

Seeing Into the Hidden Interior of Things



by CURT LEVIANT

TWENTY-ONE STORIES

by S. Y. Agnon, edited by Nahum N. Glatzer

Schocken, 287 pp., \$6.50

THE FICTION OF S. Y. AGNON

by Baruch Hochman

Cornell University Press, 206 pp., \$6.95

With the death of Shmuel Yosef Agnon in Israel in February, Hebrew literature lost its outstanding personality, a man who had become both a classic writer and a living legend in his lifetime. Born in Galicia, Poland, in 1888, he began his literary career in 1903, and continued it with undiminished creative strength for more than six decades. He was perhaps the last of the Hebrew writers to have both a diversity of interest in Western letters and a full command of the entire mainstream of Biblical, Talmudic-Midrashic, rabbinic and Hasidic literature. The secret of his unique genius may be found in his harmonious fusion of these worlds.

Agnon's collected fiction appears in a standard eight-volume edition that contains his three major novels, several shorter novels and long tales, and more than 200 short stories. In addition, there are four volumes of non-fiction. These twelve books, however, by no means comprise Agnon's entire literary output. Scores of stories and chapters from novels in progress have appeared in Israeli newspapers and literary journals over the years, but,

CURT LEVIANT is the editor of *Masterpieces of Hebrew Literature: A Treasury of 2,000 Years of Jewish Creativity*.

because of Agnon's meticulous rewriting, have not yet been published in book form. Also, there is an abundance of manuscript material (which only Agnon has seen, but to which he has occasionally alluded); this, too, will eventually appear in several volumes.

The steadily growing shelf of Agnon's works in English translation is made up of two major novels, *The Bridal Canopy* and *A Guest for the Night*; a short novel, *In the Heart of the Seas*; the novellas "Edo and Enam" and "Betrothed" in *Two Tales*; *Days of Awe*, a collection of customs, folklore and other material pertaining to the High Holy Days; and now, with the publication of *Twenty-one Stories*, some shorter fiction.

These works, with their varied form, tone and treatment, accent three types of fiction: the storybook tale, where both reader and writer agree that they are entering a make-believe world; the realistic story that reflects a social, political, and/or religious milieu; and the symbolic, surrealistic story wherein the laws of the dream world are placed in a montage with causal and temporal reality. These three types are, of course, not mutually exclusive. Some works may interweave two or more of the strands.

The Bridal Canopy is an outstanding example of Agnon's storybook world. As is usual in Agnon, the tale's lifeways are not rooted in some far-off never-never land but in a thoroughly Jewish and recognizable world order. The book tells of the comic adventures of Reb Yudel as he wanders through early nineteenth-century Galicia (southern Poland, formerly a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) in search of a dowry for his three daughters. Although the social milieu and the tradition that the Jews adhere to are real enough, the imaginative spin-off begins with the countless stories that

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are exchanged—frequent digressions that are likewise Jewish in theme and plot, and often ironically counterpoint the main action.

This novel is also representative of Agnon's blending of Western and Eastern techniques. Although the picaresque spirit of *Don Quixote* hovers lightly over *The Bridal Canopy*, an Arab literary genre long mastered by Hebrew medieval poets is closer to the story's character: the *maqama*, rhymed prose entertainments that contain a framework of plot, fantastic events, and many story-within-story episodes. (Reb Yudel's driver, Nuta, may be seen as a Sancho Panza, but also as the stock companion of the *maqama*'s narrator.) Following this pattern of make-believe, Yudel and his acquaintances at the inn speak in rhymed prose; horses not only converse, they engage in Talmudic disputation—and when they tell a story, they choose one about a mouse and a rooster who exchange Biblical quotations. Moreover, in true storybook fashion, there are amazing coincidences, mixups of identity, and a happy ending: Reb Yudel finds a fortune to endow his three daughters.

The Bridal Canopy celebrates an almost exclusively Jewish way of life in the heart of Europe, and describes a generation of Jews unaffected and unshaped by outside currents—one might almost say unaware of history. On the other hand, *A Guest for the Night* serves as a sobering historic counterpoint. Set in 1930 and published on the eve of World War II in 1939, when the Holocaust had already been several years in the making, the novel deals with the post-World War I reality of a small Jewish town that is crumbling both physically and spiritually. Whereas the reader feels tranquil in the make-believe world of *The Bridal Canopy*—even though his tranquility is occasionally upset by some of the novel's inner tensions—the reader of *A Guest for the Night* is immediately disturbed by a world of here and now.

On the Eve of Yom Kippur, a man away from home and family returns from Palestine to his native city in Galicia. He continually encounters maimed people—a noseless beggar, a train dispatcher with a rubber arm, a neighbor with a wooden leg—whose physical imperfections symbolize spiritual blemish. Townspeople narrate tales of woe; the synagogue is dying. The narrator's sentimental journey home becomes a shattering experience, and his home town is a symbol of all Jewish Europe, slowly heading for spiritual emptiness and death.

