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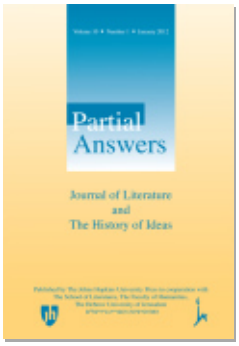


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# After the Fall: Nostalgia and the Treatment of Authority in the Works of Kafka and Agnon, Two Habsburgian Writers

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> And yet I dozed off and slept. How do I know that I slept? Because of the dream I dreamt. What did I dream? I dreamt that a great war had come to the world, and that I was called to it. I vowed to God that if I returned safely from the war, whoever came out of my house to greet me on my return from the war would be sacrificed. I returned home, and there I was myself, coming out to greet me.
>
> S. Y. Agnon 1968: 76

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Habsburg Empire, which had coalesced through centuries, was a mix of nationalities, ethnic groups and religions living in strange unity under the rule of the emperor. Though the empire was primarily Catholic, its eastern region was Greek Orthodox; the conquest of Bosnia-Herzegovina had added a Muslim faction, and a large Jewish population was dispersed throughout the imperial territory. Its ethnic groups included Austro-Germans, Italians, Croatians and Bukovinians, Hungarians and Ukrainians, Jews, Czechs, and Slovaks. The Empire was the antithesis of the nation-state that had been developing in Europe since 1848 (see Iser 2003: 3–7). The imperial bureaucracy was mostly German, and the empire as a whole owed some of its stability to the large population of Jews lacking a distinct national identity, yet sizzling beneath its surface placidity was a welter of anti-Semitic, anti-German, anti-Serb, and anti-Hungarian sentiments, with uprisings and riots occasionally breaking out in different regions. What held the realm together was the benevolent image of its aging emperor, Franz Joseph I (1830–1916). The Habsburg Jews, numbering some two million, for the most part worshiped him: they

prayed for his health and even included lyrics in his honor in their prayer books.[1]

The empire's spiritual disintegration began before World War I; the war, and the treaty of St. Germain which helped conclude it, delivered the fatal blow. The decline and fall of the Habsburg Empire left a mark on the writing of Franz Kafka and Samuel Joseph Agnon – as well as on the work of a third, a younger writer, Joseph Roth (1894–1939). All the three were born on the outskirts of Austro-Hungary. The regions of their childhood, in Czechoslovakia and Galicia, had seethed with nationalist and anti-imperial sentiments, but it was the empire rather than the emperor that was regarded as exerting hegemony and therefore eliciting the hostility of the various nationalities. In Prague, the Czechs fought the Germans and the Jews, the latter thought to be a vulnerable part of the German enemy. The Ruthenians of Galicia struggled against the Poles and the Germans, and all of them together fought the Jews. Nevertheless, an illusion of peace persisted, and though its vacuity eventually became painfully clear to all three writers, the empire that had maintained this illusion would remain an explicit object of nostalgia in Roth's work, and an implicit one in the writings of Kafka and Agnon, whose attitude towards the paternal dimension of the imperial power was more complex.

Kafka and Agnon both yearned to explode the absolute authority of emperor, God, and father, and secretly repented this yearning when it was fulfilled, longing for the order that used to be guaranteed by that authority. Such a crisis is explicitly described by Roth:

> I hate nations and nation-states. My former home, the monarchy, alone was different, it was a large house with many doors and many rooms for many different kinds of people. This house has been divided, broken up, ruined. I have no business with what is there now. I am used to living in a house, not in cabins. (Roth 2002: 247)

[1] Franz Joseph allowed the Jews to be upwardly mobile and occasionally granted them aristocratic titles. He despised anti-Semitism and in 1895 and 1896 even refused to confirm the declared anti-Semite Karl Lueger's appointment as mayor of Vienna. The emperor also created a fund for Jewish education, which in 1877 paid for the establishment of Hungary's rabbinical school. On the Jewish aspect of Austria's history, see Beller 1933 and Wistrich 1989.

Roth's predicament was shared by many Jews and many Romantics (and disappointed Jewish Romantics) as the Habsburg Empire disintegrated. The rise of nationalist movements and the establishment of nation-states – including the Zionist movement as a state-in-the-making – contradicted the Habsburgian-Catholic world-view, which supposedly aspired to equality and patriarchal solidarity among the nations. Paradoxically, such a solidarity existed almost solely in the imagination of the emperor's Jewish children who dreamed that his majesty would keep them safe from all harm. Two decades after the empire was finally dismantled, a photo-negative of this tendency reached its apex when the Nazis "reunified" the Habsburg Empire, conquering Czechoslovakia. Roth's text alludes to the intensifying hatred between nations, laments the lost past, and blames nationalism for the evils of the present.

Thus, long before the Holocaust but in the shadow of World War I, Roth laments the fate of Munkacz (Mukachevo, home of the famous Rabbi Hayyim Eleazar Shapira), where Slovakians, Hungarians, and Jews had lived side by side until a bloody internal struggle tore the town apart. For those intellectuals who did not fill the religious and human vacuum with romantic national dreams, German, Czech, or Jewish, as the case might be, the rupture resulted in a dreadful and hopeless loneliness – in particular a Jewish intellectual's loneliness in a European metropolis.[2] The concluding words of Roth's novel *Flight without End* (*Die Flucht ohne Ende*) are a eulogy for the fallen empire whose collapse had been foreshadowed by the so-called *fin de siècle* atmosphere of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The political disintegration of the Habsburg Empire was the inevitable consequence of its spiritual destabilization, or, paradoxically, of the cultural revival that undermined its conservatism along with its

[2] "It was August 27th, 1926, at four in the afternoon. The shops were full, women crowded the department stores, models gyrated in the fashion salons, idlers gossiped in the confectioners, the wheels span in the factories, beggars deloused themselves on the banks of the Seine, loving couples embraced in the Bois de Boulogne, children played on the roundabouts in the public gardens. It was at this hour that my friend Tunda, thirty-two years of age, healthy and vigorous, a strong young man of diverse talents, stood on the Place de la Madeleine, in the centre of the capital of the world, without any idea what to do. He had no occupation, no desire, no hope, no ambition, and not even any self-love. No one in the whole world was as superfluous as he" (Roth 1977: 143–44). Cf. Wagenbach 1965 on Kafka after the collapse of the Habsburg empire.

government institutions. This odd spiritual and cultural revolution actually led to an artistic flowering: Vienna, the empire's spiritual and administrative locus, was in this period one of Europe's main cultural centers, boasting such painters as Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, such musicians as Arnold Schönberg and Gustav Mahler, and such writers as Richard Beer-Hoffman, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Peter Altenberg, and Arthur Schnitzler. Intellectuals, artists, and even architects rebelled against the bourgeois liberalism that had become the empire's mainstay in the late 19th century, having taken the place of the values of the waning aristocracy. But this was the same revolution that also found expression in the rise of nationalist and anti-Semitic movements. A similar process was, of course, taking place in Prague, where anti-Semitism found an ally in the Czech national movement, just as it did among the Viennese nationalists who advocated Austria's inclusion in greater Germany. The crisis of the generation is evoked by Carl E. Schorske's description of three popular political movements, all of which broke away from their ancestral customs, denounced the liberal *father* who graciously conceded to be merciful to his multi-national monarchy, and chose instead to join nationalist/racist movements or, in one case, a utopian national movement with a similar appeal to the masses.[3]

