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S. Y. Agnon and the Drama of Writing

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Chapter

1

Introduction: “Like a Man Who Is Exiled From the Palace of His Father”

S. Y. Agnon: Modern Jewish Writer

Each of these terms—“modern,” “Jewish,” “writer”—provides structure to this inquiry. S. Y. Agnon, the subject of my study, ranks with the major modernists of this century, but differs from his European peers in his intense engagement in a universe of sacred language. The modernism of the early part of this century consisted of a revolt against inherited norms and conventions, along with a self-conscious search for new forms of expression. The literary experiments of Shmuel Yosef Agnon are the more striking within this context, insofar as they appropriate and transform elements of the ongoing religious and cultural traditions of Judaism.

Agnon’s is a restless writing that resists easy classification. He has been read by some as a pious storyteller, by others as a modern ironist. He is both and more. Shifting between exile and return, Agnon’s writing cannot simply be identified with the ideological enclosures of traditional world views; nor is it characterized by the complete absence of inherited structures. Because Agnon writes in Hebrew, the very language that he uses maintains a connection to the language of Scripture and commentary; that relationship is made inescapable by the many ways in which the writing uses Jewish themes and sources. Sharply modern disjunctions within self, social world and tradition are all the more startling for their interaction with a deeply rooted mystique of the wholeness inherent in sacred language.

Agnon explores structures that are not so much those of European history and society as they are those of traditional eastern European culture surrounding sacred Jewish texts, whose study and elaboration had been the binding force of the people in its dispersion. The modern Jewish imagination, with its collective memory of dis-

persion and the experience of return, carries the history of a people inscribed in its language. On the eve of the return to a physical homeland through the Zionist movement in which Agnon participated, we find the writer engaged in fictions that oscillate ambivalently between old world and new, filial rebellion and a return to the father (and the identity of the “father” is not constant), and between extreme positions in relation to the texts at the center of the community’s identification of itself.

Images of books and writing express a central tension and offer a rich starting point for a study of Agnon’s modernism. These images offer an emblem of the writing’s link to a text-centered tradition; at the same time, they make visible the displacement of authority and the decentering of the text that is the writing’s break with tradition.

My study approaches the fertile field of writing that is Agnon’s art to examine questions of authority and voice, self and other, text and language. The deep allusiveness to Jewish sources in texts that call themselves into question prompts my inquiry into the nature of textuality and the place of the modern, secular text in a tradition of sacred writing. I use the term “textuality” to suggest that issues of boundary and transgression, exile, and return are acted out within the domain of the writing itself.

This is a study *of writing in the writing* of S. Y. Agnon. “Writing” here can be understood as a process of signification, or communication in language, a multi-leveled process with conscious and unconscious components to it. Agnon’s writing brings into the foreground dimensions of the text that might otherwise go unnoticed by the reader, signaling a revision of relations among writing, text, language, and subject.

Language becomes the issue and writing the scene of the action in the dramas of signification that I propose to discuss. I am less interested in a representational approach that ignores or suppresses the writing in the interests of examining the purported external reality to which it refers. In making this claim, I do not mean to overlook the impact of political or historical factors on texts. I propose rather to examine historical and cultural trends and developments through their inscription in the text. They are part of the writing, not external to it.

Periods of cultural breakdown and renaissance produce intensified self-consciousness in literary works, as if the processes involved in the production of the text and the relationship of the text to its historical-cultural context have come up for question and so make themselves more strongly felt in our reading. “Modernity . . . is about

the loss of narrative," observes Alice Jardine [1985, 100]; modernist writers valorize the loss, making it the occasion for moves in new directions. The modernists of the first part of the twentieth century, among whom Agnon has a place, take on the project of renewing literature out of the disclosure of new territories in language. For some, this process involves exploration of territory that is as much psychological as topographical and in which the unconscious exerts a disruptive force. Joseph Conrad goes upriver into the heart of darkness to uncover a bestiality that is not only the horror of colonialism, but is also just as much the lawlessness buried in the depths of civilized men. Thomas Mann takes hyper-disciplined Gustave von Aschenbach on a southward journey that undoes repressive constraints, allowing for emergence of an Eros that destroys the careful structures of an Apollonian consciousness. Franz Kafka explores the penal colony, crumbling the distances between archaic and modern, primitive and civilized, that his European traveler relies upon.

In each of these modernist fictions, language discloses multiple referents for the journey that is occurring. Landscape and setting become charged with implication that cannot be located simply in the point of view of a particular character. As a result, the reader suffers a loss of privilege; no longer can the reader assert the vantage point of a superior knowledge or claim the text for the territory of a particular set of beliefs.¹

One might compare S. Y. Agnon to James Joyce. If Joyce's project is the absorption and reformulation of the English language, his texts make us aware of the languages within language, the play of polysmy in any verbal utterance. The mythic and the mundane are made to interact through the medium of language. In a revolutionary transformation that is comparable in scope but different in substance, Agnon blurs the boundaries of sacred and secular, enlarging the domain of the literary, and implying a claim for writing that approaches the collective.

