

The Word and the World

The Bridal Canopy, by S. Y. Agnon, translated from the Hebrew by I. M. Lask (Schocken, 389 pp. \$5.95), a re-issue of the 1937 English version of the Nobel Prize-winner's novel, adapts the structure of the classical Hebrew picaresque entertainment in its story of Jewish life in early nineteenth-century Galicia. Curt Leviant teaches Hebraic studies at Rutgers.

By CURT LEVIANT

TWO OFT-REPEATED and superficial comments on *The Bridal Canopy*—first published in 1931 and considered to be one of the high points of modern Hebrew fiction—are that it is a Jewish counterpart of *Don Quixote*, and that it is a placid story set in a world (early nineteenth-century Galicia) where the order of Jewish life is secure and its rhythms untroubled. In reply one might state that there exist Hebrew antecedents to *The Bridal Canopy*'s form, spirit, and prosody; and that beyond the innocence and comic surface of the novel, which describes the adventures of Yudel and his driver Nuta, there lurk the tensions of the modern world.

It is true that both the Spanish and Hebrew novels are picaresques wherein hero and assistant share a number of adventures, listen to and exchange stories, and meet a spectrum of character types. However, while *Don Quixote* is a romantic in quest of personal glory and ideals—Romance and Chivalry—that are already superannuated, Yudel is more realistic in his quest. His world view is not passé and the ideals of his society, if not universally practiced, are at least acknowledged to be always pertinent.

A more accurate literary ancestor for *The Bridal Canopy* than *Don Quixote* would be the classical Hebrew picaresque—the late twelfth- and early thirteenth-century rhymed prose entertainment called the *maqama*, in which two people travel about, exchange stories, epigrams, poems, and songs in witty fashion. Agnon artistically adapts the *maqama*'s frame structure and some of its genres and applies them selectively to what is basically a novel modern in design and execution.

The all-pervasive Jewishness of Agnon's writing is evident in *The Bridal*

Canopy from title through theme, from images and dialogue to characters and plot. The title in Hebrew, *Hakhmasat Kalla*, is a Talmudic term referring to the obligation of dowering the bride; and it is this *mitzvah*, or precept, that impels the impoverished hero to wander about his native Galicia and collect sufficient alms to provide dowries for his three daughters. The images, too, reflect the intimacy of the Jewish experience. A lad holds on to a man "as carefully as though he were a fine citron on the first day of Tabernacles"; girls blush like the apples on top of the children's Simchat Torah flags; and a bent man with a cane and a pack on his back resembles the Hebrew letter aleph (roughly like an X).

Sometimes even the turns of plot are thoroughly Jewish. In one scene an impostor claims to be Reb Yudel. No strawberry mark differentiates the two, but a typically Jewish test is applied. Each Jew is expected to know the biblical verse wherein the first letters of each word form the acrostic of his name. And so, when the false Reb Yudel is challenged to recite his verse, he immediately exposes himself.

FROM major principles of behavior to minor personal habits, Reb Yudel's entire life is influenced by Torah teaching. When Yudel sees a wolf, he confirms its existence and predatory nature by recalling the Talmudic story of the wolf who ate two children. The world, then, becomes a proof text for Jewish lore. Nevertheless, the well-ordered universe posited by Yudel quavers: coherence is not all. In his travels he meets and hears about the ex-religious, apostates, and schemers—characters who in the very act of fulfilling one precept violate others.

Reb Ephraim has the laudable trait of never eating unless there is a guest at his table. Yet when Yudel joins him, Ephraim humiliates him and berates his own wife. In a "told" story we encounter Reb Israel Solomon, the rich man of Shebush—this village is the antithesis of all the good villages Yudel travels through—who supports an uneducated youth on condition that he sit silently in the House of Study and pretend to review the sacred texts. Reb Israel's sole purpose is to induce his enemy's daughter to marry the supposed Torah scholar and then revel as she discovers his ignorance.