The atmosphere in late 19th century Vienna was very intense – no wonder that, not without the influence of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Wagner, the writers Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hoffmansthal and the psychologists Sigmund Freud and Otto Weininger (the latter Jews or descendants of Jews) devised characters and theories that emphasized the power of irrational forces. Freud's theory, in particular, sees the murder of the father as a stage in the evolution of man, which, in social terms, can be read as the removal of an obstacle to society's

[3] Newly prominent in this process are the figures of charismatic leaders, who enflame the masses, address themselves to the mob rather than to the sane bourgeoisie, and attempt to use their popularity to establish a new regime suited to their agenda. Schorske lists three main leaders of this type: Georg Ritter von Schönerer, head of a distinctly Fascist movement in German Austria, author of the concept of greater Germany and one of the founding fathers of Nazism; Karl Lueger, who joined forces with the Catholic movement to create the powerful Christian-Social party and eventually became mayor of Vienna; and Theodor Herzl, the founding father of political Zionism. (It is noteworthy that Herzl's utopia, *Alt Neuland [Old New Land]*, is the vision of a liberal state that has never existed in Europe and probably never will; its creator would doubtlessly have been chagrined to learn that it did not materialize in the Middle East either.)

development. Meanwhile, political leaders appealed to the irrational as a means of arousing national sentiments.

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The fallen empire was an explicit object of nostalgia in Roth's work, and an implicit one in the writing of Kafka and Agnon, whose attitude towards the paternal dimension of the imperial power was more complex. The image of the emperor as a paternal as well as a political and religious authority are central to the understanding of their work. In Kafka, the emperor, the King of Kings, and the biological father merged into one intimidating figure, so that, as Avital Ronell has argued, "Kafka has pronounced the death sentence on God and the Kaiser" (218). Nevertheless, both God and father play an active and vital part in Kafka's writing. His negative father figure – whether incarnated as an actual biological father or appearing in symbolic or allegorical guises – wields a destructive power (see Kafka 1966). Agnon's work, by contrast, blends the emperor with the creator of the universe: both may have lost their authority, but the prodigal son yearns to return to them nevertheless.[4]

The disintegration of the monarchy, the decline of faith, and the breakdown of the community life of the Jewish Shtetl happened in the same region at the same time. Kafka and Agnon were both born to Jewish families in the land of Kakanien – a term derived from *K und K*, one of the appelations of the Habsburg countries under Franz Joseph (**K**aiser of Austria, **K**ing of Hungary).[5] Their cultural backgrounds were different. Kafka's parents were the typical assimilated bourgeois Jews of Central Europe.[6] His father, Hermann Kafka, had moved from a small town to the big city, where he owned a large haberdashery store. Franz received a European education, culminating in a daunting matriculation exam, in a German high school; he then studied law at

[4] See, in particular, Agnon's story "At the Outset of the Day" (Agnon 1995: 370–77).

[5] Franz Kafka was born in Prague in 1883, died in Vienna in 1924, and was buried in Prague; Shmuel Yosef Agnon was born in Buczacz, Galicia, in 1887, came to Palestine in 1908, and died there in 1970.

[6] For a succinct account of Kafka's historical and social background as part of the German minority in a Czech environment, of the place of Judaism in his life, and the nature of "the Prague circle" which surrounded him, see Dietz 7–20.

the university (where he also took some courses in literature and philosophy) and worked for an insurance company, a job that would take up much of his time and energy throughout his life. He did not seek a conventional lifestyle: he never married, despite several engagements (most prominently to Felice Bauer and Dora Dymant) and quite a few relationships with women, the best-known being with the Czech writer Milena Jesenska-Polak (see Hayman 244–61); still his was a life of a metropolitan European who could sample a variety of Prague's and Vienna's cultural offerings. His travels took him only to other parts of Europe, where he frequented both cultural institutions and brothels, the latter candidly described in his journals (Kafka 1949: 629–41). By contrast, Agnon, born in a family of observant middle-class Jews in the town of Buczacz (his father, Shalom Mordecai Czaczkes, was a religious scholar and ordained rabbi who made his living as a fur trader), was given a traditional Jewish education in the *heder*; he also, however, learned German, and from his youth on read world literature. While Kafka seemed to accept the values of his father's world, rebelling against them inwardly, emotionally, in his work, Agnon revolted openly by coming to the Land of Israel in 1908, along with "our other brothers and sons of our redemption," as he would write in *Tmol Shlishom* (*Only Yesterday*; Agnon 1947: 7).[7]

Afterwards, Agnon spent the years 1912–1924 in Germany, where he expanded his education. His personal life was more orderly than Kafka's: he married the daughter of a bourgeois German Jewish family and had two children. In his youth he held a number of jobs, but from the 1920s on he received regular financial support from the publisher Zalman Schocken and, unlike Kafka, did not have to divide his life

[7] The first story Agnon published in the Land of Israel, "Abandoned Wives," appeared in 1908 in the periodical *Ha'Omer*. Another early work, the novella "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," appeared in installments in 1912 in *HaPoel HaTza'ir*. That same year Agnon went to Germany and settled there. He spent World War I in Berlin and Leipzig and at the resort of Bad-Birkenau (Laor 49–81; 88–121). In 1918 *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight* was published in a German translation. A German version of "The Tale of the Scribe" appeared before a full Hebrew version was even published. Kafka's first prose pieces appeared while Agnon was publishing his own early work: a collection entitled *Meditation* (*Betrachtung*) came out in 1908 in the journal *Hyperion*; another story, "Beginning of a Conversation with the Supplicant," and chapters from *Description of a Struggle* [*Beschreibung eines Kampfes* (written in 1904)] appeared in the same journal in 1909 (see Dietz 29–30).

between writing and making a living. In 1924, after his home in Homburg burned down, Agnon returned to Israel. In 1966 he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. He died in February 1970. Much of his rich and varied literary estate was published posthumously. The bulk of Kafka's estate, which included his three novels, letters and journals, was likewise published after the author's death in 1924.

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To the haunting memory of the fallen empire was added the trauma of World War I, which both Agnon and Kafka spent in the German-Austrian home front. The war was among their primary formative experiences (cf. Band 1987). Whereas Agnon's novella "And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight" (*V'Haia heAkov l'Mishor*, 1912; Agnon 1953: 61–127) deals with some of the factors that shaped the pre-war *fin de siècle* (see Shaked 2002), the novella *Until Now* (*Ad Hena*), which appeared in the 1960s, alludes to his experience during World War I, epitomized by the narrator's dream (see epigraph) that parodically recycles the myth of Jephtah's daughter, suggesting that no one can escape wartime devastation unscathed. The formative experience of the great War is discernible throughout Agnon's *oeuvre* and especially in his most important novel, *A Guest for the Night* (see Shaked 1968).