Agnon writes during the period of the renewal of Hebrew as a language of daily use. In the context of political and social upheavals that the nineteenth century brought to European and Russian Jewry, we find a coalescence of some currents of Jewish life into a nationalist movement in which the revival of Hebrew constituted a significant feature of national identity. The precipitous pace of events of the last century, including not only the rise of Jewish nationalism but also the Nazi effort at genocide, has made of modern Jewish identity less a stable set of concepts than an ongoing field of forces. Agnon's texts are inscribed within that cultural-political upheaval. Registering the im-

pact of the competing tendencies of modern Jewish thought, including questions of language choice and use, nationalism, piety, and skepticism, the writing gives access to the main currents of this last century of Jewish modernization and modernism. At the same time, Agnon's writing sustains a detachment from the immediacy of solutions or the urgency of contemporary pressures, allowing itself an exploration of the ways in which cultural constructs and ideologies derive from deeper levels of subjectivity and collectivity.

The conflict between sacred and secular has proved in many ways to be an energizing source for the modern Hebrew writer. Agnon's writing responds to the question of secularization of a sacred tongue and can be studied in relation to other texts of the modern period for its treatment of issues surrounding that effort. Mendele Mokher Seforim prepared the way with novels and tales that put traditional sources to parodic use in biting social satires. Mendele's writing registers the impact on the eastern European Jewish community of Enlightenment expectations and their frustration, nationalist aspirations, and the rise of state anti-Semitism. In H. N. Bialik's essays, as well as his poetry, we find indications of profound cultural dislocation; the writer experiences language as a realm of promise as well as terror. (See, for example, Bialik's exploration of mundane and poetic language in "Revelation and Concealment in Language" and more recent discussions by Scholem, 1972; Hartman, 1985.) For Agnon, as for Bialik, language forms a charged field of operations.

While Agnon's strength as a writer was heralded early on by Y. H. Brenner, full acknowledgment of his importance to modern literature came in the 1930s with Dov Sadan's emergence as a critic; Sadan directed readers to the psychological dimensions of the writing and demonstrated the complexity of Agnon's relationship to the past. During the 1940s, Baruch Kurzweil explored many of the conflicts central to Agnon's fiction; following Sadan, Kurzweil (1970, 76) made a particular claim for the surrealistic "*Sefer hama'asim*" ("The Book of Deeds") as the "psychological key" to Agnon. In 1968, Arnold Band provided an overview of the life and work that constituted an important initiative in the study of artistic development. Since the late 1970s, Gershon Shaked has led the way in examining theme, structure, and intertextuality through close reading of texts. The present study brings current literary theory to bear on a reading of Agnon in a comparative context. In doing so, it builds upon previous work, while drawing on more recent developments in post-structuralist thought.

To enter Agnon's fictive universe, one must acknowledge the very central place occupied by Torah as the fabric of the world that both contains Creation and binds God to Israel. At the mythic center of Agnon's fictive universe, Torah constitutes a text of presence where word and thing join. Within this emblematic geography, two sorts of movement can be discerned, movement away from or toward the source. More interesting than any simple linear movement of departure and return is the expression of both movements simultaneously in the text. "Like a man who is exiled from the palace of his father": the phrase, which forms the title of this introductory chapter (taken from a 1934 story called "*Hush hareah*" or "The Sense of Smell"), signals the ambivalence that informs the relationship of text and writing to a rich linguistic patrimony.²

Mystical and rabbinic approaches to language and writing constitute an attractive source for Agnon, insofar as they retrieve a relationship to the letters of a holy alphabet out of which the world was formed. The Midrash tells us, for example, that "God consulted the Torah and created the world" [Genesis Rabbah I.1]. As the blueprint for Creation, Torah is understood to be literally the world-forming text, one indication of a "mystique of language" [Scholem 1972, 70] that pervades Judaism. A sense of the rich inherence of meaning in the text, as well as the infinite interpretability of that text, manifests itself in the talmudic conviction that all Torah was given to Moses at Sinai [Avot 1:1].

Through his own formative immersion in Jewish sources, Agnon gains access to this linguistic domain and uses it as a primary source for his art. There are moments in reading Agnon that suggest a restoration of presence in text and word. The text evokes the horizon of a golden age that it can only point to, so that the reader is made to feel loss, while glimpsing a wholeness that cannot be achieved. Like Kafka, Agnon writes for a restoration he knows to be unattainable in writing. His writing activates both a sense of the inherence of meaning in language and the testimony to loss of a prior plenitude. In a geography of language and text, his writing moves between exile and return.

This study of the tensions that inform Agnon's literary art begins by comparing Agnon to two other twentieth-century Jewish writers, in order to identify some central questions concerning inscription, utterance, and authority. The chapters that follow examine the production of an autobiographical myth in the writing, as well as stories of writing that play with the relationship of later texts to their pre-

decessors; the book concludes with readings of several major novels that both raise and subvert some fundamental cultural assumptions. While not intended as a survey of Agnon's art, this study does demonstrate the diverse moves of texts in relation to inherited or traditional structures, as well as the range of the writing through the significant components of modern Jewish experience. The thematic continuity of my work is supplied by a focus on representations of writing and books, considered as components of an ongoing drama of textuality, and also by an approach to reading and writing as related processes in the production of meaning.

To introduce this drama of writing and text in Agnon, the opening section of this study situates Agnon in relation to Franz Kafka and Edmond Jabès, in order to explore their common interest in problems of communication, as well as their different uses of Jewish sources. Kafka and Agnon merit comparison for the ways in which each calls into question the relationship of writing to authority and to the body. Thus, chapter 2, "Scribal Fictions," compares two stories of Agnon and Kafka in order to examine scenes of writing and the dramas that surround "inscription." These stories of writing show writing to be a charged field of intersubjective relations in language. Chapter 3, "Dramas of Signification: Edmond Jabès, S. Y. Agnon, Franz Kafka," examines how texts work in making problematic the communicative processes they represent. From the perspective of the comparative study of modern Jewish writing, Franz Kafka and Edmond Jabès offer strong contrasts to each other and to S. Y. Agnon. Each of the three writers both represents and subverts structures of communication. Two of them—Agnon and Jabès—do so in ways that explicitly evoke traditional Jewish themes and contexts. Voices of rabbis in Jabès, a Moses figure in Agnon, and hunger in Kafka supply the points of departure for a study of signification, or the production of signs, as it is represented in texts.

