Agnon and Kafka

Lilian R. Furst

Since Shmuel Yosef Agnon came into prominence through the award of the Nobel Prize in 1966, his name has often been associated with that of another great Jewish prose-writer of the twentieth century: Franz Kafka. Critics have been quick to notice certain affinities between them, although comment is at times qualified by some reservation hinting at differences too. Perhaps it is possible to chart the areas of congruence and of divergence more precisely through a comparison of two specific stories by each: Agnon's *Betrothed (Shevuat Emunim,* 1943) and *Edo and Enam* (*Edo ve-Enam,* 1950) on the other hand, and on the other, Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (*Die Verwandlung,* 1915) and *The Judgement* (*Das Urteil,* 1916). These works have been chosen above all because they are so characteristic of their authors, and also because they are readily available in English versions.

The first impression is undoubtedly of a great similarity: in each case the reader is captivated by the ease, the apparent simplicity, even artlessness with which the tales are told. Before long, however, he comes to realise that this naivety is highly deceptive for he becomes increasingly aware of all manner of over- and undertones beneath the smooth narrative. This then is the second and more lasting impression of the works of both Agnon and Kafka: the ever growing consciousness of the complexity, the unfathomable depths of these seemingly so simple tales, which, in fact, are seen to have two levels: as well as the realistic surface of incident, various deeper strata of latent significance that are neither easily understood nor, for that matter, unambiguous. Herein lies the real challenge of both writers.

The complexity is suggested initially by the mystery inherent in all these stories. In every case the reader is left in a state of perplexity, facing an enigma that has been placed before him without a word of explanation,

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as though it were the most natural thing in the world. No wonder that the immediate reaction is to embark on a search for the 'meaning', to ask not only 'why?', but 'what?' really happens – and 'how?' can it happen. What is the relationship between Gemulah and Ginath in *Edo and Enam?* What is the secret language they speak? and why do all the names begin with 'G' (Gamzu, Greifenbach, Günther, Gevariah, Gideon, Gadi, etc.)? Or how does Susan, after languishing for months with a strange sleeping sickness, suddenly appear at the end of *Betrothed* to win a running race against six strong, healthy young women? Even more puzzling, perhaps, are the happenings of Kafka's stories: has Gregor Samsa, the chief protagonist of *Metamorphosis* actually been transformed into a huge insect overnight? And what prompts Georg Bendemann to carry out without demur his father's savage sentence of death by drowning at the close of *The Judgement?* Neither Agnon nor Kafka ever offers a single explicit word of help towards the solution of these mysteries. In his bewilderment the reader may well feel that he has somehow missed the vital cue or lost the magic key. It is the quest for such a key to both writers that has prompted the plethora of interpretations, often allegorical or psychological, and generally more remarkable for the obscurity of their cabalistic arguments than for the illumination they bring. If, however, complexity is the challenge of Agnon and Kafka, as I have ventured to suggest, then the insoluble mystery is the source of their peculiar fascination, for their stories will always seem new to us at each reading, because we can never grasp – and dismiss – them completely once and for all.

The affinity between the two writers continues when we come to inquire into the reasons for our puzzlement. After all, we are accustomed to accepting supernatural forces in fantastic stories, be they fairy-tales or science fiction, without much difficulty. The trouble with Agnon and Kafka, however, stems from the fact that their works are not tales of fantasy pure and simple. The characteristic practice of both writers is to fuse the extraordinary with the ordinary, to weave the fantastic into the real, to embed the supernatural in the everyday in a most disconcerting manner; hence our disorientation. Apart from the initial fantastic premise, contained in the very first sentence, that a man may find 'himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect', *Metamorphosis* proceeds with implacable logic; Gregor's efforts to crawl out of bed are described with a realism so minute as to be horribly convincing:

'To get rid of the quilt was quite easy; he had only to inflate himself a little and it fell off by itself. But the next move was difficult, especially because he was so uncommonly broad. He would have needed arms and hands to hoist himself up; instead he had only numerous little legs which never stopped waving in all directions and which he could not control in the least. When he tried to bend one of them it was the first to stretch itself straight; and did he succeed at last in making it do what he wanted, all the other legs meanwhile waved the more wildly in a high degree of unpleasant agitation.'