The *fin de siècle* experience and World War I also left their mark on Kafka's work. "The old Commandant" in his "In the Penal Colony" stands for emperor, a symbol of the old regime (Shaked 2001). The sense of guilt and persecution in *The Trial*, as well as the sense of rejection and the struggle for identity and belonging in *The Castle*, faithfully reflect refugee experience: bereft of identity, persecuted for no fault of their own, Kafka's victims are like the homeless nomads who flock to the rear in times of war. These figures are perhaps more typical of World War II (which may explain Kafka's enormous success with the post-World War II audience), but they nevertheless grow independently out of earlier experience and are a product of what might be called *la condition juive* which from the 1940s on became a representative sampling of the human condition in the modern world.[8]

[8] Kafka "addressed himself to the broadest questions of human nature and spiritual existence, working with images, actions and situations that were by design universal in

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Touches of nostalgia and conflicted attitudes to the authority of the canon are discernible in the ways in which Kafka and Agnon sketched their self-images as artists, especially in stories that double as poetic manifestoes presenting the artist as a victim of his own art. In "The Tale of the Scribe," for instance, Agnon portrays the writer as an ascetic who sacrifices his personal life on the altar of his work; by contrast, in "A Hunger Artist" Kafka transforms asceticism into art, a goal, and a mission.

Kafka mentions the ascetic side of writing in his diary:

> It is easy to recognize a concentration in me of all my forces on writing. When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed towards the joy of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection and above all music. I atrophied in all these directions. This was necessary because the totality of my strengths was so slight that only collectively would they even halfway serve the purpose of my writing. (Kafka 1948–1949, I: 211)

What we encounter here is a very explicit commitment to a self-imposed asceticism – a writer's pledge to channel his entire creative libido into his work. The emerging self-portrait is fairly similar to the figure of the writer in Agnon's "The Tale of the Scribe," one who willingly suffers in order to fulfill his obsessive duty (see Malka Shaked 2001: 13–27).

Thus both the writers portray the artist as a *poeta doloroso*, a poet whose torments become the source and substance of his work.[9] But

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character, but his self-awareness as a Jew and his consciousness of Jewish history impelled his imagination in a particular direction and imparted a peculiar intensity to much of what he wrote, where the abstractness or generality of the parable is strangely wedded to the most concrete sense of actual experience felt and recollected" (Alter 1994: 65).

[9] Hilel Barzel comments convincingly on this issue: "Agnon and Kafka's perception of art is founded on the singular, ongoing commitment of the artist to his craft. The artist's passive, almost immobile appearance gives testimony to the inner strength that guides him as he fulfills his life's mission" (330; translation by Yael Shapira). See also the comparison between the two writers in Hoffmann 1991: 30–39 and 49–54.

Agnon's most conscious poetic manifesto associates his creativity with a specifically nostalgic sorrow:

> If the Temple still stood, I should take my place on the dais with my fellow poets and daily repeat the song which the Levites used to chant in the Holy Temple. Now, when the Temple is still in ruins, and we have neither priests at their holy work nor Levites chanting and singing, I occupy myself with the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings, the Mishnah, the Halakhah and the Haggadot, Toseftot, Dikdukei Torah and Dikdukei Sofrim. When I look into their words and see that from all our goodly treasures which we had in ancient days nothing is left us but a scanty record, I am filled with sorrow, and this same sorrow causes my heart to tremble. Out of this trembling I write my fables, like a man who has been exiled from his father's place, who makes himself a little booth and sits there recalling the glory of his forefather's house. (Agnon 1953: 297–98)

Agnon thus identifies a longing for the lost ancestral home as the wellspring of his work. Though he refers to this home as "the Temple," his reference is actually to the *beit midrash*, or house of Jewish study. He also speaks longingly of the Jewish canon, for which his own writing is a mere substitute. The uneasy relationship to a lost canonical tradition is perhaps the distinguishing feature of Agnon's work: his texts are haunted by the sense of being an ersatz, not the thing itself.

In the journal entry for January 16, 1922, Kafka refers to the possible emergence of a new existential religious literature and tries to imagine a genius that would bring it into being:

> All such writing is an assault on the frontiers; if Zionism had not intervened, it might easily have developed into a new secret doctrine, a Kabbalah. There are intimations of this. Though of course it would require genius of an unimaginable kind to strike root again in the old centuries, or create the old centuries anew and not spend itself withal, but only then begin to flower forth (1948–1949, II: 202–203).[10]

[10] Cf. Scholem 1981: 125: "I told them that in order to understand the Kabbalah, nowadays one had to read Franz Kafka's writings first, particularly *The Trial.*" K. E. Grözinger (1992) uses this remark as an epigraph to his book.

In envisioning this, Kafka does not seem to be aware that he is talking about his own contemporary, S. Y. Agnon. His words identify the potential inherent in Agnon; they also, perhaps, reveal that Kafka too yearned for the religious wholeness of ancient times and for writing of the canonical kind. What he wished to write, then, was not just stories but a new mystic treatise that might transcend any concrete tale.[11]

Kafka, however, was also influenced by the Central European *fin de siècle* literature and by Prague's "decadent" writers (his close friends were Max Brod, Franz Werfel, and Hugo Bergman). His writing, in fact, sought to strip literature of its so-called sublimity. Despite a residual hankering after canonical writing,[12] Kafka crafts a portrait of the artist as a wretched creature (an insect), not as a priest or prophet, not even the pseudo-priest or pseudo-prophet that Agnon imagines.

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Agnon's and Kafka's attitudes towards Jews and Judaism were, accordingly, complicated by conflicting sentiments. Judaism stood for an ancestral tradition, while, at the same time, representing a set of nationalist values of the kind that could undermine the *pax Habsburgiana*. Agnon's presentation of Jews is ambivalent; he judges his characters on a case-by-case basis, each according to his or her qualities and function in the plot. His treatment of Judaism is equally complex and ambivalent; its only consistent feature is a profound intertextuality, nourished by a vast knowledge of the Jewish canon.

[11] See Robertson 225–27 on existential limits and the concept of the Kabbalah in Kafka's work. It was Zionism that opened new avenues to the traditions of the past; references to Hassidic literature can be traced in the cultural code of *The Castle*.

[12] Cf. Ronell 218: "Kafka's texts – but this is not an unwelcome contradiction – are fundamentally concerned with literature and with what the author calls *Schriftstellersein*. Yet there are, properly speaking, no poets or authors in Kafka's works. Nor do these works reserve a place of honor for literature or exalt it in any way, in fact Kafka seems to have lifted the *concept* of literature – of a literary subject, language and form – from the thematic tissue of his text." Ronell believes that Kafka does not depict the poet as yearning for canonical writing and does not view him as a suffering artist; rather, she argues, his various works feature characters and situations related to being a writer or a scribe not as an exalted and poeticized state but as a base and miserable one.

This knowledge allows him, to use Kafka's words, to "strike root again in the old centuries, or create the old centuries anew." All of Agnon's work, and especially his novel *The Bridal Canopy* and the short-story collections *Those and Others* (*Elu ve'Elu*) and *A City and the Fullness Thereof* (*Ir u'Meloa*), are infused with folkloric materials and fragments of canonical texts. Even when the sacral contents are obscured by ironic, parodic, or grotesque comments, the power of this concealed mastertext, the main canonical target of his intertextual references, remains undiminished.

Agnon's attitude towards the canon is, therefore, highly complex. Secularizing and prophaning the sacred sources, he demands that the reader acknowledge the parodic, at times grotesque, link between the tradition and its modern context – in, for instance, the grotesque collocation of Jewish traditional cosmogony and that of the dog Balak in the novel *Only Yesterday*, which opens with the words "[i]n the beginning was the camel" (Agnon 1947: 473).