Building on this comparative approach to the thematics of writing in Agnon, the second major section of this book examines autobiographical myths and stories of the writer. Chapter 4, "Autochthon of the Book," examines Agnon's autobiography as it is to be found in the writing, enmeshed in a relation to language. This shaping of a life in, among, and through texts produces a persona of the writer that is itself a literary construct. Ancestors—personal and national—are defined through a relationship to Torah, in a post-romantic myth of the artist created through his work.

The notion of a life in the writing or of fiction as a form of autobiography provides the transition to chapter 5. This chapter,

“Housing the Past,” takes up the project of restoration in the major novel, *Oreah natah lalun* or *A Guest for the Night*. This first person narrative allows for dissection of the various, contradictory impulses that enter into the very act of telling. Playing with the relationship of the writer to the collective, *A Guest for the Night* invokes the social tapestry of Europe between the wars. The novel links its narrator’s effort at self-renewal to the restoration of the *beit midrash* or House of Study in his eastern European birthplace, as well as to renewal in the larger Jewish community; through this set of parallels, the novel plays with the possibility of the text itself as a life-giving instrument. Nevertheless, *A Guest for the Night* undermines its own project of restoration through its exploration of the contradictory impulses bound up in the activity of narration; themes of rebirth and renewal disclose opposing tendencies that subvert claims to progress. To cite just one example, the novel plays with variations on the theme of the infant in the womb who knows the entirety of the Torah. This fantasy of an intrauterine state of pure knowledge not only expresses the attraction of a return to Torah, but also poses the threat of regression to the integrative project that the narrator has undertaken.

Agnon enjoyed a variety of roles in relation to classical Jewish texts, as collector, student of the sources, and anthologist. He played a major role, for example, in the society known as *Mekitze nirdamim* (Awakeners of the Sleeping), a group devoted to the retrieval, preservation, and dissemination of old Jewish manuscripts. Typically, Agnon’s address on the one-hundredth anniversary of the society describes the impact of his encounter, as a youth of twelve in a Hasidic *kloyz* with a book published by *Mekitze nirdamim* [1976, 348–49]. He incorporates that early reading into an account of the formation of the writer that gracefully subordinates storytelling to the project of retrieving the texts of the past.

In Agnon’s writing, however, we find no simple relation to sacred texts, but rather the complex unfolding of a multi-faceted relationship. Agnon is a “bookish” writer, not only in his allusiveness, but also in his use of books, manuscripts, and a variety of representations of texts in his narratives. I have selected three such dramas of textuality for study in chapter 6, “Inclusion and Exclusion.” These stories illustrate the movement of the writing between exile and return, as it both includes itself in and excludes itself from a geography of texts surrounding the Torah. These three short stories enact varieties of relationship to predecessor texts, which are themselves fictions of the writing. Two of the three stories draw on the model of the wonder-working deeds and writings of holy men, in playful attempts to join

present-day narrative to its more potent predecessors. Using writing as theme, the Agnon text plays out issues of authority, autonomy, affiliation, and utterance. It is in this sense that we meet the writer in the text, not so much as a consistent persona who wields the authority of his intentions, but rather as a function of the writing, subject to the play of discourses in the text.

The third major section of this book moves from close study of writing and writer to the broader cultural canvas of two major novels. My reading attends to the ways in which these novels jostle some major cultural myths or constructions, concerning gender, the dissociation of culture from the body, and formative passage of the subject through the Oedipus complex. Chapter 7, "Inscription and Madness," considers the function of a random writing on the back of a dog in *Only Yesterday* (*Tmol shilshom*), Agnon's novel of the Second *Aliyah* (wave of immigration to Palestine, 1905–14). It begins by looking at the puzzling relationship of the novel's two plots, the story of Yitzhak Kummer, would-be pioneer, and the wanderings of the dog Balak. The relationship of these two plot lines was apparently a source of difficulty for Agnon in the composition of the novel and has continued to trouble readers in search of interpretive coherence. Using the writing on the dog as a point of departure, this chapter examines the meeting of a young man and a dog in a moment of writing, and considers the wanderings or dissemination of the dog Balak as a "text" cut loose from its putative author. The young man's writing can be read as a gesture of Oedipal defiance that makes manifest the madness inherent in any writing. The end result of that defiance is a form of filial sacrifice that is both savage and conciliatory in its move to restore a primitive paternal authority.

Chapter 8, "The Wound and the Book," turns to *Shira*, an unfinished masterpiece that is an antimemorial work. *Shira* is a response to the distinctions between self and other, male and female, flesh and spirit that inhabit culture. The novel's setting in the German-Jewish academic community of Jerusalem brings in the historical moment at which the destruction of German Jewry became clear. In its anatomy of culture, the novel implicates Germany's designation of a diseased Jewish "other" in service of a myth of racial purity. The novel takes the perspective of that "diseased other," the German Jew who is the product of the very culture that rejects him. Hence, the novel's texture, which is informed by a degree of explicit cultural reference, rare in Agnon's writing.

