chachkes, born in 1887 in the town of Buczacz in today's western Ukraine, settled in Palestine's main port city of Jaffa, soon to spawn the new Jewish neighborhood of Tel Aviv. Chachkes did not keep his family name for long. That same year one of his

first published stories appeared in a Hebrew periodical. It was called *Agunot*, “Abandoned Wives,” and its author signed it, in a play on its title, “S.Y. Agnon.” Gradually, the pseudonym adhered to him.

Agnon spent four years in Palestine, partly in Jaffa and partly in Jerusalem, working in various secretarial and editorial capacities while continuing to publish and to acquire a reputation as a rising star in Hebrew literature, especially after the serialization in 1911–1912 of his novella *And The Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, a folkloristic tale set in mid-19th-century Galicia. Nevertheless, in the autumn of 1912 he sailed back to Europe. This was not unusual for a Zionist settler of that period. Palestine was small and provincial, its climate difficult, its opportunities few, its Jewish population of 75,000 growing at a snail’s pace; for every new arrival there was someone else, so it seemed, who departed. Berlin was a great cosmopolitan city and a center of Jewish and Hebrew culture. Agnon put Zionist and other sentiments aside (his close friend and the man he most looked up to, the older and more famous Hebrew writer Yosef Haim Brenner, had implored him to stay in Palestine) and went to live in Germany.

He had been in Berlin for less than two years, writing and supporting himself as a Hebrew teacher and an editor in a Jewish publishing house, when the war broke out. Although much of *To This Day* is indeed autobiographical (Agnon did, during the war years, report regularly to his draft board; did live in fear of being called up and sent to the front; did travel often between Berlin and Leipzig; did change rented rooms frequently; and did fall ill and have to be hospitalized), much of it is not. In many ways, Agnon’s wartime experience was far better than his narrator’s. Unlike Shmuel Yosef in *To This Day*, he was not paralyzed creatively by the war or socially isolated; on the contrary, he kept his publishing job, persisted in writing Hebrew fiction that won recognition and was even translated into German, and made and maintained a wide range of social contacts that included friendships with Martin Buber and the department store magnate Salman Schocken, his future literary patron.

Nor did Agnon hurry, like his narrator, to return to Palestine when the war ended in 1918. It was not until 1924, in fact, after taking a German-Jewish wife and fathering two children, that he decided to

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re-immigrate to Palestine and settle in Jerusalem, where he reverted to the religious Orthodoxy of his youth—and this, too, only after a fire had razed his home in the resort town of Bad Hamburg and destroyed his large library and his manuscripts, among them a draft of a first full-length novel to which he was never to return.

What is interesting about this in regard to *To This Day* is not only that the narrator's yearning for Palestine is considerably greater than was Agnon's in those years; it is also that his growing abhorrence, as the war progresses, for Germany and all things German was clearly not Agnon's then either. From a Jewish point of view, indeed, Germany was not the enemy in World War I. However to blame German militarism may have been for the war's onset, the German army's behavior toward the Jews of the Eastern-European territories it conquered was exemplary, certainly when compared to the barbarism of the Russians. Nor was there significant public anti-Semitism in wartime Germany itself. Jewish soldiers fought, died, and were decorated alongside Christians in the German armed forces, and wartime censorship kept anti-Semitic opinions out of sight.

To what, then, can we attribute the narrator's attitude toward Germany? It makes more sense when we recall that *To This Day*, the last of Agnon's completed novels,* appeared in 1951—that is, that it was written, not after World War I, but after World War II, and that in it Agnon was projecting extreme anti-German feelings back onto an earlier age. Nor is this the only thing that the date of the novel's composition helps to explain. *To This Day*'s puzzling ending, too, becomes more understandable when we consider that Agnon wrote it following the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel and its successful war of independence. However one thinks of these two colossal events in Jewish history, it is impossible not to regard them together.

In the eyes of many of Agnon's contemporaries, they were regarded through the prism of historical causality. Israel, in this per-

* Agnon's unfinished novel *Shira* was published posthumously in 1979. His other novels are *The Bridal Canopy* (1931), *A Simple Story* (1935), *A Guest for the Night* (1939), and *Just Yesterday* (1945).

spective, was a direct consequence of the Holocaust and of what led up to it. Political Zionism originated as a reaction to the European anti-Semitism that climaxed in the Nazi genocide, and the infrastructure in Palestine that made Israel's establishment possible was largely built in the 1920s and '30s by Jews fleeing Hitlerism and anti-Semitic persecution. Moreover, after World War II a Jewish state was perceived as necessary by the Gentile world because of the need to find a home for Holocaust refugees and to ensure that the Jewish people never again met such a fate. Without Christian guilt for what had happened, so the argument went, there would never have been international support for the creation of Israel.