Agnon's ideal implied reader is well-versed in the canonical tradition yet capable of accepting the subversive, parodic, or grotesque materials that undermine it. The Jewish mastertext persists in Agnon's writing as a memento to the author's roots in tradition. Agnon's texts question God's treatment of his people and express an uncertainty whether the modern Jew can even survive the 20th century (Shaked 1977: 3–11). Yet the traditional substratum of the work argues that a would-be heretic immersed in traditional culture is closer to tradition than to heresy. The oxymoron "a revolutionary traditionalist" is, therefore, an apt description of Agnon: though swayed by powerful revolutionary forces, he nevertheless remains strongly attached to his Jewish heritage (see Shaked 1989 and 1994).

Kafka's attitude towards Judaism and Zionism was no less complex. Jewish tradition was not a part of his childhood world, and he arrived at it relatively late in life, under the influence of his Zionist friends and of Levi's Yiddish theater. He studied Jewish history and literature. Eventually, encouraged by his Zionist-Jewish friend Dora Dymant, he tried to learn Hebrew and even attempted to read Yosef Chaim Brenner's *Breakdown and Bereavement* (see Alter 1991: 38–40).

Jewish issues are only implicit in his fiction, which contains only one explicitly Jewish hero, the student Joseph Mendel in *Amerika*. This multinational novel sports European names of every possible origin and language, as though this fictional America were a gathering place

for Europeans of every stripe: alongside the Americans Mac and Green, the novel also features the headwaiter Isbary (Hungarian), Feodor (Russian), Robinson (Irish), Schubal (Slovak), Giacomo (Italian), and Delamarche and Rennell (French), as well as Clara, Therese Berchtold and Grete Mitzelbach (German).[13]

By contrast to his fiction, in his letters and journals, Kafka wrote directly, even bluntly, of his complex Jewish identity:

> In Hebrew my name is Amschel, like my mother's maternal grandfather, whom my mother, who was six years old when he died, can remember as a very pious and learned man with a long, white beard. She remembers how she had to take hold of the toes of the corpse and ask forgiveness for any offense she may have committed against her grandfather. She also remembers her grandfather's many books which lined the walls. He bathed in the river every day, even in winter, when he chopped a hole in the ice for his bath (1948–1949, I: 197; entry for December 25, 1911).

> As a child I reproached myself, in accord with you, for not going to the synagogue often enough, for not fasting, and so on. I thought that in this way I was doing a wrong not to myself but to you, and I was penetrated by a sense of guilt, which was, of course, always ready to hand.
>
> Later, as a young man, I could not understand how, with the insignificant scrap of Judaism you yourself possessed, you could reproach me for not making an effort (for the sake of piety at least, as you put it) to cling to a similar, insignificant scrap. It was indeed so far as I could see, a mere nothing, a joke – not even a joke. (1966: 75–77)

> What have I in common with Jews? I have hardly anything in common with myself and should stand very quietly in a corner, content that I can breathe. (1948–1949, II: 11, entry for January 8, 1914).

[13] Marthe Robert rightly points to the absence of Jewish characters in Kafka's work, despite its abundant treatment of Jewish themes, such as exile, expulsion, guilt, and return to religious observance – themes associated with persecution and cultural disconnection. Though some of the names sound Jewish (Raban, Blumfeld, Block), none belong to distinctly Jewish characters (see Robert 1986: 3).

These are three faces of an assimilated Jew. His deepest connection to the Jewish world is through his grandfather, whose figure, and the rituals surrounding it, symbolize the old Jewish world. The grandson nostalgically savors two main images: the Torah (the grandfather's many books) and the rituals of faith (bathing in the river). Both have faded into dim memories, leaving no palpable trace in the lives of the two subsequent generations. The parent generation could give its offspring nothing but a set of rituals and symbols (the synagogue, prayer) drained of all meaning, and the son despises this futile emptiness, a void that does not even amount to a joke. The sterilized, "Westernized" tradition arouses no respect or nostalgia, only contempt for its assimilated advocates. Caught somewhere between nostalgia and disgust, the son-grandson is left desolate, unconnected to any community of believers (*Glaubens-Gemeinschaft*), without any symbols of faith, all alone in front of the void.

Agnon's treatment of Judaism is, in fact, even more ambiguous and conflicted than Kafka's, though the language and style obscure this complexity. Having rejected some aspects of the religion of his parents, Agnon both openly and secretly yearned for the faith of his ancestors. He, therefore, did not deny his origins or ignore his roots, but rather reworked Jewish materials and conflicts into a shape representing the existential angst of all mankind. His diaspora counterpart Kafka, feeling rejected by German literature, and seeing himself as a kind of expatriate dabbling in the assets of the locals, attempted to appropriate for himself the German culture from which and through which he had been excluded.[14]

Agnon and Kafka also dealt with the question whether Zionism could be a solution to the widespread anti-Semitism of the Habsburg Empire, whose different ethnic groups, each demanding its own territorial domain, were alike suffused with the hatred of the Jews. In making *aliyah* to Israel, Agnon chose the Zionist solution, and the ideology of Zionism permeates his works; but even here his stance is

[14] Cf. Alter (1991: 53): "There is no question, I think, of Kafka's trying to escape from or conceal his Jewish origins. What he sought to do instead – and this is arguably a chief source of the strange power of his work – was to convert the distinctive quandaries of Jewish existence into images of the exsitencial dilemmas of making *überhaupt*, 'as such.' Perhaps he sensed that the way for him to overcome the danger, as a writer who felt himself in one crucial respect to be an outsider to German culture, of a 'tacit . . . appropriation of someone else's property,' was to make his own property German, and universally as well."

not unequivocal. The satire "Of Our Young People and Our Elders" reflects the distaste he felt towards the "professional Zionists" of the Diaspora, and *Only Yesterday* frequently expresses doubts as to the future of the Zionist endeavor.

The character of Yitzhak Kumer in *Only Yesterday* is not only crafted for its psychology, but also functions as part of the novel's mythological infrastructure. *Only Yesterday* is rooted in the Biblical myth of Isaac's sacrifice by Abraham. Yitzhak Kumer, Isaac's namesake, is perceived as a ritual victim of the perennial rift between exile and redemption, Judaism and Zionism. Like Isaac the Patriarch, Yitzhak is bound on the Mountain of Moriah, but in his case God produces no sacrificial ram. The novel's basic outlook is tragic: the sin-ravaged earth cannot be redeemed of the plague (drought) until the sinner-hero dies. Only after Yitzhak is dead, having been bitten by a sick dog, is the land finally purified of sin and can once again flourish:

> And when we came outside we saw that the earth was smiling with its plants and its flowers. And from one end of the Land to the other came shepherds and their flocks, and from the soaked earth rose the voice of the sheep, and they were answered by the birds of the skies. And a great rejoicing was in the world. Such rejoicing had never been seen. (Agnon 2000: 641)

Unlike the heroes of Greek tragedies, Yitzhak is the innocent victim of an ironic situation, a character who will never arrive at self-knowledge or recognize his own sin. The non-hero is destroyed, but society is revived. Yitzhak Kumer is the helpless victim of a transitional period, part of a doomed generation. On the symbolic level, his death opens up the possibility of new life and therefore has a tragic justification; but in so far as he is an individual character whose relationship with the dog is a matter of chance, he is but a pathetic, random, and pitiful victim of blind contingency (see Kurzweil; Katz; Shaked 1971). Agnon revisited such themes even more intensely and bitterly in "Edo and Enam" and especially in "The Covering of the Blood."[15]

Kafka was ambivalent about Zionism and never derived any operative decisions from this ideology. Some passages in his writing may, with some strain, be read as Zionist. He describes the burrow, in his story of

[15] For a more detailed discussion, see Kurzweil; Sadan; Bahat; Barzel; Meiron; and Shaked 1977.

the same name, as "my castle which can never belong to anyone else, and it is so essentially mine that I can calmly accept in it even my enemy's mortal stroke at the final hour, for my blood will ebb away here in my own soil and not be lost" (1983: 340). Is Kafka describing the final burrow of the Jewish people? This question must remain unanswered, but it is not impossible to give the passage a Zionist interpretation.[16] None of Kafka's works alludes directly to the Land of the Patriarchs, though some of his closest friends (Brod, Weltsch, Bergman) were indeed confirmed Zionists.