Shira raises questions as to the relationship of body and book in culture, with particular attention to the German-Jewish book as a

problematic object. Signs of the emergence of a repressed body can be discerned in the novel's recurring preoccupation with images of disease in the body. These thematic concerns displace plot and signal a turn away from metaphysical oppositions. The effect is to alter the reader's sense of texts as bounded entities that can be described objectively.

While I am less concerned with tracing development in Agnon than with following some of the rich explorations that the writing makes available to the reader, the concluding portion of my study makes a particular claim for *Only Yesterday* and *Shira*, two vast and dissonant texts that offer narrative dissections of cultural processes. Along with *A Guest for the Night*, these are texts of our time whose writing discloses the persistent and opposing tendencies that inhabit our constructions of self, gender, authority, and text. Moving toward this larger territory of the writing in which uncertainties of definition and boundary are enacted, this study accepts the invitation that the writing offers to enter an encounter in and through the text.

Language, Literature and Subjectivity

No longer the transparent medium in which story is given, language has become visible in the texts of our modernity. For writers and anatomists of various persuasions, from the linguist to the psychoanalyst, and the literary critic, language is the dense medium of cultural expression in which subjectivity takes shape. As a preface, I would like to suggest some theoretical coordinates for the questions that structure this study of textuality in Agnon. Realizing that this brief discussion risks offering too much to the novice and too little to the more experienced reader, I would also simply direct readers to the body of the book, where theoretical issues come out of the readings themselves.

Agnon's texts make manifest problems in communication that involve the transmission and decoding of messages. In order to enter the domain of signification in which signs are produced, I make use of a model of communication that situates the sender of the message in relation to the addressee and notes also the code in which the message is communicated. The notion of "message" is complicated, however, insofar as literary or poetic language defies our ability to detach any simple "message" from the text we read. The poetic aspects of language acquire communicative function of their own, directing our attention to the play of language. This self-referential

quality constitutes the poetic function of language [Jakobson, 1960, 356].

Extending this notion of the reflexive nature of poetic language, I argue that the effect of self-reference is intensified in texts that contain within them representations of writing, books, and structures of communication. My starting point in reading Agnon is to look at representations of structures of communication in order to see what they have to tell us about the texts in which they are to be found, about ourselves as readers, and about the nature of the experiences we call "literary."

As readers and critics, we can draw upon linguistics and psychoanalysis to investigate the ways in which texts call into question concepts of identity, self, and ego as unitary fictions. This is particularly a feature of modernist texts such as Agnon's, where voice and utterance, the relationship of an "I" to a "you," become major sites of conflict and supply the dramatic material of plot. This study demonstrates the ways in which Agnon's writing posits varieties of wholeness, which it then calls into question. Agnon's writing calls our attention not only to narration as an ordering activity aimed at producing coherence, but also to self as a construction out of disparate impulses. By reminding us of the constructedness of story and character, the writing demonstrates the often tenuous nature of the coherence that such concepts allow.

We should note at the outset that use of the terms "subject" and "subjectivity" reflects the impact of linguistics and psychoanalysis on understanding the nature of the self. The concept of "self," as it is commonly used, suggests the undivided presence of consciousness to itself. This assumption of coherence can be maintained, however, only at the cost of overlooking or erasing difference [Derrida 1982, 16]. Rather than assume the self to be a coherent and integrated entity, we have come to understand that the knowledge of self supplied by consciousness is only part of the story. The term "subject" takes the place of unitary terms like "identity," "individuality," or "person," because it provides greater acknowledgement of the constructedness of the self, as well as of the role of cultural and unconscious factors in its construction of the world [Silverman 1983, 130].

The interaction of psychoanalysis and literature makes possible rich examinations of subjectivity in language. We can understand why this should be so, if we remind ourselves that it is through the acquisition of language that we gain the possibility of subjectivity. By assuming the personal pronoun "I" in relation to the "you" of another person, each of us enters the social realm of language [Benveniste

1971, 224, 227]. Discourse is the arena in which subjectivity takes shape. Nevertheless, no one of us can claim ownership of the pronoun “I.” Those pronouns are “shifters”: “I” and “you” change their reference with each user. The interpersonal realm of pronouns demonstrates the dependence of a sense of self on another person’s corroborative participation in discourse.

Texts do not mirror the subjectivity either of author or of reader, but texts are produced and read out of processes and structures that are inherent to subjectivity. In Jacques Lacan’s hypothesis of the mirror stage, for example, we find suggestive indications of “the *méconnaissances* that constitute the ego, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself” [1977, 6]. In that hypothetical moment, the infant gains a rudimentary sense of self by assuming an absolute identification with its mirror image, overlooking the mediating other in that transaction. Lacan uses the term “imaginary” for this illusory or specular identification of self with other. While the mirror stage constitutes a theoretical moment in development, it suggests also an emblematic account of the achievement of self at the very cost of alienation from self. Lacan’s approach to Freud demonstrates the alienation of the subject in the very utterance that affirms his/her subjectivity.