The leisurely pace of the narration—



—From the book jacket.

the freezing of action and subsequent digression into story-within-story—actually disguises the novel's inner tension. The frame story here has several functions: In musical fashion, it acts as a counter-theme to the main motif; it provides a commentary, parables and alternatives to the life-ways depicted in the primary adventure; it links past and present, for many of the characters of the inner stories are related to people in the basic one; it often serves as a device to point up character as in the *Canterbury Tales*, where the teller and his tale are psychologically one. The hero of the story told by the irascible Reb Ephraim is a testy man, too; by extension, Ephraim's tale justifies his own behavioral quirk. The enlightened Heshel's tale pokes fun at a naïve young scholar whose fiancée runs away with her gentile lover. Heshel's moral is that one must know more than just Torah. Even when one of Nuta's horses tells a story, his subject is, naturally, animals—a mouse and a rooster who exchange biblical quotations.

From the very beginning of the novel where Nuta's horses converse, disbelief is suspended. The technique used to describe an inn scene is representative of the novel's storybook atmosphere. In *maqama* fashion the business agents and Yudel speak in verse or in rhymed prose, and the dialogue has the effect of a formal dance. Yet, unlike fairy tales or slick fiction, *The Bridal Canopy* does not deal with lily-skinned, rosy-cheeked heroes and heroines in a sunny, silk-lined world. The book's uniqueness lies in its magnificent fusion of apparently contradictory elements. Juxtaposed with the make-believe is a historically and socially accurate re-creation of an entire civilization, now destroyed. Agnon utilizes a Hebrew the linguistic layers of which extend from the Talmudic-Midrashic period up to the nineteenth century, yet this idiom always contains the undercurrents of the Yiddish turn of

phrase, its earthy humor, its word-and-thought-play—in short, chiseled, refined Hebrew fashions a vibrant, Yiddish-speaking world. Finally, the novel's literary modes are at once classically Hebrew and Jewish—the quotes and allusions, the images, the characters and their mores, and the various genres from the Hebrew classics: parable, anecdote, story, song, intricate poem, parody of biblical verses; and yet, concurrently, the sentient pen that manipulates, balances, and invents is influenced to a great degree by Western literary sensibility.

I. M. Lask's translation of *The Bridal Canopy* (this volume is a reissue of the 1937 edition) was a pioneering effort, the first of Agnon's major works to be published in English. While the enormity of the translator's task, the erudition required, and his fidelity to the text should not be denigrated, his version with its purposeful use of "early Quaker and seventeenth-century" prose (as Lask stated in his 1937 foreword) must be considered inadequate. To be sure, Agnon's genius does shine forth in the book; nevertheless, an English reader should not be expected to run the gantlet of a linguistic obstacle course, an imposition that the Hebrew reader is not subjected to. In addition to the often thickly textured and occasionally crenellated prose, there are no quotation marks and no new paragraphs to indicate change of speaker.

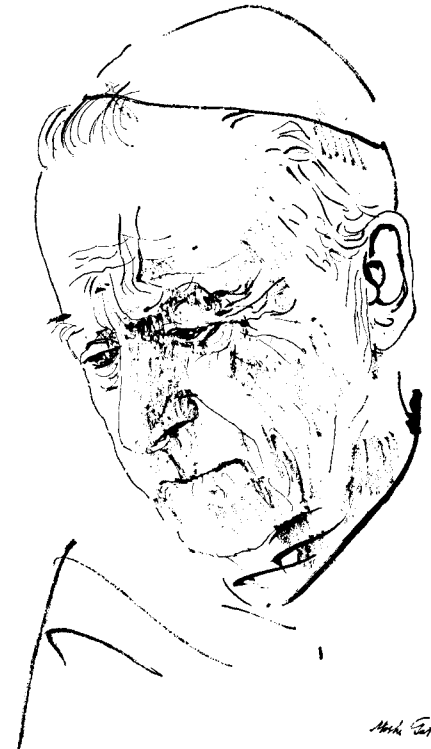
Mr. Lask's basic error was one of planning, not execution. Rightly called

the dean of Hebrew translators, he has displayed his talent in rendering Agnon, especially in the short story "Tehilla" and *In the Heart of the Seas*. Lask thought that in *The Bridal Canopy* he could use "an English style recording a period corresponding" to that of Yudel's; hence the choice of pseudo-Quaker prose. But, whereas Agnon's idiom is native to him, seventeenth-century prose is not to the translator.

