

Between Shelter and Home

by Aharon Appelfeld

Aharon Appelfeld's literary work has been widely translated. His latest novel, *Laish*, was published in Hebrew in 1994.



IT HAS BECOME commonplace to describe Agnon's writings as representing the tension between the sacred and the profane, or as the critics put it, between the traditional and the secular. In other words, between the polar opposites that were deeply rooted in the souls of the writer and his contemporaries. This interpretation of his work was first proposed more than half a century ago, and was spread enthusiastically by Baruch Kurzweil: Agnon of the traditional-patristic world, versus the secularized, sceptical Agnon, striving to bridge the unbridgeable.

This interpretation appeared to be grounded in Agnon's writings. It seemed especially evident in *Only Yesterday*: Jerusalem versus Jaffa; Sonia, the queen of the sea and the workaday life, versus Shifra, whose life runs down in stifling rooms; the dark fanatical alleys of Jerusalem, as opposed to the open sea and the pioneers of Jaffa and the settlements—while the protagonist Yitzhak dreams and struggles to find himself in these two worlds. It seems to be a strong, almost symmetrical, opposition of the sacred and the profane.

But the symmetry itself is suspicious. True, it may be found in nature, but things are different where the soul is concerned. Let it be said at once: even in *Only Yesterday*, where the sacred/profane model appears so vividly, it is an illusion. Jerusalem is a city of paupers, of fanatical traditionalists, and not at all a place of genuine faith. Yet in that fossilised city lives the painter Blaukopf, a Jew who does not observe the Law but is full of intense religiosity. Meanwhile, in Jaffa and the settlements, which purport to be building a new Jewish world, things are far from perfect. Wealthy pompous patrons on the one hand, humbug activists on the other, and some bubble-headed flirts in between. Yet the pious Hasid Malkhov also lives in Jaffa, an old-world Jew with something of the pioneers' innocence about him. In other words, things that appear to be either sacred or profane are not necessarily so.

As I see it, there is another way of juxtaposing Jerusalem and Jaffa. Jerusalem has its specious preachers and Jaffa its busybodies. In Jerusalem there is exterior piety, and in Jaffa hollow secularity. Nonetheless, there exist truly religious people in Jaffa as in Jerusalem. Indeed, Agnon did not divide people into religious and secular, but held that some Jews had a spiritual Jewish quality that others lacked.

Agnon was not an author of sharp contrasts, but of nuances. He did not set one thing against another. His characters are presented not by means of monologues and arguments, but through observation of

their behaviour, with an occasional comment. In that, he differed from the writers of his generation. The critics have strained to make him fit in with his contemporaries and to point out their common qualities, but there is no avoiding it—Agnon stands apart. He did not swim with the current of his age, which arose in the Enlightenment and continued during the Revival, which stressed the contrast, the tension and hostility, between religion and life, Judaism and humanity. His contemporaries maintained, in loud or subdued voices, that old Judaism had reached a dead-end and was doomed to extinction. Berdyczewski and Brenner also felt affection for Judaism, but accepted the verdict. Agnon did not. He, who wrote *A Guest for the Night*, which is a litany of doom, who had witnessed the protracted death throes of the Jewish townlet, could not accept the demise of Judaism. Throughout his life he felt a part of it, and strove to restore it to its birthplace, Jerusalem.

After the great destruction Agnon set out in search of lost Jewry. His writings are, in effect, a prolonged gathering of fragments. Curiously, it was *Eretz Israel*, the physical distance, which enabled him to see his native town not only affectionately, but in a new perspective. *Eretz Israel* of the early decades of the century represented a protest against everything that the diaspora stood for. And yet in this place, which in those days tried so hard to shed the burden of the past, he succeeded in giving voice to his forefathers better than any of his predecessors.

Agnon differed from his contemporaries in almost every aspect—his language, the Hebrew sources he drew on, the syntax, the tone.... His writing was not qualitatively but substantially different. This may be explained in a variety of ways, but I believe it will remain a mystery. His mental pattern created a different poetics. Perhaps we may still usefully apply Schiller's old distinction between the two types of writers, the sentimental and the naïve. The sentimental writer can never accept reality as he finds it, but strives for the perfect and the ideal. He is a rebel with an idea, in the light of which he views the flaws of the real world. Most of the Hebrew writers since the Enlightenment were sentimental, and saw Jewish reality as fundamentally flawed. The original idea, Enlightenment, was succeeded by the Bund and Communism, and later by Zionism. These represented resistance not only to the social conditions of the diaspora, but to Judaism itself, its moral and religious values.