Our experiences with language testify to the workings of the unconscious. In this respect, Lacan’s attention to linguistic manifestations of unconscious processes has opened up new possibilities for our reading of texts. Using the Saussurean structure of the sign, J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis [1973, 210] refer to a coalescence of signifier with signified in the imaginary. That illusory coalescence corresponds to the infant’s experience of a one-to-one correspondence, or the illusion of perfect fit in the early mother-child dyad. That specular identification or mirroring is disrupted by the intrusion of a third term, the paternal, which brings about the advent to the symbolic order, a pre-existing cultural order or world of signs in which the relation of signifier to signified is arbitrary.³

Despite the inevitable move into the symbolic order, the residual effects of the “imaginary” inhabit our use of language and make themselves felt in forms of cultural expression. Myths of a primal language such as the Eden story posit the original unity of word and object, expressive of a magical relationship to environment [Cassirer 1944, 109–10]. These are fantasies of an original and originary presence, fictions of a lost wholeness. While we may be tempted, as readers, to identify this “recollection” of wholeness as Edenic, pre-Oedipal, prelinguistic or imaginary, we should keep in mind that

these are verbal tags, retrospective efforts to retrieve in language that to which language attests our loss.⁴

The literary text may bring about experiences of language for the reader that reflect both the imaginary and the symbolic order. In particular, Agnon's writing may activate in the reader a nostalgia for the imaginary coalescence of signifier with signified, as well as a sense of their inevitable separation and dislocation in discourse. Thus, fictional texts provide a unique access to processes of subjectivity, not only in their representations of character, but in the reader's own engagement with the text. While the reader's distance from the text may supply the illusion of safety, we find on closer examination that these borderlines are indeterminate: any reading reflects both text and reader. The reader actualizes the text in a reading that is shaped by conscious and unconscious presuppositions and by cultural codes [Eco 1979].

The linguistic structures of the text betray traces of the cumulative impact of developmental struggles and long lost battles in the formation of subjectivity. These paradigmatic stages and ruptures shape our use of language, and we can try to assess their impact on our reading. Rather than view development as a smoothly continuous process, J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis [1973, 427] regard the abundance of references to ruptures or "splittings" of one sort or another in psychological writings of the last century as indicative of a pervasive sense that human beings are inherently divided within themselves. Indeed, if we survey the territory that Freud and his French followers have disclosed to us, we may be struck by the succession of "splits" or decisive ruptures that begins with the trauma of birth, separation from the body of the mother, and the hypothesis of a primal repression through which the unconscious is formed.

Texts may recall stages in the formation of the subject, not sequentially, but cumulatively, so that we can try to read the register of the unconscious both in texts and in ourselves as readers. Julia Kristeva observes that theory enables us to "'situate' such processes and relations diachronically within the process of the constitution of the subject precisely because they function synchronically within the signifying process of the subject himself" [1986, 96]. These synchronic operations dominate the signifying process in texts, particularly those we call "literary." My reading attends to echoes in the writing of earlier stages in the formation of subjectivity that, contrary to popular belief and everyday functioning, have not been superseded.

The notion of "inscription," in particular, is crucial to my study, insofar as it resonates with the impact of early stages in the forma-

tion of subjectivity. "Inscription" denotes the action of writing upon something; more concretely, it indicates that which is inscribed or written into a surface. It carries the sense of a formative writing and has been used as a metaphor for the formation of the unconscious [Freud 1925; Derrida 1978]. "Inscription" suggests something of the incisive impact with which cultural processes shape and gender individuals. My study focuses on inscription in a textual field constituted by male Jewish writers, for whom it has a different significance than it would for a female reader, evoking as it does writing, incision, and a relation to the body. Turning to Agnon and Kafka, I argue that dramas of inscription in literary texts register the impact of difference in our knowledge of ourselves, disclosing as well the uncertainties of our positions in culture.

From the perspective of a female reader, I draw attention to issues in the writing that carry explicitly masculine labels. The order of culture is patriarchal; the terms we use and the positions we occupy are gendered. Nevertheless, "male" and "female" should be understood not as essences, but as mutually dependent terms in an opposition that is constitutive of culture. I would like to think that this study is sensitive to issues of gender in the domain of textuality; that territory, however, is neither exclusively masculine nor feminine, and, in some ways, challenges or resists those classifications.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* [1920], Freud describes the child's game of "*Fort-da*," that is born out of the experience of loss of the mother. (The child overcomes the impact of the mother's absence by constructing a game in which he repeatedly throws away a spool and retrieves it, uttering "*fort*" and "*da*" triumphantly.) The anecdote shows language to be a form of mastery that responds to loss and attests to the absence of the object, even as it asserts its presence in words [Silverman 1983, 169]. This play of absence and presence persists into later language games, including those we call literary. Thus, for example, representations of books and writing in Agnon give access to a drama of presence and absence, attachment and loss. Not at all secondary to the ideas it conveys, writing moves into the foreground as the scene of the action. This book is an effort to render a reading of the writing.

Jacques Derrida calls for a psychoanalysis of literature that would study the "becoming literary of the literal," an approach that would respect the "originality of the literary signifier," rather than privileging "nonliterary signified meanings." This approach undoes the assumption of a fixed distance between sign and referent and

directs our attention back to the writing in order to work towards a “psychoanalytic graphology” which would study the relation between writing and repression [1978, 226, 229–30]. Drawing our attention to the ways in which texts subvert their own manifest statements, deconstruction demonstrates that the position of the observer is implicated in the structure it purports to survey. There is no privileged vantage point from which one can arrive at conclusive statements about a text. This loss of privilege opens up new possibilities of reading by directing us to a study of constructions of authority either in the text or in ourselves.

As object and as concept, “book” suggests an authoritative definition of a discursive field that is orderly and bounded. If we look at the development of western literature, we find the “book” as metaphor has a rich history. E. R. Curtius [1953] traces the history of the metaphor of the Book in European culture from its first flowering in Hellenistic Greece (with some earlier appearances), through Rome, attributing to Christianity “a religion of the Holy Book” [1953, 310] and noting a rich history of metaphors of writing and of the book.