By the time Gregor has managed to get out of bed – several pages later – we know that he really *is* an insect trying to answer, in his queer squeaky voice, the impatient shouts of his family and his employer through the locked door. In *The Judgement* it is harder still to draw a line of demarcation between the real and the fantastic; until the last minute who is to say whether the words of Georg's father are the ravings of a senile, feeble, demented man or the considered sentence of a judge? There is a similar ambivalence in Agnon's tales: the narrative of the weird events in *Edo and Enam* is repeatedly interrupted by references to the narrator's pedestrian concerns, to his shopping for

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bread and olives, to the lack of water in the tanks, to his family's departure on holiday and subsequent return. It is on this background that the shadowy figure of Ginath is superimposed, just as Rechnitz's scientific studies in *Betrothed* act as a foil to the uncanny outcome of the race. For Agnon, as for Kafka, the boundaries dividing the real world from the world of the imagination are blurred. So much so that at crucial points it is no longer possible to distinguish between them. During the race, the whole scene – the sea, the sands, the sky, the girls – 'were taken up into the dream', Rechnitz's dream, as with eyes shut, he finds the fulfilment of his wishes, Susan the victor. At the climax of *Edo and Enam* too, the narrator cannot 'decide whether what I saw was really seen or not', just as Gemulah's father, at the sight of the magic leaves 'seemed as if transported to another world. And then it became increasingly clear that what at first sight had seemed an illusion was the truth itself.' Truth and illusion, the real and the fantastic are, in the worlds of Agnon and Kafka, no straightforward fixities.

There is also a certain affinity in at least one aspect of style – in so far as it is at all feasible to attempt a comparison between two stylistic media as disparate as Hebrew and German. However, David Patterson's recent comment on Agnon's style ('though distinctive and immediately recognisable, it is firmly grounded in the traditional strata of Hebrew literature') is equally apposite to the prose of Kafka, which is at once classical and individualistic. But apart from this, Agnon's manner of expression is totally unlike that of Kafka. Its outstanding characteristic, evident even in translation, is its Biblical tone and phraseology. In marked contrast to Agnon's lyrical cadences, Kafka's style is of a decidedly legalistic hue, full of conditional verbs and of those qualifying, concessional adverbs in which German abounds. The tone and atmosphere of these two narrative styles is obviously quite different.

Another apparent similarity can be found in the ironical humour that is common to Agnon and Kafka, but this too is a deceptive likeness for though it is in both cases ironical, the humour is in other respect utterly diverse. Agnon's is gentle and whimsical; as he views the tragi-comedy of life with a certain detachment, it is a tolerant smile of acceptance that spreads over his face. Whereas Kafka's humour is mordant and bitter, part of a desperate effort to 'laugh off' the sombre tragedy confronting him. Peripheral though it may at first sight seem, this gulf separating their humour points to the profound difference between Agnon and Kafka.

The nature of that difference becomes clearer when we turn to consider their narrative technique, which could hardly be more diametrically opposed. Agnon's approach might be dismissed by the *avant-garde* as 'old-fashioned' in that his two tales are related in the first person by an omniscient narrator, of whose presence we are always conscious. Repeatedly this narrator turns to address us directly in a familial, conversational manner, calling the reader 'my dear friend' in the style of the Victorian novelists, or appealing to our own experiences: 'If you have ever seen such a night, you will not find it strange that . . .'. From these and many similar little phrases ('we have intimated', 'let us tell', 'I do not remember', etc.) we know that the narrator is there before us, guiding us through the happenings, as it were, however strange they may be. Moreover, this story-teller has foreknowledge, as is indicated by this remark of his in *Edo and Enam:* 'This was my conjecture. I was later to see that it was wrong.' This retrospective manner of narration through the mouth of an omniscient, ever present narrator gives the reader a firm perspective and with it a certain sense of security. Nothing could be further removed from this