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Kafka and Agnon differ from one another so prominently in their choice of genres that it is all too easy to overlook parallels between them. Indeed, Kafka wrote sketches ("Poseidon, A Little Fable"), short stories ("The Judgment," "Josephine the Singer or the Mouse Folk"), monologues ("A Report to the Academy," "The Burrow," "Investigations of a Dog"), novellas ("In the Penal Colony," "The Metamorphosis," "A Hunger Artist"), and novels (*Amerika*, *The Trial*, and *The Castle*).[17] His canonical heritage also includes documentary texts, letters, and diaries.

Kafka's generic and thematic range is limited; he might be described as a genius coaxing music from a single chord. His patterns repeat

[16] For a succinct account of Kafka's ambivalence towards the Zionist idea (and even more towards its realization), see Dietz 74–75. Ritchie Robertson offers a number of labored readings that find Zionist implications in Kafka's work; Marthe Robert, however, argues – more convincingly – that Kafka shied away from any ideological agenda.

[17] Kafka's novels are puzzling, mostly because they were never completed and exist only as fragments. Critics and scholars have attempted to piece them together into whole, or almost whole, works – but the forced efforts to rebuild these texts and the tendency to read them as possessing an Aristotelian coherence are misplaced: they miss a major innovation of Kafka's art. The assumption that Kafka sought to create a complete and unified work implies that he was no more than a fine writer who failed and that his novels were left fragmented due to psychological and social inhibitions. But Kafka's work was not just a glorious failure (for a discussion of the the fragmentation in Kafka's work, its meaning, and the various critical attempts to overcome it, see Corngold 190–91). Though Kafka himself believed that completion of the work is his main task (see his letter to Felice Bauer of March 9–10, 1912; 1976: 332), in fact, paradoxically, Kafka's "failure" to complete his work was his main achievement; it created open novels deliberately based on fragmentary patterns. Rather than write drafts of whole novels, Kafka created *chains* of chapters: a novel emerged chapter by chapter, each of its parts seemingly self-contained.

themselves, and he limits his writing to a few essential topics. He does not provide variety through particularities of time and space but tends to leave his characters in a void. These limitations of structure and substance are compensated for by the vast variety of meanings evoked. Agnon's *oeuvre*, by contrast, offers a great variety of genres, forms, and social materials. Unlike Kafka, Agnon placed his stories in distinct temporal settings (sometime between the early 19th century and the middle of the 20th century) and in detailed, highly realized locales (from Galicia to Austria, Germany, the United States, and all the way to the various parts of the Land of Israel). He wrote in numerous genres: the psychological love stories favored by European realism ("Ovadia the Cripple," "The Doctor's Divorce," "In the Prime of Her Life," "Metamorphosis," "Fernheim"), as well as comic works of every stripe, from social satire ("Of Our Young People and Our Elders") through comic sketches ("On Taxes") to Rabelaisian grotesques ("Pisces," "The Frogs," "With the Death of a Saint"). His most interesting stories straddle the boundary between realism and symbolism ("The Covering of the Blood," "Betrothed"). Agnon tends to make subtle artistic use of primary folk forms (*Einfache Formen*): folk tales, saint legends ("The Tale of Rabbi Gadiel the Infant," "The Pipe of My Grandfather"), and fables about historical figures ("Pleasant Stories of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov") appear alongside ballad sagas ("Repentance") and melancholy tales ("The Dead Girl"). He wrote family sagas ("The History of Our Houses") and historical chronicles ("The Father of the Ox"). Novellas written in the form of archaic Hassidic tales ("The Tale of the Scribe," "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight") display modernist traits, and some share surrealist themes and structures ("Edo and Enam," "The Book of Deeds," "The Overcoat," "Forevermore," "Footstool and Throne"). His ballad-type Gothic stories (e.g., "The Dance of Death," "The Lover's Canopy," and "The Lady and the Peddler") contain a fairly complex modern component. Finally, Agnon's novels rework a variety of traditional genres – the picaresque novel (*The Bridal Canopy*), the psychological family novel (*A Simple Story*), the chronicle (*Only Yesterday*), the university novel (*Shira*), and even an innovative modernist novel (*A Guest for the Night*) (see Shaked 1989: 137–46).

Yet despite the differences in the generic range, Agnon and Kafka share a leaning towards imaginary literature of a symbolic or allegorical nature. Indeed, some commentators regard Agnon's *The Book of Deeds*

as evidence of Kafka's influence. Agnon himself, however, denied any such link: "My friends, I have never lied about my teachers or concealed whom I learned from," he said at a public lecture in 1962,

> but *The Book of Deeds* I learned and heard only from my soul. And those who mention Kafka to me are in error. Prior to publishing *The Book of Deeds*, I knew nothing of Kafka's tales except for his story "*Die Verwandlung*" ["The Metamorphosis"] and now, except for *The Trial*, which I read while ill ten years ago, I have not yet picked up a book by Kafka. My wife, long may she live, has frequently offered to read me a tale by Kafka, but she did not succeed. After she had read but one or two pages, I turned my ear from it. Kafka is not of my soul's roots, and anything that is not of my soul's roots I do not absorb, even if he is as great as the ten old men who made the Book of Psalms. It is joy to read Homer, Cervantes, Balzac, Gogol, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Hamsun, or even their lessers. But not Kafka, even though my wife has all his books and is always willing to read them to me. I know that Kafka is a great poet, but my soul is alien to him. The same is true of Proust, Joyce, Hoffmann, and others of the world's great masters. (Agnon 1976: 245)

Thus, on record, Agnon rejects and almost defends himself against the attempt to link his work to Kafka's. He unequivocally denies any connection to modernist literature (Proust, Joyce) and pre-modernist literature (Hoffmann), while expressing a strong affinity to mimetic literature (from Homer to Hamsun). Both the denial and the pledge of affinity are curious matters.

As early as in his very first tales ("And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight," "Abandoned Wives") Agnon employed elements of modernist symbolism (Shaked 1987a, 2002). *Sefer HaMaasim* (*The Book of Deeds*), published in the early 1930s, was not an entirely new beginning; rather, it exposed and foregrounded elements that had previously been concealed or marginalized. It does not matter whether Agnon read Kafka during his years in Germany (some believe that he did), discovered him later in life, or – as Agnon himself claimed – eschewed his influence altogether. Both authors were born during the same period, and their work grew out of similar literary contexts, though each poured these common elements into different literary molds. The realist literature Agnon praised was the solid ground on which he

constructed his *symbolic* systems, yet his work had "Kafkaesque" elements long before the early 1930s, when the highly allegorical tales of *The Book of Deeds* began to appear.

