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DESPITE ITS BREVITY, Agnon's "The Sense of Smell" combines disparate elements that are not easily reconciled. The story's homiletic structure, storybook headings, archaic style, and anecdotal plot, and its coincidental encounters, dream sequence, and moment of mystical reverie bespeak a world of all-too-perfect harmony. Yet the narrative is riddled with riddles. Is the writer/protagonist a pious raconteur or a misanthrope? Does not the closed and self-referential world of Torah study, with its obsessive search for authority, clash with the solipsism of the artist, who lives in the subjective realm of the senses? The sukkah, furthermore, is both lowly and sublime; the "sense of smell" of the story's title implies a sensibility at once neotraditional and radically innovative. Having lavished so much attention upon the wording of a single phrase chosen, almost erased, and ultimately validated, what is Agnon trying to say about the relationship between writing as a craft and writing as a religious calling?

[1]

To begin with, the linguistic medium would seem to be the story's manifest message. Just as the homiletic style of chapters 1 through 3 avoids all signs of modernity, the message is resolutely antisecular. Hebrew cannot be confused with any other national language. It is *leshon hakodesh*, the language that predates Creation and that will usher in the messianic age. It is the vehicle of past, present, and future; of the Torah; the Holy One, blessed be He; the angels and seraphim; the people Israel; of Jacob, the exiles, the mourners of Zion, the Messiah. It is the language of prayer, the language that God most longs to hear; the language of Song of Songs, in which God sings the praises of His people, Israel; and the language of the Psalms, in which Jews seek solace through their long night of exile.

This is vintage Agnon, just the kind of densely allusive, sermonlike pre-ambule that he made famous with "Agunot," his signature story of 1908. For the narrator is convinced that we live in an age of stammerers and skeptics. His opening homily is a preemptive strike, a polemic against all those who deride the revival of Hebrew as a spoken language; who fail to master even

the rudiments of the holy tongue; who revert to writing in the languages of exile; who "put worldly matters first and words of Torah second." "If [scholars] would make Torah their basis," the narrator proclaims, "the Torah would come to their aid." *She'ilu 'asu hatorah 'ikkar haytah hatorah mesay'atam*. Indeed, this extravagant credo is borne out by story's end: the Torah will literally come to the author's aid. But not before he pulls out all the stops. So holy is the holy tongue, he polemicizes at the end of chapter 2, that it overrides even the wickedness of the worst Gentile. To wit, Balaam, whose most extreme act of betrayal was forgiven on account of his immortal Hebrew words in praise of Israel, *ma tovu ohalekha Ya'akov*. For this one poem, he merited having a Torah portion named after him and having the morning prayers open with his words.

Never mind that the Balaam of folk memory flies in the face of this seemingly irrefutable proof; that, quite to the contrary, when you teach someone a lesson, *lernt men mit im Bolok*, you teach him "the Torah portion Balak". Never mind that the man who colluded in the downfall of 158,600 men of Israel should be forgiven and immortalized simply because he uttered his prophetic words in Hebrew. And never mind that, looking ahead to the Middle Ages, some of the great Jewish sages composed their works not in Hebrew but in Arabic. The narrator has this to say in rebuttal: These works (the *Kuzari*? the *Guide for the Perplexed*?) were but pabulum for babies! Besides, there is divine reason for the choice of Arabic. The Holy Land has been entrusted to Arab hands by God, until such time as God returns it to the Jewish exiles.

So what began as an exalted invocation of the cosmic merits of the holy tongue has ended with a rearguard, rednecked attack on:

- 1) Jewish scholars who refuse to master their ancient tongue;
- 2) the culture of the Gentiles;
- 3) the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry;
- 4) the attempt to liberate Palestine by political means; and
- 5) the whole secular enterprise.