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than Kafka's narrative technique. Not only is the comforting figure of the narrator totally absent, so that the reader is left to find his own way, but there is even little feeling of a story being told, Kafka's wholly impersonal presentation reads more like a scientific report, without any of the human expansiveness characteristic of Agnon. Furthermore, Kafka's narration is in the present, and this has far-reaching consequences: since there is none of the fore-knowledge with which the story-teller of a retrospective narrative is endowed, it is an uncorrected and therefore constantly changing, uncertain view which we face. These two contrasting techniques could be compared to the two possible methods open to the sports commentator: either he watches the race and afterwards writes or tells of it, knowing full well who will win; or he gives a running commentary while he is watching, not knowing the outcome, and having to correct his statements as the situation changes. This latter method has the impact of greater immediacy, but its attendant drawback lies in the danger of confusion. Agnon's is the former, Kafka's the latter approach, the one gives a sense of security, the other of bewilderment.

The contrast is again evident in the milieu, and indeed, entire atmosphere of the two pairs of stories. Much of the action of Agnon's tales takes place out of doors. This is particularly true of *Betrothed,* where Jacob and Susan find their greatest happiness in a garden, first of her home in Germany and then of the hotel in Israel, and where the beach plays an important part as the scene of Jacob's work, of his walks with his friends and finally of the race. This open-air setting suggests a certain freedom and freshness that colours the whole narrative. Kafka's stories, on the contrary, take place indoors, in rooms that are at best dark and gloomy like that of Georg's father in *The Judgement*, or worse still, ill-ventilated, not to say malodorous and dirty like that of Gregor in *Metamorphosis*. Kafka's characters are shut into these claustrophobic confines, which are an image of the prison in which they are trapped. From this perhaps stems that haunting awareness of pressure, of stress that is so salient a feature of Kafka's writings, and that stands out so sharply against the relaxed leisureliness of Agnon's tales.

In the final analysis the difference between the Hebrew and the German writer goes much deeper than just a contrast of the milieu or the narrative technique. Agnon and Kafka in fact experienced and portrayed the world in radically other ways. Kafka's world, as has often been said, is that of the nightmare. It is a world ruled by absurdity and malevolence, in which a human being may turn into a verminous insect or suddenly be sentenced to death by drowning by his own father. And the horrifying thing is that neither Gregor nor Georg seriously questions his fate; both accept it without protest, almost as a natural occurrence in their realm of unspecified guilt, confusion, perplexity, *Angst*. The conditional tenses and qualifying adverbs typical of Kafka's style only reflect the fundamental flux of all accepted norms, the state of doubt that dominates his world. While Kafka's world is under an evil spell, Agnon's too is enchanted, but this is the enchantment of a dream or a fairy-tale. Not that Agnon is blind to life's problems; yet they are somehow overcome. Thus Susan, the sleeping beauty, somehow or other wins the race and takes the crown from Jacob's hands, and Ginath's work too survives as a light to those who have the power to see. For Agnon can find a certain underlying benevolence even in adversity and where he cannot understand, there too he has an effective answer. "Can you understand this?", Gamzu asks the narrator in *Edo and Enam;* 'I answered, "Have not the rabbis said, "To the place where a man is summoned,

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there his feet carry him"? But a man does not always know to what end he is summoned." "So it is," said Gamzu.' This is the voice of faith, and this is the essential difference between Agnon and Kafka. Agnon has faith in the power of love to conquer sickness, faith in the power of the spirit to outlive physical death, faith in the eternal presence of God's guiding hand. It is this belief that radiates from his stories and evokes that sense of security that is echoed in the Biblical style and gentle manner of narration.

In spite of certain undeniable affinities between them, Kafka and Agnon are related only as black is to white. This is, of course, not intended in any sense as a literary judgement for the greatness of both is beyond question. But Kafka was, perhaps inevitably in his historical position as a Jew in the Diaspora on the eve of the holocaust, a doubter, a questioner, exposed, insecure, frightened, one of the 'disinherited' minds of Europe, to use Erich Heller's vivid term. Whereas Agnon has inherited, with the Promised Land, the sure faith that conquers doubt and fear.

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