The allegorical tradition on which both Kafka and Agnon drew was closer in nature to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* than, say, to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Both create a tension between schematic allegory and profound symbolism. Both also hesitate between, on the one hand, a symbolic system that might represent the internal laws of the personal and collective unconscious and, on the other, a semiotic system whose meaning is primarily ideological or political. In the Middle Ages, the artist as shaman and mystic was believed to possess the key to the secrets of existence; allegory (e.g., in the Midrashic and Kabbalistic traditions) offered a way of unlocking them.

Kafka and Agnon both turned to allegory out of the same religious need; but the general modernist recourse to symbol and allegory was likewise spurred by a desire to find objective correlatives for the incomprehensible, grotesque, and absurd world: symbols seek to decipher their own threatening, uncanny (*unheimliche*) secret. Both Agnon and Kafka go beyond both allegory and symbolism: their writing is not as unequivocal as allegory, nor is it always universal and endowed with multiple meanings. As symbolic works, their texts usually operate on several levels at once.[18]

Allegorical and symbolic systems both link the text to and separate it from the mastertext to which the allegory alludes and from which it derives its authority. The pre-text that authorizes Agnon's work is that of Jewish tradition; some argue that Kafka, too, relied on the same mastertext. One can occasionally identify an intertexual relationship between Kafka's writing and the Jewish canon, but it is not the same persistent, essential link that exists in Agnon's *oeuvre*. Robert Alter

[18] Goethe and Coleridge claimed that an allegorical figure was limited, because it had a single, unequivocal conceptual meaning, while a symbol had no such bounds. Allegory is separate from the reality it represents, while a symbol is a synecdoche that engages with the object. "Allegory which is already associated with metaphor by the classical rhetoricians is then a kind of imagery in which there is no necessary or intrinsic connection between the vehicle of the image and its tenor; a symbol, on the other hand, is a metonymic image whose tenor, though not cosubstantial with the vehicle, can be accepted as a nature or obvious extension of it. Verisimilar fiction tends to use symbolism, since it purports to describe the empirical world in a manner that readily evokes symbolic implications; while the literature of fantasy, though not debarred from using symbolism, tends more towards the allegorical mode" (Robertson 1987: 269).

argues that Gershom Scholem saw a profound connection between Kafka's writing and Kabbalistic literature and that he found the two symbolic systems of the two cultures to be governed by parallel rules. Moreover, Alter claims, Scholem "was strongly inclined to see Kafka as a latter-day kabbalist exhibiting deep kinship with some of the esoteric figures he [Scholem] has studied as a historian" (Alter 1991: 12). Yet while a comparison might be made on a phenomenological or structural level, there is no convincing proof of a semantic link between the text's literal stratum and a hidden Kabbalistic mastertext.[19] Kafka's subtexts do contain occasional covert allusions to other canonical traditions (mostly the Pentateuch); but these are hard to bring to the surface, because Kafka's putative mastertext is itself far less clear than Agnon's. However, many of his works demand that the reader *create* an imaginary or mythic mastertext derived from the reader's own reservoir of mythological lore.[20]

The pre-text on which Kafka *does* draw consists of travel literature, legal literature, debates (*Streitgespräch*), and Aesopian fables. His writing literalizes animal metaphors and folkloristic proverbs (e. g., if Jews are referred to as dogs, then a dog must be Jewish). According to Gerhard Kurz, Kafka usually prefers puns and allusions to allegoristic and emblematic images, such as the cross, whose meaning is fixed (see Robertson 1987: 271).

Kafka explores the potentialities of hidden and ambiguous wordplay in an unprecedented way. For example, K.'s profession in *The Castle* is that of a land surveyor, or *Landvermesser*. The root of the German

[19] Karl-Erich Grözinger has explored this insight in his book on Kafka, seeking to uncover parallelisms between the latter's work and the Kabbalistic tradition. Despite the varied evidence Grözinger provides, I cannot see a direct allusive or connotative relationship between Kafka's writing and the Kabbalah. Grözinger attempts to derive a method from Scholem's poetic observation about the similarities between Kafka's world patterns and Kabbalistic hierarchy (Scholem did not argue for a direct causal link between them). The problem with this meticulous exploration becomes evident when the critic compares the role of the righteous Jew (*tzadik*) in shaping the internal processes of divine action (theurgy) to the various lawyers in *The Trial* or to the mediators of *The Castle*. Grözinger's comparison between *The Trial* and Elijahu de Vidas' *Reshit Hochma* (Grözinger 1992: 19) is interesting, but also unconvincing. Despite the two works' similar thematic structures, no direct influence or intertextual link can be established between them.

[20] I believe that Alter (2000: 63–96) overinterprets when he draws intertextual links between Kafka's *Amerika* and the story of Joseph, the exodus from Egypt, and the conquest of Jericho.

original (*messen, vermessen*) carries multiple meanings that get lost in the translation.[21] The word's various denotations identify K. as a man who sins both by audacity (*hubris*) and by missing the mark (*hamartia*). He tries to confront the problem of measures, or standards, without truly being able to confront it, and therefore relies only on his own strength and luck instead of treading a more righteous path. The name of the counter-hero, Klamm, is also a form of wordplay[22]; this cold, repulsive man (or half-God) shakes off K.'s attempts to cling to him. The profession of the hero, the name of the counter-hero (and the name of the implied author, which begins with the same letter) all function as a code leading to some of the text's hidden meanings.

Such games, claims Robertson (271), are typical of allegory, as is the skeptical stance of the narrator, who doubts whether reality can be expressed through language. Moreover, each element of the plot trails in conflicting interpretations, creating in the reader that odd sense of bewilderment typical of the effect of Kafka's texts.[23]

Agnon relied less on the polysemy of specific lexical items and more on collocations of seemingly contradictory elements, as in the names of Dr. Yekutiel Ne'eman,[24] or Yitzhak Kumer (an allusion to the Biblical Isaac joined to "newcomer," *Kumer* and also connoting *Kummer*, the German for "pain" or "grief").[25] Like Kafka, he also stages encounters between basic mythic situations and their parodic incarnation in new contexts (see Shaked 1973: 89–132, Sadan 1959; Kurzweil 1961; Tochner 1968; Barzel 1972; Hoffmann 1991; Alter 1969: 131–53). Much of Agnon's writing can be understood only by those familiar

[21] Among the various meanings are *vermessen* as "make mistaken measurement," and "to act boldly, audaciously"; *ein vermessender Mensch* is a man who relies solely on his own strength or good fortune or is without restraints or inhibitions.

[22] In German *Klamm* means both "a rocky abyss" and "congealed"; *klämmen* means "to grasp firmly."

[23] Alter argues that Kafka and his heroes are always puzzled by the circumstances they encounter, leading all those involved in or with the text to try and provide interpretations (Alter 1991: 80–86).

[24] Yekutiel Ne'eman is one of the many names of Moses; by giving him a PhD. Agnon is parodizing the canonical figure.