Meanwhile, the lyrical tone of chapter 1, with its seductive and seamless rhetorical structure, has given way to the strident rhetoric of intellectual debate: *shema yomar . . . kol ha'omer ken . . . kol sheken . . . umipnei mah . . . mipnei she . . . teda' lekha sheken . . . shema tomar . . . lefikhakh . . . veshoneh . . . velamah*. The narrator signals a further shift in tone in chapter 3, as he

turns his attention inward, to his own state of exile. *Me'ahavat leshonenu umihibat hakodesh ani mashhir panai 'al divre torah umariv 'atsmi 'al divrei hakhamim umeshamram bevitni kdei sheyakhonu yahdav 'al sfatai*. Not a Levite is he, officiating at the Temple among his singing brothers, but a lone Nazirite, on a self-imposed diet of Torah and the words of our sages. He lives in spatial and spiritual exile. Anne Hoffman calls this section Agnon's "imaginative geography," reading "sukkah" of the author's parable not as "lowly hut," but as "sanctuary," the word that houses.¹ This may be true in retrospect; but at this point in our reading, what we hear is a litany of loss: the solitary study of Torah replaces the communal singing of psalms; the living word is replaced by *zikhron devarim*; the resplendent house of God is replaced by a makeshift hut; and the ultimate expression of loss is the writing of *sippurei ma'asiyot*, mere *mayslekh* that tell obsessively of a world that is no more.

Thus, the first three chapters form a kind of triptych: praise, polemic, and lament. Since the diction and cadence remain so firmly rooted in traditional discourse, the shift to the first-person singular in chapter 3 is almost imperceptible. The craft of writing is here depicted as a tragic surrogate for the exalted Levitical calling, yet so long as the storyteller can on occasion construct a lowly sukkah, fiction still partakes of the same universe of faith and meaning that was once the preserve of the Temple brotherhood. As a Nazir, furthermore, dedicated solely to the preservation of the holy tongue and feeding exclusively off words of Torah, the narrator must honor and preserve each and every word.

How brutal, then, the fall from even this demoted status, when the narrator is forced from his solitary ministrations by a public accusation on the part of an unnamed grammarian. To make matters worse, the narrator is described in the chapter heading as a mere *mehabber*, or "author," no better than his opponent, who challenges him on the most hallowed ground, the aforementioned sukkah. Can one speak of a sukkah "smelling"? Not much to hook a story on, much less, a quest narrative. But a quest it becomes, "mock heroic" perhaps, but a quest nonetheless. And here we see the narrator at his most misanthropic. He is radically mistrustful of *sifrei shimush*, the tools of modern scholarship, as he is of the scholars themselves, who "know everything except that particular thing you are looking for." And he finds no answer even among his fellow Jerusalemites, native speakers of Hebrew, because each is motivated solely by ego and personal whim. Just as he is about to erase the offending word, however, the sukkah

itself miraculously intervenes, its aromatic smells validating the narrator's linguistic usage.

What this last episode means is never explained, and is anyway superseded by an even greater miracle, announced in the heading of chapter 5: "The Righteous from Paradise Come to the Author's Aid." What has the narrator done to warrant such a miracle? He has gone out of his way to honor a descendant of Rabbi Jacob of Lissa. He has also engaged a scholar in dialogue, in the course of which he has praised the Sage of Lissa for the exceptionally useful prayer book that he had compiled. The narrator then falls into a sweet slumber and is visited by the sage himself, who holds the aforementioned siddur in his hands. Dream merges with reality when the narrator awakens, consults his own copy of the prayer book, and rediscovers in its pages the very words he has been seeking. Searching through another sacred tome, he finds additional linguistic proof. He ends the chapter with sweet thoughts of revenge.

Properly, the quest is over. All told, the author has found textual validation in three separate sources, and his credo, "If scholars would make Torah their basis, the Torah would come to their aid" has been borne out in fact. What's more, the quest has taken him out of his glorious isolation and allowed for meaningful interactions on a social and trans-temporal plane. Hoffman calls the dream sequence "something of a family romance," in which the narrator discovers kinship not in life, but in texts, the dream suggesting a community "where, ultimately, it is language that joins together sages of the past and the figure of the writer" (119–20). Again, paraphrasing Hoffman, the sage instructs his progeny that true innovation through the Torah means discovering what is already there, already written, already read, already copied.

The author makes much of the fact that he was able to identify the face of the sage in his dream; this, despite the absence of any known pictures and despite the well-known rule that "the great among Israel just don't look like their relatives, because their Torah gives their faces a special glow." What was so special about the Sage of Lissa's Torah? "Our holy rabbis have left us lots of prayer books," the narrator had said earlier, "filled with directions and commentaries both hidden and revealed, with matters grammatical or sagacious, with permutations of letters, secrets, and allegories, all to arouse the hearts of worshipers as they enter the King's palace." Yet none could match the prayer book of the Sage of Lissa for usefulness. None but he had made himself a true servant of the Torah, or had written "in

such an accessible way.” Does this not suggest an elective affinity between him and the dweller in a mere sukkah, a match for any man in scholarship, who nonetheless stooped to conquer in order to produce accessible stories of supreme usefulness?