The tension that pervades this essentially dark novel abates on only two occasions: when Agnon describes a training camp for young Jewish farm-

ers preparing for migration to the Land of Israel, and when the narrator returns there at the close. Agnon implies that salvation can come only in the Homeland, a theme orchestrated through many of his works, for Jews and Diaspora cannot be in harmony.

The theme of *aliya* to the Land of Israel is treated more light-heartedly in *In the Heart of the Seas*, which also has some of the storybook atmosphere of *Bridal Canopy*. *In the Heart of the Seas* is a classical example of Agnon's transmutation of the folklore he knows so well into a work of art. Since this story describes a small group of early nineteenth-century Hasidim who want to go to Israel, the spirit and lore of Hasidism infuse the work. Agnon gives us Hasidic miracle stories, the sayings of Hasidic *rebbe*s, the accent on joy of worship, singing and dancing, and the sanctity of Israel that are cornerstones of Hasidic teaching. Although the hero of the tale is Hananiah (who eventually floats to the Land on an outspread kerchief), the narrator—Agnon—places himself in the story much as cinema directors place themselves in crowd scenes. In the company of Hasidim who make the long and arduous trip to the Land of Israel, everyone has a role; Shmuel Yosef Agnon's is to be the teller of tales and thus sweeten the passing time for the travelers.

The complementary novellas "Edo and Enam" and "Betrothed" (in *Two Tales*) reveal Agnon at his most modern, and adumbrate for the English reader the kind of surreal writing that appears in *Twenty-one Stories*. But whereas plot and characters are not developed in the symbolic tales, these two narratives are rich, dazzling, and suspenseful. "Edo and Enam" tells of a pious, one-eyed bookseller whose somnambulist wife—from an ancient, distant tribe—is attracted by an expedient scholar to whom she teaches the hymns of Enam and the supposedly ancient (but in reality concocted) language of Edo. Although moonlight, malaise, and death are accented in "Edo and Enam," "Betrothed"—whose heroine also ultimately becomes a sleepwalker—is a tale of apparent hope, with images of spring, flowers, and sea predominating. Like "Edo and Enam," "Betrothed" is a tale of unfulfilled love—time has frayed the bond of betrothal made in Europe between a marine botanist, Jacob Rechnitz (now of Jaffa), and his childhood playmate, Susan. But years later Susan finally visits the Land of Israel and once more meets Jacob. In a dreamlike ending, while six girl friends race for a seaweed wreath, another figure—Susan asleep—wins race, wreath, and, we must assume, Jacob.



S. Y. Agnon—"a complex, sentient artist."

Another fascinating aspect of these novellas is that while "Edo and Enam," the more despondent of the two, is full of allusions to Hebrew literature and liturgy and has an observant protagonist, "Betrothed," with its aura of hope, has a man of no formal religion as hero and contains many references to Homer and to Zeus and other gods, and concludes with a re-enactment of a Greek marathon. The symbolic reinforcement for a happy ending in "Betrothed" is the Hebrew name of the lovers: Shoshana (which means rose) and Yaakov, the fusion of which—Shoshanat Yaakov, or Jacob's Susan—is a poetic name for the ideal community of Israel.

Twenty-one Stories has now been added to the five Agnon works currently available in English; no doubt it is the first of a series of volumes to be devoted to Agnon's shorter prose. These tales have been translated by various hands and edited by Nahum N. Glatzer, noted professor of Jewish history at Brandeis University and an outstanding interpreter of Jewish history, literature, and culture.

In *Twenty-one Stories* we see the themes that had become almost obsessive with Agnon throughout his long career: loss of home, exile from family, Diaspora, alienation, despair, loss of faith. Half of the stories come from Agnon's *Sefer ha-Maasim* (variously translated as *Book of Tales, Deeds, or Happenings*), one of the heights of Agnon's achievements. In these surreal works action takes place in a world devoid of laws of time and place, cause and effect, and, occasionally, life and death. Here Agnon accents

modes of perceptions and experience normally blocked in realistic fiction. And in subverting the rational, normal order, Agnon instills in us a metaphysical fear as we see into the hidden interior of things.

Although some of the stories have no particularly Jewish slant, it should be remembered that Agnon is primarily a Jewish artist, fashioning the raw materials within the framework of the Hebrew word, Jewish imagery and allusions, and a Jewish world view. His method of shaping, converting and balancing the material, however, is Western, inspired by his acknowledged reading of the French, Russian, and Scandinavian writers and the German Neo-Romantic masters. Agnon's esthetics should also be seen in the light of the Central European mode of writing which accents the meditative approach, and in which inner dynamics outweigh dramatic action, as in the Swiss Gottfried Keller, the Austrians Robert Musil and Adalbert Stifter, and the Czech Kafka.

Whereas extensive exegesis is not usually necessary for Agnon's other works, these stories, rich in allusion and Kafkaesque in complexity, nearly always need explication. Like all good fiction, they may be said to have an outer and an inner life; the latter is often evident only to the reader in Hebrew who can react to various motifs and crucial words and terms with multi-meanings, or phrases from the Bible and Talmud woven into the text.