[25] The connotations of Agnon's names enter the thematic strands of each work. It is important, for instance, that Menashe Haim can be deciphered as "disappearance of life," that Bluma Nacht is "night flower" (*Nacht Blume*), or that "Fahrneheim" or "Fernheim" plays on "returning home" or "far from home."

with the secrets of Jewish tradition. Alongside this hidden mastertext there appear different pre-texts of varying degrees of authority.[26] Moreover, the two levels of meaning that comprise the allegorical text can connect to each other in different ways. For example, an allegorical work may contain many realistic materials whose allegorical meaning is hidden. Agnon's "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" appears at first to be overflowing with realistic materials. Kafka's *The Castle* also foregrounds realistic and psychological concerns in shaping K.'s relationship with Frieda, while the allegory is relegated to the margins of the text. Both the writers create expansive, rather than reductive, allegories. Their works do not perform a simple semantic gesture of "this means that," but instead open up a perspective of great depth.

Both the writers went through a period of symbolism before arriving at allegory. Agnon's early works "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight" and "Abandoned Wives" are distinctly symbolic; *The Book of Deeds* contains a stronger allegorical plane, while later stories use a combination of both methods. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* is symbolic: the image of the insect is meaningful mostly as a metonymy, while Gregor's character creates an entire conceptual system.[27] *The Castle* relies on metaphorical connections to different traditions, as well as on a mastertext constructed from the implied reader's presumed storage of varied mythological lore. By contrast, Agnon, who emerged from a distinctly Jewish environment, created a form of language deeply rooted in specifically Jewish tradition, but even his handling of this heritage was subversive.

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Both Agnon's and Kafka's subversions of the authority of the canon take the shape of oneiric transpositions and metaphorizations. Through his minute realism of detail Kafka makes an unrealistic world real. Agnon, by contrast, de-actualizes the realistic time and space – whether of the European Jewish town or of Israeli life: he subverts his realistic

[26] The allegorist is often what Robertson calls a *poeta doctus*, a poet addressing a small, privileged circle of readers (271).

[27] By contrast, stories such as "Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk" and "Investigations of a Dog" stand in a metaphoric rather than metonymic relationship to the animal world.

signifieds, relocating them in a reality that is beyond, or below, the real. At the same time, Agnon's style involves ongoing and branching intertextual connections: each of his works provides fertile grounds for the study of canonical sources and of the expansion of meaning.[28] An Agnonian text always works on at least two levels and is best understood by a certain, limited kind of implied reader – one familiar with Jewish sources and undeterred by their being parodied. An "utterly secular" reader, unfamiliar with the Jewish canon, may be more willing to accept the subversion but is likely to miss its significance. Readers of this kind may need editions that annotate the canonical allusions and the possible meanings of the fictional narrative's interrelations with the canon. Kafka's writing, by contrast, does not rely on a canonical tradition; the symbols he employs are natural ones, or ones that accumulate significance in the course of the reading.

Agnon's hedged-in world is seemingly classical in its conscious archaism, but the plot and characters tend to the absurd and the grotesque which are, in turn, reworked in the spirit of classicism; the impossible is stylized and hence admissible, and the effect of the text is enhanced by contradictory tendencies. Kafka, by contrast, domesticates the impossible by presenting it as self-evident. A man's metamorphosis into an insect is not viewed as a miraculous occurrence; nor does it violate the internal logic of the plot; equally self-evident are the fast in "A Hunger Artist" and the strange tribulations of K., Josef K. and Rossmann. Kafka's world appears to shake off the film of the mundane, turning processes that take place within the depths of the psyche, or else in heaven or hell, into one's daily bread. Agnon's world, unlike Kafka's, is enclosed within a stylistic ghetto that is somehow empowering: its style seals it off from the rest of the world but also maintains a self-sustaining universe within.

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Kafka and Agnon both grapple with the transcendent world and its governing forces. In doing so, both draw on the biblical story of Job. Many of Agnon's characters – from Menashe Chaim in "And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight," through Daniel Bach and his friends

[28] See, for instance, Holtz 1995; Kurzweil 1961; and Tochner 1968.

in *A Guest for the Night*, to Yitzhak Kumer in *Only Yesterday* and Hillel in "The Covering of the Blood" – are paltry avatars of Job, without his rhetorical powers and his auspicious beginning and end.

As for Kafka, Gershom Scholem wrote to Walter Benjamin: "I advise you to begin any inquiry into Kafka with the book of Job, or at least with a discussion of the possibility of divine judgment, which I regard as the sole subject of Kafka's production [worthy of] being treated in a work of literature" (1981: 170). The problem of judgment is central to Kafka's work – from his short story "The Judgment," through "In the Penal Colony," to *The Castle* and, above all, *The Trial*. In fact, the issue is found everywhere in his various works, all of which express a human complaint addressed to a sealed and oblivious heaven. Motifs from Ecclesiastes (1: 2–7) support the notion of an endless, Sisyphean repetition of the circles of existence. A sense of the folly of human existence also pervades the work of both writers (Kurzweil 1961: 146–153; Shaked 1987b).

The revision of the Job topos is associated with a rebellion against a figure of authority. Kafka's and Agnon's protagonists are plagued by a profound feeling of guilt towards their biological father, tribal leaders or God, the "Father" of creation. Paternal figures loom large in the work of both these *fin de siècle* writers: they struggle with the Father and find it hard to justify his actions. The fall of the Habsburg Empire is to them the end of solidarity among the nations. This sense of crisis is also related to the destabilization of the ethnic group's religious unity. No longer a religious community with its own positive values, it gradually becomes defined mostly by its unjustified persecution: in "And the Crooked Shall be Made Straight" the authority of the Kaiser is no longer what it used to be and therefore the restrictions on the transgressors against the commercial regulations of the Jewish community are no longer operative. Agnon also frequently raises doubts regarding that group's survival as a religious community.

The parallels between the two writers are important for understanding the atmosphere of a declining civilization that left its mark on their work. Each, in his own way, tried to deal with the pressing problems created by the state of his society. Agnon sent his heroes to the land of Israel and crafted narratives but raised doubts as to Zionism's ability to provide a solution for Jewish existence. Kafka's rebellion against the father was expressed more bluntly and directly, in the famous letter and through his repeated portrayal of the sovereign as a capricious demiurge.

The all-powerful, amoral father is repeatedly shown effortlessly bringing women to submission; served by a system of clerks and minions, he continues to rule the world from inside an inaccessible castle or a courthouse where injustice reigns. The old father can sentence the son to death or force him to commit involuntary suicide, and, in "The Judgement," the guilt-ridden son submits to the verdict:

> "An innocent child, yet, that you were, truly, but still more truly, have you been a devilish human being! – And therefore take note: I sentence you now to death by drowning!"...He swung himself over, like the distinguished gymnast he had once been in his youth, to his parents' pride. With a weakening grip he was still holding on when he spied between the railings a motor-bus coming which would easily cover the noise of his fall, called in a low voice: "Dear parents, I have always loved you, all the same," and let himself drop.
>
> At this moment, an unending stream of traffic was just going over the bridge. (Kafka 1983: 87–88)

Kafka's novels evoke absolute existential uprootedness. His characters exist in a state of exile, which to Kafka is the essential human condition. They are nationless people living outside time and trying to confront problems without a clear temporal and spatial context. The a-temporal, non-spatial setting of his three main novels – *The Castle*, *The Trial*, and even, to an extent, *Amerika* – presents the exiled (Jewish) existence as a sentence imposed on a helpless individual.