We stand to amplify that history with a study of textuality in the history of Judaism. Susan Handelman [1982] offers an important initiative in this area by considering rabbinic methods of exegesis in light of postmodern theories of language and text. In Jewish traditions of interpretation, the sacred text is regarded as both definitive and inalterable and, at the same time, unbounded, in the sense that it already contains all later interpretations within it. Furthermore, rabbinic strategies of interpretation utilize the potential for polysemy in language. Here we see the grounds for the attraction of postmodern theorists to rabbinic exegesis: rabbinic approaches to Scripture appear to anticipate and confirm the postmodern reader’s sense of polysemy and indeterminacy in the text. It must be noted that rabbinic exegesis takes the play of language as a manifestation of divine plentitude, while for the postmodernist, polysemy indicates the instability of the text that is the product of multiple discourses. Nevertheless, although a comparison of these two approaches to textuality may risk overlooking significant epistemological differences, it should also be evident that comparison can amplify our readings of both modern and ancient texts.

The Talmud tells us that after the destruction of the second Temple, God was left with the four cubits or ells of the law [Berakhot 8a], a suggestion that the activity of interpretation of the law supplies the architecture of the faith. Simon Rawidowicz, Gershom Scholem, and, most recently, Susan Handelman and José Faur delineate the

drama inherent in interpretation and assert its importance to understanding the nature of the text in Jewish tradition. Rawidowicz refers to rabbinic interpretation as “the second house of the Jews,” and describes the breaking up and building from within that the process of interpretation involves; he argues that the very structure of the “house” (subordination to the “four ells of the Law”) provides the “limitation which leads to expansion” (1974, 50, 52, 100, 102).

Gershom Scholem asserts that “tradition” is itself a revisionary process in which claims of fidelity to prior texts are made for “interpretations” of great originality. He characterizes the biblical commentator in terms of both his awe of the sacred text and the boldness of his intrusion upon it; from the interpreter’s stance, the text is not monolithic in its consistency, but shows itself to be “diversified, multifold, and full of contradictions” [1971, 285, 288–90]. Recuperating strategies of interpretation and a focus on the very letters of the sacred text, Scholem examines approaches that belong as much to rabbinic interpretation as to specifically mystical movements. Scholem’s work constituted a response to the rationalist enterprise of nineteenth-century German *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (as David Biale, 1979, has shown), which may also help to explain its appeal to poststructuralist thinkers. Jacques Derrida, Harold Bloom and others have used the work of Scholem as access to rabbinic and mystical approaches to interpretation and writing. These theorists incorporate elements of a loosely defined Jewish textuality into the critical enterprise of demonstrating the fierce dramas that occur in and between texts.

Thus, Scholem’s work on Jewish mysticism, with its consistent focus on writing, texts, and issues of interpretation, has served as an energizing source for current theorists. They find in his discussions of language and textuality the transitional space in which to consider rabbinic attitudes to textuality together with contemporary theory. This commingling of current literary theory, on the one hand, with, on the other, rabbinic exegesis and mystical approaches to language has proved controversial, to say the least. Nevertheless, the discussion of textuality is a valuable one that should be kept from territorializing attempts on the part of contemporary theorists or from isolationist defenses on the part of rabbinic scholars. Certainly, there is little point to ignoring historical and ideological differences in order to claim the identity of rabbinic and postmodern modes of interpretation. At the same time, however, as long as we remain alert to the dangers of collapsing significant differences, we stand to gain in understanding the linguistic universes we inhabit, by extending our

knowledge of the interpretive modes and traditions that have contributed to them.

My study fits into this general area by considering some of the ways in which Agnon's modernist writing draws on a history of interpretive strategies. This approach to Agnon both acknowledges the participation of his writing in traditional structures, but understands that it can never be completely identified with them. I read Agnon with a sense of his participation in a drama of language use that is deeply rooted in Jewish learning, however marginalized and ambivalent his activities in that domain may be.

I have not made the author the focus of study, because it seems to me that is not the task of the literary critic, whose effort it is to understand what constitutes the "literary." While the author is technically the subject of the enunciation as producer of the text, he or she is lost to us as direct speaker; we encounter instead a voice or play of voices in the text. Language speaks through the text in ways the author may not have imagined.⁵ I have, however, studied the production of a persona of the author, a "literary" Agnon, who is the production of bits of narrative found in a variety of texts—speeches, interviews, reminiscences, not to mention in the margins of the texts that are properly designated as literary themselves. That "Agnon" is literary insofar as it is a rich "text," constructed over time, open to different readings. It is a construction on the reader's part out of material that the writer has made available over time, material that accumulates to form the larger "text" that is the life of the writer in relation to the community in which he writes.

A last point of reference for this study concerns feminism's further revision of the relationship of the subject to language through recuperation of the lost and fragmented body of the woman, the subtext so long repressed in western culture. That subtext makes itself felt in Agnon in images of relationship to the body that may subvert the ostensible metaphysics of sacred writing. That writing has been, until very recently, a male province in a tradition that developed rules and practices to the specific exclusion of women. Without arguing that Agnon was a feminist, we can examine the ways in which his writing evokes a patriarchal writing, but does not rest within theologically defined structures. It subjects that patriarchal writing to the play that is literature, play that is at least disruptive, if not subversive. My readings are attentive to the Oedipal dramas that shape Agnon's literary art, but I am equally aware of issues surrounding fusion with an archaic maternal body that may

disrupt that linguistic order. Those issues of relationship to the female body reflect a level of experience prior to the positioning of the subject in culture that occurs through the Oedipus complex.