The naïve writer (naïve not in the sense of unsophisticated, but of a certain integral innocence)

accepts reality as he finds it, with all its charm and ugliness, past and present, the material and the spiritual. He never says: this society is hopeless and must be changed, root and branch. He will say: this society in which I live, which is so full of suffering and sorrow, deserves to be carefully observed, right back to its origins. Life, such as it is, is worthy of a little charity. The naïve writer does not place an idea before the face of reality. He is concerned with reality, with its ailments and deformities, and not because he dotes on misfortune. He knows that his society has not wilfully adopted these faults, but had them imposed upon it by reality. Agnon may be one of the few writers of his generation, if not the only one, to meet this definition of the naïve writer. The others were characterised by their conflict with the fathers, with Jewish history, and above all, with the Jewish religion. Though most Hebrew writers were not Zionists, their message amounted to a pragmatic Zionist one: we have to change.

Agnon had no use for this message. He had an unsentimental affection for the world of his fathers, its physical nature, the Jewish house and the synagogue, and Jewish creation through the ages. Whatever was created in the Jewish world was embedded in him and his writings. T.S. Eliot stated that the essence of a writer lies in his tribe's collective memory,¹ which he stores and renews. In that sense, Agnon was unique among our writers. We have had thinkers and writers who were captivated by Judaism, people like Martin Buber and Gershom Scholem, but they did not accept it as a whole. They chose the aspects that appealed to them. Agnon, on the other hand, saw Judaism as an indivisible cultural entity. Any attempt at division jeopardised its integrity. His writings embraced everything: the Enlightenment and Hasidism, assimilationism and Zionism. He blended the modern and the Jewish experiences, which is why his world is not really divided into the sacred and profane, but into that of values and their absence, the genuine and the false. He is a post-assimilatory artist in search of himself, and he attempted to construct bridges across the gulf that opened up between the generations. Unlike his contemporaries, he felt no enmity for the tribal beliefs. He was one of the few who understood that the core of Jewish culture lies in its religion, which may take on different features, as indeed happened, but remains the infrastructure underlying the tribe's very existence.

In common with Rabbi Kook, Agnon viewed the emergent Jewish community in Israel not as a culmination, but as the beginning of a new Jewish life. He

was quite free of modern orthodoxy, its self-confidence and pretensions. He had the inner freedom to observe himself and his fathers clearly, without rancour or pity. Of course, his world differed from theirs, but that did not mean it was superior. He wrote in a minor key, without outbursts of rage and jeremiads. The action is almost inward, but make no mistake—the quiet conservative tone was itself a major revolution. While his contemporaries went out to search for treasures, Agnon stayed home and communed with his fathers and their writings. It was this ability to remain true to himself, this loyalty, that made Agnon what he was.

He has been compared to Kafka, which is a great mistake. Kafka was concerned with the individual, his inner depths, his inconsolable despair. Agnon's protagonist, even in moments of bitter despair, is never alone. The tribe, or what is left of it, will take pity on him and gather him to its bosom in the darkest hour. That was what happened to Yitzhak Kummer and to the guest in *A Guest for the Night*. Even the individual who has strayed far from the tribe can seek the path and try to rejoin it. Zionism sought to provide a shelter and a foothold for the persecuted Jew, and Agnon sought to achieve the impossible—to gather up the fragments of the tribal soul and bring them back to their ancient source. It was an unattainable mission.

To return to the point of departure. The critics and scholars of Agnon's day, (with the exception of Dov Sadan), saw Agnon in their own image. Being uprooted, and preoccupied with their uprootedness, they saw in him and his protagonists reflections of their own personae, namely, people swaying between loyalty to their tradition and its utter rejection. Agnon had nothing to do with all that. He was years ahead of this conflict. He was at peace with his fathers, not because he was weak, needing shelter and oblivious of the gulf. The return to the fathers was a return to himself, and Jerusalem closed the cycle of wandering. After years on the roads, the wanderer returned home. ■