Although one can challenge the historical accuracy of some of these assumptions, they were commonly viewed then, as they are today, to be true. And by some in Agnon's milieu in Jerusalem, which was that of what was and still is known in Israel as the "national religious camp," Israel's link to the Holocaust was considered to be even more profound. Conceived of theologically, it was viewed as part of a divine plan for redemption in which the Jewish people had to be purged in the Nazi inferno before commencing the messianic ascent of which the birth of Israel was a first harbinger. As stated by a leading proponent of this school of thought, Agnon's Jerusalem contemporary Rabbi Tsvi Yehuda Kook, the son of Palestine's first chief rabbi, the religious thinker Abraham Isaac Hacoheh Kook:

The Jewish people was torn from the depths of the Exile and brought to Israel. The blood shed by the six million [victims of the Holocaust] was a terrible incision in the body of the nation. The Jews underwent an operation that, though divine, was performed by the Nazi fiends, [for] God's people had so adhered to the uncleanness of the lands of the Gentiles that it had to be forcibly cut away and removed from their midst by great violence... By means of this cruel surgery, our lives are now revealed to be those of a reborn nation in a reborn land with a reborn Torah and reborn holiness... We must recognize the cosmologically divine nature of the historical facts.

Kook's theodicy was radical, even if its image of an emergency Caesarian delivery leaned on biblical precedent. ("Has God ever before sought," asks the book of Deuteronomy about the Exodus from Egypt, "to take a people from the midst of a people with trials and signs and wonders and war and a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and great terrors?") Many, probably most, "national religious" Jews would have shied away from such an extreme formulation, according to which the mother, the Jewish Diaspora, had to be killed for the child, the state of Israel, to be born. Yet they, too, would have agreed that this state was, if not a justification of the Holocaust in Kook's sense, a divine compensation for it, *reshit tsmihat ge'ulateynu*, "the first budding of our redemption," in the words of the "national religious" prayer book. Furthermore, this belief had its counterpart in Israel's secular political and intellectual establishments, whose supersessionist outlook held that if a doomed European Jewry had to perish for a Jewish state to emerge, the price, however dreadful, was worth paying. Israel was living through heady times. Despite the economic hardship of the post-independence years, the country was developing by leaps and bounds, absorbing large numbers of immigrants, making the wasteland bloom, throbbing with dynamism and confidence. The Holocaust was rarely a subject of public discussion. Though the crematoria had, as it were, just stopped smoking, their fallen ashes were already regarded as the historical matrix from which the Jewish future had sprung.

It is in this context that *To This Day* must be read. When it is, the full range of its symbolic equivalences becomes clearer. Although the events of the novel are not reducible to allegory, they also point to something other than themselves: World War I to World War II, the massacres of Jews in Galicia to the Holocaust, the narrator's return to Palestine and building of a home there to the Jewish people's creation of Israel, his concluding remarks to Holocaust-rationalizing Zionist theodicies and interpretations of history.

These remarks are indeed absurdly egocentric. They are Agnon's satirical protest against the belief that the state of Israel, however remarkable an achievement, is the end-all of Jewish history in the light of which all else can be rationalized. Like Voltaire's Dr. Pangloss,

for whom everything from the torture chambers of the Inquisition to the devastation of the Lisbon earthquake turns out to have been for the best because he and Candide are now eating “preserved citrons and pistachio nuts” in their garden, there were those in the gardens of Agnon’s Jerusalem who, unable to conceive of the Holocaust as a pure manifestation of evil serving no purpose in an arbitrary world, construed it as divinely or historically ordained. The ending of *To This Day*, put in the mouth of a narrator whose self-congratulatory preening is impervious to what was up to that point the greatest mass slaughter in the history of mankind, is a scathing critique of this outlook.

But it is also scathing toward Agnon himself, for just as Shmuel Yosef the narrator is a partial projection of Agnon the author, so a part of Agnon, yearning to believe in God’s providential love for his chosen people, was tempted to embrace the narrator’s point of view. He was restrained from this by the other part of him, Shmuel Yosef Bach the skeptic, who would have scoffed at such naive credulity. All of Agnon’s large literary production, indeed, can be viewed, in one way or another, as an argument between the two Shmuel Yosefs. In it faith battles with unbelief, the ideal of religious wholeness with pitiless ironic laughter. We, Agnon’s readers, are batted back and forth between them.

In everything he wrote, Agnon plays with us, and readers who resent being played with will not be among his principal admirers. Still, they too might concede that being asked to play with a master is no small compliment. Yes, Agnon often sets out to fool us. He deviously hides what is important and dangles before us what isn’t. He entangles us in his net and smiles as we flounder there. But in the end, he trusts us to free ourselves and to profit from the exertion of doing so. If he didn’t, he would have been foolish himself to write as he did. For this he deserves our trust in return, there being no riddle in his fiction to which he fails to provide, no matter how cleverly concealed, the clue to its solution. When we have finished following *To This Day*’s many loops, we find ourselves a surprisingly long way from where we started. It’s enough to make one want to repeat the journey.