If the true sage and he are revealed to be *mishpokhe*, members of a select brotherhood who “darken their faces over study of Torah,” then why the reverie at daybreak, the pious recitation of psalms, and the discovery of a fourth and final proof, in Rashi’s commentary? The Torah has already come to his aid. The anal grammarian has already been vanquished. Why the repetition? Why isn’t the Sage of Lissa a good enough *yikhes*? Because Rashi’s intervention comes against the backdrop of something new, the intrusion of real smells and real sounds emanating from a particular natural landscape. Whatever happened before, when a sukkah came and its aroma rose before him until he really saw that it was smelling, what happens now is acutely sensory and sensual.

Yet this most personal, overtly autobiographical, moment in the story is also the most intertextual. In a scene reminiscent of Bialik’s “Hamatmid,” the scholar is seated indoors pouring over a sacred tome while nature beckons outdoors. Recalling an episode in the *Tales* of Nahman of Bratslav, he hears birds singing exquisite melodies to one another. And in the language of the Song of Songs, the same passage, in fact, with which he began the story, the voice of the second bird “was just sweeter than the other bird’s”; *vehayah kolah ’arev mikolah shel havertah*, and together, the two birds “sang new songs, the likes of which no ear had ever heard.” Pretending not to hear, the author sets their singing to the words of Psalm 45, the Psalm for the Chief Musician upon Lilies, and although he identified this psalm earlier as “a song of praise of the sages’ disciples, those who are soft as lilies and pleasant as lilies,” it is clear that he is reading the words as he has never read them before, nonmetaphorically, and in a way unsanctioned by tradition. That is when Rashi comes to the rescue, and glosses the words *kol bigdotekha* (45:9) in two different ways: contextually, as “all thy garments smell like fragrant spices,” and midrashically, as “all your betrayals and foul deeds will be forgiven and will smell sweet before me.” Whereupon the sukkah reappears in all its aromatic glory, and his mind is eased “like a person smelling flowers that smell.”

On the manifest, homiletic, plane, one that is clearly privileged from beginning to end, the author is rescued by the Torah. On a psychological plane, he is rescued by his own sense of smell. Alongside the ideal portrait of the Torah scholar, modeled by Jacob of Lissa, who, for all his relative

obscurity, had served his flock so much better than any other scholar, there is the real portrait of the contemporary Hebrew writer, living in a diminished world, at odds with his surroundings, reduced to writing *mayselekh* in an embattled language.

Why did Agnon write this story? Why did he write it in 1937? Why, sitting in Talpiot, Jerusalem, did he prefer the company of the sages long since dead? How credible is it that one sense of smell does not subvert, betray, the other?

[2]

Agnon is the master of what Bakhtin calls the “double-voiced utterance.” Agnon appropriates the utterance of another as the utterance of another and uses it for his own purposes. His stylized tales are designed to be interpreted as the utterances of two speakers. The audience hears in a version of the original utterance the collective voice of the Jewish past and a second, contemporary, speaker’s evaluation of that utterance. Left to their own devices, the two speakers would be in essential agreement, so that the success of the stylization would derive from the utterances of the second speaker corroborating the utterances of the first. The narrator functions here as a latter-day scribe, a *sofer stam*, as is the case in such late works as *Tr umlo’ah*. Devoid of inner tension, these stories are eminently forgettable.

Not so “The Sense of Smell.” Here, the first utterance, the collective voice of the past, is under attack. Its whole authority and semantic position are being questioned. This is why the writer must up the ante and preempt his attackers with a tour de force in praise of the holy tongue. Conscious throughout of an audience for whom Hebrew is neither holy nor viable, the speaker of the second utterance objectifies, personifies, hallows the first utterance in every way conceivable: through lyrical, polemical, tragic, and mock-heroic passages. The ultimate purpose of his discourse is not self-validation, not the quest, but the revival of the authority and vitality of the first utterance. If Rashi can speak to the present, then the present can speak through the past.