Feminist theory argues for recontextualizing knowledge in personal relations and the body. While I agree with the attempt to contextualize knowledge in the personal, it seems to me that such an effort cannot simply discredit or replace the “objective” with a new way of knowing. Rather, it must modify the seemingly objective by incorporating an acknowledgment of the perspective of the observing “I.” I have attempted to find a base for discussion in the texts of Agnon that acknowledges the role of the reader in selecting and designating as noteworthy particular elements of texts. Nevertheless, the text remains the primary, though ultimately undefinable, object of study for me. It takes its place in a continuum that runs from author to reader, in a series of interactions whose boundaries cannot be definitively determined.

Criticism must explore that interactive process, thereby modifying the old sense of the text as autonomous artifact and the reader as invisible interrogator. At the same time, critics who attempt to subvert academic discourse and shake its epistemology by writing in the personal, as opposed to the presumably “objective” mode of academic discourse, may forget that any discourse produces its subject, a subject that can never be identical with the subject of the enunciation. If current theorists attempt to move beyond what they criticize as an outmoded humanism, that effort strikes me as an alteration of the focus on the human subject, rather than a repudiation of it.

Ultimately it is reading that interests me. Part of the value of literary criticism is to give access to the workings of the process by which texts are received, assimilated, and reformulated in readers’ statements about them. While we may want to ignore the process of reading in order to arrive at statements of meaning, reading is the interaction in which such statements take shape. Reading reflects indeterminacies that are inherent in any communicative process, however much we may need to assume a stable identification of sender, message, and addressee.

Rabbi Nahman and “The Menorah”: Toward a Model of Reading

My introduction comes to an end with a brief reference to Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav, whose “Tale of the Menorah,” can be read as a

depiction of the reading process. Agnon and Kafka find a common source in Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav.⁶ Indeed, Rabbi Nahman figures as both a model and a source for modern Jewish writing: he draws interest both for his enigmatic tales, with their parabolic qualities, and for the fiercely experienced contradictions within his personal life, a “highly complex inner dialectic,” as Arthur Green [1981, 106] describes it, that gave rise to a new definition of the *zaddiq* or righteous man in terms of “conflict and controversy.”

For our purposes, Rabbi Nahman’s “Tale of the Menorah” [1981, 239–40; 1983, 231–32] can be read for the ways in which it conceptualizes the variable relationships between artist, created object, and viewer. This is the story of a young man who returns home to his father after a long absence and “prides himself on his mastery of the craft of making a hanging lamp or menorah.” He has his father invite to their home all the “masters of this craft,” so that he, the son, can demonstrate his mastery to them. But the craftsmen are not impressed with the son’s skill. The father approaches each and each admits that he has found fault with the menorah. When the father tells his son that all have found the menorah to be flawed, the son turns to his father and says: “By this I have shown my greatness. For I have shown to all of them their defects. For in this menorah are to be found the defects of each and every one of the craftsmen who are here. [. . .] What one sees as ugly, the other sees as lovely. And vice versa. And I made this menorah of mine from defects alone, in order to show to all of them that they lack perfection, and to each there is a defect: for what is lovely in the eyes of one is a flaw in the eyes of his friend. But in truth I can make a menorah properly.”

The parabolic qualities of this short tale lead the reader or listener to play with applications beyond the story itself. For the contemporary reader, “The Tale of the Menorah” is particularly self-reflexive insofar as it offers a depiction and an enactment of the reading process. One could argue that the menorah, as a created work, is analogous to a text that a reader reads in its openness to the reader’s construction of it. Considered as a text, the menorah is not fixed or invariable, but rather is shaped by the response of the viewer or reader. (This effect is intensified once we realize that we possess no stable text of the parable itself, which comes down to us through its transmission by the Bratslaver Hasidim.⁷)

The flaw that each observer finds in the menorah mirrors the observer to himself, confusing subject and object, and suggesting an important dimension of the process of reading: the reader finds his/her reflection in the text, but with a difference that disrupts the

comfort of an easy identification. The menorah or work of art disturbs the observer's comfortable self-assurance and initiates a process of self-criticism. In effect, if the reader were to follow through to complete the interactive process that the text initiates, he/she would be working towards an understanding of subjectivity on the model of self-reflection that the parable prompts. To begin the process of "restoration" is to participate in *tiqqun*, that is, to carry out human action, directed towards return, under the sign of the Father.

Two concepts of the text operate in this short tale. On the one hand, we find indications of radical indeterminacy: the menorah as text is what the viewer says it is. It reflects each viewer to himself. On the other hand, the craftsman's statements assume a notion of the text as invariable. He stands outside the reader-text interaction and comments on it from a privileged vantage point that suggests a higher perspective. His statements imply a judgment of those variable readings according to an unchanging standard that classifies them as flaws. In effect, the craftsman's words raise the ideal of a fully restored menorah (presumably a stable text) that would subsume all variant readings into it.

Whether the reader chooses to identify the craftsman as Creator, as Rabbi Nahman, or simply as the artist, the suggestion is that the role of this craftsman is to make the interaction between viewer and object possible. The menorah as text is stabilized, implicitly, through its participation in a divinely authorized structure. That theological structure nevertheless allows and even provides for individual experiences or readings. Within the larger structure of religious values, variables are termed "flaws" or "shortcomings," a designation which makes viewers or participants aware of a higher standard, while acknowledging the "difference" of each that is his or her humanness.