The sovereign king or judge of the land becomes, in Kafka's work, an emblem of the King of all Kings, as well as a metaphorical embodiment of the biological father, entailing, for both him and Agnon, both theological issues and the Oedipal anxiety. One example of metaphysical heresy and anxiety in Agnon can be found in the following passage from *A Guest for the Night*, which calls into question both the symbols of faith and the possibility of passing faith down from father to son:

> I do not remember whether I was awake or dreaming. But I remember that at that moment I was standing in a forest clearing, wrapped in my prayer shawl and crowned with my tefillin, when the child Raphael, Daniel Bach's son, came up with a satchel under his arm. "Who brought you here, my son?" said I. "Today

> I have become bar-mitzvah," said he, "an I am going to the Beth Midrash." I was overcome with pity for this pitiful child, because he was docked of both his hands and could not put on tefillin. He gazed at me with his beautiful eyes and said, "Daddy promised to make me rubber hands."
>
> "Your Daddy is an honest man," said I, "and if he has made a promise he will keep it. Perhaps you know why your father saw fit to ask about Schutzling?" Said Raphael, "Daddy has gone to war and I can't ask him."
>
> "Between ourselves, Raphael," I said to him, "I suspect that your sister Erela is a communist. Doesn't she mock your father?"
>
> "Oh, no," said Raphael, "she cries over him, because he can't find his arm." I asked him, "What does it mean, he cannot find his arm?" "He lost his arm," said Raphael. "If so," said I, "where does he put his tefillin?" "Don't worry about that," said Raphael, "those for the head he puts on his head, and those for the hand he pits on someone else's arm." "Where does he find someone else's arm?" said I. "He found a soldier's arm in the trench," replied Raphael. "Do you think he can meet his obligations with that one arm? Isn't it written the dead are free? When a man becomes dead, he is exempt from religious precepts, and anyone who is exempt from a precept cannot exempt anyone else." "I don't know," he replied. "You don't know," said I, "so why did you pretend you knew?" "Until you asked me I knew," replied Raphael, "once you asked me I forgot." "From now on," said I, "I will not ask. Go, my son, go." (Agnon 1968: 383).

Scraps of reality found elsewhere in the text converge in this dream segment. The forest clearing alludes to Daniel Bach's fear of the forest, and the handless child and Erela also appear at other points in the novel. The dream indicates that the two generations cannot realize their faith, because they lack some physical capacity (hands, arms). Not only did the father lose his faith in the trenches of World War I, but the son, born into a world devoid of faith, cannot claim his legacy. Disability has become a typical feature of life: both the speakers refer to it casually. The family system is shattered; the father has lost authority and receives nothing but pity from his daughter. Communication is impeded by the participants' inability to conduct a fruitful dialogue or address each other's questions.

In Kafka intricate metaphysical questions are likewise associated with the issue of authority. As Alter rightly claims, "Commentators have sometimes reduced his work to autopsychobiography, or to sociopolitical or religious allegory, but he actually undertook a more daring and difficult task in his writing, which was to expose himself to, or to take by imaginative force, a realm of the transcendent in which he could not believe, or, if he believed in it, might prove inimical and perverse" (1991: 112). Kafka's work repeatedly ponders the possibility of believing in and trusting the "old commandant" ("In the Penal Colony") or the powers seated in the remote castle (*The Castle*) or behind the gates of the law (*The Trial*). The metaphysical force his heroes confront is that of a demiurge rather than a benevolent God.[29] The characters themselves are guilt-ridden, judging themselves and judged by forces they cannot control. The judgment itself is based on a hidden and incomprehensible code of law. Having provided a harsh account of the inaccessible legal world, the priest in *The Trial* concludes by saying: "That means I belong to the Court.... So why should I want anything from you? The Court wants nothing from you. It receives you when you come and it dismisses you when you go" (Kafka 1971: 248). The death sentence in *The Trial* has nothing to do with the defendant's guilt or with the legal process.

Both Agnon and Kafka portray the powers-that-be as brutal. In Agnon, man's relationship with the divine is reflected in various disasters. Among the many examples are the death of Ginat and Gemula in "Edo and Enam," Adiel Amsel's flight to the leper asylum in "Forevermore," the death of Yitzhak Kumer and the persecution of the dog Balak in *Only Yesterday*, the troubles of the townspeople in *A Guest for the Night*, and the suffering of Hillel, hero of "The Covering of the Blood," who loses both a leg and a prosthesis after having survived a World War, drudgery in America, and exile in the Land of Israel. All these characters are hounded and destroyed by unassailable forces through no fault of their own.

Josef K. in *The Trial*, K. in *The Castle*, and young Rossmann in *Amerika* are likewise persecuted by incontrollable powers that abuse

[29] "Thus Kafka revives the Marcionistic idea of the Creator as a demiurge and therefore evil – a parallel all the more surprising in that the God responsible for creation is for Marcion also the Old Testament God of the Law [not of Love!], just as for Kafka too the divine authority, the law, and evil are one" (Anders 1960: 86–87).

them because they attract abuse. Even when they misbehave in response to persecution, their response is incommensurate with the punishment that is inflicted on them. The demiurge who rules the transcendent world torments human beings. This world is an exact reflection of the next one, and vice versa: Kafka's abusive clerks and Agnon's mutually violent gentiles and Jews are synecdochal descriptions, through the realities of the stories, of a reality beyond the real.

The death of the protagonists can be read either as suicide or as a death sentence carried out by forces beyond the victim's control. The anonymous executioners who kill the victim of a legal injustice (*The Trial*), or the mad dog who inflicts doom on the man who writes "mad dog" on his back – both express the predicament of authors who long for a benevolent God but despair of ever discovering one. Kafka cannot find any foothold in a world whose rules are faulty or incomprehensible. Agnon's metaphysical stance is not uniform: in his earlier works, his protagonists (Menashe Chaim, Ezechiel, Dinah) make futile attempts to be released from their bondage; later works feature heroes like Reb Judel the Pious, a comically righteous man whose innocence transcends the comic-pathetic bind in which he is caught; but from the 1930s on, in *The Book of Deeds*, *A Guest for the Night*, and *Only Yesterday*, Agnon's protagonists find themselves, like Kafka's heroes, facing an inaccessible transcendent reality which is bleak and confusing. Kafka and Agnon's works provide no vindication of the ways of God, and God does not speak to these modern-day Jobs from within the storm.

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Both Kafka and Agnon were shaped by the trauma of World War I. Their works predict the greater cataclysm to follow, as well as the catastrophe awaiting Europe's Jewry, while they reflect the despair felt by residents of the disintegrating Habsburg Empire, who could find no viable substitute for the emperor/father/"former commandant." But Kafka and Agnon are also spokesmen of the crisis of modern man whose existence in the world has become a meaningless exile; above all, they articulate the desperate state of Jews living in a void and, in Agnon's case, carrying the void with them to the land of their forefathers, hoping to find a way to fill it. The work they produced in the first two decades of the century struck its contemporary readers like a feverish

nightmare; that nightmare was confirmed as living reality in the 1940s.[30] Kafka and Agnon offer testimony to the crisis that gripped Central Europe between the late 19th century and the aftermath of World War I, a crisis that would come to a head in World War II and in the Holocaust.

Translated from Hebrew by Yael Shapira

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[30] "Unquestionably, Kafka's world is a terrible world. No doubt we know better today than we did twenty years ago that it is more than a nightmare, that, on the contrary, its structure is uncannily equivalent to the reality that we have been forced to experience. The greatness of this art lies in the fact that it can have just as convulsive an effect today as it had then, that it has lost none of its immediacy through the reality of the gas chambers" (Arendt 1981: 8).

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