What are you doing here in town, Reb Ephraim asked Reb Yudel at length. Reb Yudel took out his letter of recommendation and said, Since my daughters have attained marriageable age and I lack the wherewithal to marry them off, the Rabbi of Apta, long life to him, amen, has given me this letter to serve as my mouthpiece before our fellow Jews with their generosity worthy of the people of the God of Abraham, to stir up their hearts to my advantage and the benefit of the commandment of the Bridal Canopy.

In words that are still applicable—they might even be considered the Translator's Creed—Maimonides gave the following advice to his translator of *Guide to the Perplexed* in 1199:

The translator who proposes to render each word literally. . . . will meet with much difficulty. . . . The translator should . . . state the theme with perfect clarity in other languages . . . so that the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates.



—Sketch by Moshe Gut, reproduced with the permission of the Cultural Department of The Israeli Foreign Ministry.

S. Y. Agnon — "reaching for others, but himself unreachable."

ten no autobiography—but they write things about me as if they were facts. Totally untrue things. Now I understand how history is made. Everyone writes what he pleases—or what pleases him. It's all very subjective, even when it comes to cold facts that are not matters of judgment.

"There are writers who are greatly influenced by critics and by what they say, and there others who are not. I in general am not greatly affected by my surroundings or by what is said about me. I live in the modern State of Israel, and I love it, yet I write very little about it. Everyone about me speaks modern Hebrew, yet I don't write in modern Hebrew.

"As for the symbols they find, different people will see different things. Look over there. Some will say, 'The sun is setting beneath the earth.' Others might say, 'The evening is rising from the earth.' Who is to say which one is right? They are both right. Or take the 'Alenu [the concluding prayer of each of the three daily services]. We are so familiar with it, we say it so often that we just mumble it quickly without giving it much heed. But comes Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and what happens to the poor 'Alenu? It becomes the focal point of the services. The entire congregation rises, they open the Holy Ark, and they read the 'Alenu as they prostrate themselves, and the cantor chants every single word slowly. What has changed? The 'Alenu is the same. Why suddenly all the fuss and

side and pose with them. They snap a picture and they disappear. I am trying to do my work, I am trying to answer all my mail, but I will need twenty years just for that." Abruptly he turned to me and said rather briskly, "Well, what can I do for you?"

Off guard, I chose the wrong question: why had he changed his name to Agnon many years ago, and did this have any connection with the title of one of his early stories, "Agunot," which means alone, bereft, isolated? "Yes, there is a connection," he said, and walked along silently, obviously unwilling to elaborate.

I turned to his craft. Does he deliberately write in the symbols and metaphors which the critics see in his work; does he in fact read the critics at all?

"Critics say many things, but I want you to know that I don't read the critics. First of all, I certainly don't read the foreign critics, because I don't know their language. And even in Israel I tend to ignore them. Critics are not always reliable. I've never been one to give out details of my life—I have writ-

—JERUSALEM, ISRAEL.

A Man Touched by God: Shmuel Yosef Agnon was out for a stroll in the afternoon sun of Jerusalem, brilliant even in February, and he asked me to join him. There was no hint in his appearance—short stature, ruddy complexion, unobtrusive bearing—that here was a Nobel laureate. Only his luminous blue-gray eyes and sharply etched nose suggested the extraordinary.

Well known as he has been in Israel for so many years, he was surely accustomed to the rigors of fame. But had his new international recognition affected his life in any way?

"I am not a young man. The papers say I am seventy-eight, and I suppose they are right. For months now I have been doing nothing but giving interviews and greeting well-wishers. This is my first walk in a long time. The prize gave me much honor, but it is an honor wrapped in much trouble. From morning to evening they come to my door—professors, neighbors, students. Can I say no to them? Tourists come with their children, ask me to step out-