Among the more memorable tales in *Twenty-one Stories* are the antipodal "Metamorphosis," which begins with divorce and seems to end in love, and "The Doctor's Divorce," where the reverse occurs. In "Metamorphosis" a divorced couple, Hartmann and Toni, achieve new degrees of communication and understanding after the bonds of their marriage are formally severed. Following a long walk in the country, they stop to eat supper at an inn and spend the night in separate rooms. Hartmann thinks of his two daughters and of Toni, whose image he embraces. Although not definite, the lyrical ending seems to indicate that a reconciliation is possible:

Once again she appeared before him
 . . . his eyes closed . . . his soul fell
 asleep, and his spirit began to hover
 in the world of dreams, where no
 partition separated them.

"The Doctor's Divorce," on the other hand, deals with the gradual erosion of love. A doctor who marries a nurse, Dinah, cannot rid himself of the suspicion that his wife has had an affair before their marriage. Despite the strong love that the nurse has for her

husband, the irrational doubt by a man of science and rational sensibility destroys the marriage, just as monomaniac probing of a supposed flaw ultimately leads to destruction in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark."

The theme of absence from home and estrangement is pursued in "Fernheim," in which a man returns from a prisoner-of-war camp and finds his wife gone, won over by another who he thought had been killed in a landslide. Stories with similar motifs thrust the reader into the world of homelessness from the very first sentence:

The train was lost among the mountains and could not find its way. ("On the Road.")

After the enemy destroyed my home I took my little daughter in my arms and fled with her to the city. ("At the Outset of the Day.")

Close to the Passover holiday it happened. I was far away from my father's house and my home town. ("To Father's House.")

Yet, despite the nightmarish qualities of unresolved and occasionally paralyzed will, some stories end with hope or signs of positive resolution, an indication that even in a shattered world optimism is possible.

These stories contain various gradations of Jewish material. The simplest, and the common denominator, is Agnon's richly nuanced and stylized Hebrew, apparent in stories like "Fernheim" and "Metamorphosis," which contain no Jewish milieu, imagery, or theme. The symbolic tales, though

tangentially Jewish in background and general in plot (desire for a whole loaf in a restaurant, attendance at a concert) are weighted with meanings involving crucial Jewish issues such as faith, alienation, and wholeness of spirit. Another category, minimally represented in *Twenty-one Stories*, is that where the European Jewish milieu is fully recreated and where traditional Jewish referents, characters, plot, and language combine to make a completely Jewish tale.

Such a story is the nostalgic "The Kerchief." The young narrator longs for his father's return from the fair. The central object in the tale is a holiday kerchief which the father brings his wife. The narrator relates the joy of the father's return, and the tranquility and delight of the Sabbath when the family is reunited. The boy had previously dreamt of the Messiah who would lead everyone to the Land of Israel, and recalls the Jewish legend that the Messiah sits among beggars of Rome binding his wounds. The dream becomes vivified later in the story when a poor beggar (aligned with the Messiah) comes to town. The boy binds the beggar's sores with the most precious object he possesses: his mother's kerchief, given him for his Bar Mitzvah. In parting with the beloved possession to do a *mitzvah*, a good deed, he is accorded both supernatural approval ("the sun came and stroked my neck") and the approval of his mother ("Ere I had ended asking her to forgive me she was gazing at me with love and affection.").

One reason perhaps why so little of Agnon has appeared in English is

Your Literary I.Q.

Conducted by David M. Glixon

TRANSLATION, PLEASE!

Below are the titles of some British and American works as they are known to many French, Italian, Spanish, and German readers. E. R. Cole of Yakima, Wash., asks you to match the author with the foreign title. For USA versions, see page 63.

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|---|------------------------|
| 1. <i>En avoir ou pas</i> () | a. Emily Brontë |
| 2. <i>Una manciata di polvere</i> () | b. Charles Dickens |
| 3. <i>Der Hochstapler</i> () | c. William Golding |
| 4. <i>Les Hauts de Hurle-Vent</i> () | d. Graham Greene |
| 5. <i>A buen fin no hay mal principio</i> () | e. Ernest Hemingway |
| 6. <i>Weihnachtserzählung</i> () | f. W. Somerset Maugham |
| 7. <i>I Pascoli del cielo</i> () | g. Herman Melville |
| 8. <i>La Chatte sur un toit brûlant</i> () | h. Arthur Miller |
| 9. <i>Il filo del rasoio</i> () | i. Margaret Mitchell |
| 10. <i>Sa majesté des mouches</i> () | j. William Shakespeare |
| 11. <i>Der Tod des Handlungsreisenden</i> () | k. John Steinbeck |
| 12. <i>Una mujer sin importancia</i> () | l. Robert Penn Warren |
| 13. <i>Autant en emporte de vent</i> () | m. Evelyn Waugh |
| 14. <i>Das Herz aller Dinge</i> () | n. Oscar Wilde |
| 15. <i>Tutti gli uomini del re</i> () | o. Tennessee Williams |