This is a tale that thematizes its own efforts and opens out towards the reader or listener. It works to engage the reader with the object of which the narrative speaks and to bring about an experience of the text for the reader similar to the viewer-menorah interactions that the story describes. Rabbi Nahman's narrative initiates an elaborate dance of textuality, whose participants define and illuminate each other in their interaction.⁸

While literary criticism involves the effort to articulate the interaction between reader and text, the focus remains on the text itself. Although the roots of any reading are always personal, reading sustains a vital connection with the text that we hold in common, however varied our responses to it may be. The challenge is to make

public a reading, demonstrating its derivation from a configuration of texts and a particular angle of approach. I want to emphasize the non-exclusivity of the approach I take, while making a strong case for the importance of a study of writing and textuality to our understanding of Agnon.

We can only use our language, constructs that shape our thought and our relation to the world. No critic stands apart from culture. Nevertheless, while we cannot think outside of the signifying systems, conscious and unconscious, that have formed us, texts do offer a unique medium through which we can read ourselves in culture. Rather than hold up the goal or the promise of a “revolutionary” or revolutionized language, we may agree that our participation in culture is now accompanied by a degree of self-consciousness that enables us to assume the dual stance of participant-observers. The literary art of S. Y. Agnon offers to us complex dramas of textuality and consciousness, through which we may move to interrogate some of the constitutive assumptions in our knowledge of the world.

Notes

Chapter 1.

1. This is along the lines of the “deterritorialization” of which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari [1986] speak: there is no firm ground for definitive interpretation of the text; the text resists the claim of any ideology.

2. “*Hush hareah*,” or “The Sense of Smell,” is discussed in chapter 6. For a discussion of the pervasive influence of this image of the son’s exile in the formation of the identities of Hebrew writers at the turn of this century, see Alan Mintz, 1989.

3. Jacques Lacan notes that “the paternal function concentrates in itself both imaginary and real relations, always more or less inadequate to the symbolic relationship that essentially constitutes it” [1977, 67].

4. “Not only does language provide the agency of self-loss, but cultural representations supply the standard by which that loss is perceived,” observes Kaja Silverman [1983].

5. M. M. Bakhtin examines this quality of polyphony and values texts in which the play of voices is particularly rich and unconstrained. Julia Kristeva develops the concept of intertextuality out of this play of voices or fragments of utterances in any text.

6. Hillel Barzel describes Agnon’s familiarity with tales of the Baal Shem Tov and the shared affinity of Kafka and Agnon to Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav [1972, 168–70, 177]. Arnold Band notes that Agnon read *Shivhe Haran*, tales of Rabbi Nahman, as an adolescent; he emphasizes the impact of Rabbi Nahman’s style on Agnon. Y. H. Brenner was the first to notice the influence of Rabbi Nahman on Agnon’s “Agunot” [Band 1968, 9, 60, 92]. Franz Kafka knew Rabbi Nahman’s tales through Martin Buber’s work.

7. I compared Hebrew editions by Yisrael Har [1981] and Yehudit Kuk [1973] and translations by Martin Mantel [1977] and Howard Schwartz [1983]. “The Tale of the Menorah,” also titled as “The Tale of the Menorah of Defects,” is not among the original thirteen collected by Rabbi Nahman’s

disciple Rabbi Nathan. See editions prepared by S. A. Horodetzky [1922] and Band [1978].

8. One further note: In the tradition of the Bratslaver Hasidim, the prayer that is recited before one of R. Nahman's tales is told breaks down distinctions between teller, listener, and text [Schwartz, 223]. Through the telling of the tale, teller and listeners participate in and transmit traditional tales of the deeds of holy men. The act of telling brings the teller closer to those deeds, imparting to teller and audience a measure of the holiness of the deeds themselves. The teller participates actively in the realization of the tale and draws his audience into the narrative fabric that he weaves. The Bratslaver prayer is an invocation of the power of narrative to transform the experience of its participants.

Chapter 2.

1. Critics began to compare Franz Kafka and S. Y. Agnon early on in Agnon's literary career. The first full-length sustained comparison was Hillel Barzel's [1972]. Gershon Shaked has demonstrated the complex intertextuality that Agnon's relationship to Judaism makes possible. With specific attention to Kafka's "need to stand outside of history," Shaked contrasts Kafka's delineation of an "abstract *universal world* in a detailed and concrete manner" to Agnon's transformation of "a concrete, historical world" in his surrealist works [1987, 15].

2. "*In der Strafkolonie*" was originally published in 1919. Page numbers refer first to the 1971 edition of *The Complete Stories*, edited by Nahum Glatzer and then to the 1946 German edition. In some instances, translations may have been modified.

3. "Now some time ago there came upon the market, under the name of the 'Mystic Writing-Pad,' a small contrivance that promises to perform more than the sheet of paper or the slate. It claims to be nothing more than a writing tablet from which notes can be erased by an easy movement of the hand. But if it is examined more closely it will be found that its construction shows a remarkable agreement with my hypothetical structure of our perceptual apparatus and that it can in fact provide both an ever-ready receptive surface and permanent traces of the notes that have been made upon it" [Freud, v. 19, [1925], p. 228].

4. Clayton Koelb [1989, 69] has written suggestively on the parallel between Freud's metaphor of the mystic writing pad, as Derrida discusses it, and Kafka's more brutal and overtly sexual representation of the writing machine.