Hebrew, in Agnon’s scheme, becomes the language of polyphony. The real enemy, therefore, is the grammarian, who insists upon using Hebrew monologically: one word, one meaning. God forbid that the revival of Hebrew as a living language be entrusted to people like him! If truth is dialogic, then Hebrew is the one true language. Note that Hebrew precedes Creation, precedes God, as it were, thus freeing the text of Torah for dia-

logue, commentary, agreement, and disagreement. Why, even the author, for all his erudition, doesn't understand everything he reads in Scripture! Agnon displays his genius by conjuring up a dialogue that works vertically instead of horizontally. On the horizontal plane of politics, society, and academic scholarship, language is debased and monologic. Only when one gives voice to the past, crediting each individual utterance and its author, recognizing that author's unique face, does Hebrew regain its openness, its unfinalizability, its cosmic potential. Each recaptured utterance, moreover, rests upon an ethical event, upon the author / hero owning, or signing an act: praying, studying, helping a stranger, talking words of Torah with another scholar. In this way, *leshon hakodesh* becomes both the vehicle and tenor of true dialogue.

How does individual creativity enter into the system of sanctioned dialogue? Creativity begins when one feels at home in the world of the past. Creativity is predicated upon mobilizing the whole personality. Creativity comes when the recitation of the received words is accompanied by something unexpected, a birdsong unlike any that was ever sung. Creativity begins when nature comes to the rescue of culture, when the utterance beyond space enters into dialogue with the utterance beyond time.

[3]

Agnon's best stories are not stylizations at all. They are a species of "creative betrayal." As such, they belong in the mainstream of Jewish literary history, midway between *Der Nister* and I. B. Singer.² Agnon shares *Der Nister*'s sense of election. The artist is a Nazir, who dedicates his life to the service of his craft. The measure of his self-discipline is the distance between mundane, profane speech and the carefully wrought language of his literary art. The plot is always the tale of a symbolic quest, undertaken by a lone hero who meets with many obstacles. Both writers swore allegiance to Reb Nahman. Both came of age in the heady atmosphere of Weimar Germany.

Even if there were no genetic link between them, both *Der Nister* and Agnon arrived at the art of creative betrayal via the same three-act drama of rebellion, loss, and negotiated return. In Agnon's case, each act played itself out in and through a different setting.

Act 1, the rebellion, as a member of the Second Aliyah.

Act 2, when he experienced the profound loss of Buczacz and all that it stood for.

Act 3, the negotiated return to the severed past, during Agnon's sojourn in Weimar Germany.

Creative betrayal was the art of triage, the art of rescuing what little could still be saved in an age of skepticism, fragmentation, and gross materialism: archaic language, storytelling, the figure of the sage. Creative betrayal was an artistic bulwark against national despair. What else could a Hebrew writer hold out to his audience in 1937, at the height of the Arab revolt, and against the rising specter of Hitler and Stalin? A little *sukkah*, and nothing more.

But the strength of creative betrayal lay in the very combination of its disparate strands: rebellion and retrieval, nature and culture, the sensual present and the spiritual past. When the Agnon narrator says, "There is nothing especially wondrous or praiseworthy about this," you know that something extraordinary has just happened. His coy modesty at story's end just about gives the game away, "because the psalm played itself like an instrument of many strings. A Song of Love, next to which all other songs are as nothing." This is a song that can be heard only by someone who has returned to the study house of Buczacz via the cultural revolution of Tel Aviv/Jaffo. This is a song rooted as much in the senses of the beholder as in the language of psalms.

And lest there be any doubt about this, Rashi himself comes out of the Academy on High in the Garden of Eden and explicates the key passage: *bigdotekha* from the root *bgd* means "thy garments," but it can also mean "your betrayals," from the word *begidah*. Like the art of creative betrayal, derived from the Hebrew *begidah yotseret*, the art of creative recloaking is preceded by the act of betrayal. Agnon, perhaps the greatest of the born-again storytellers, has written a fantasy about a writer, all of whose betrayals and foul deeds were forgiven, and who, in the midst of his anger, isolation, and despair, was granted a miracle: the early morning breezes, the sweet fragrances, and the birdsong emanating from his own garden suddenly endowed the language of Creation with new meaning and gave new promise to the language of redemption.

Notes

1. Anne Golomb Hoffman, *Between Exile and Return: S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 117.

2. See David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

READING HEBREW
LITERATURE

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