

# How Does A Convention Mean? A Semiotic Reading of Agnon's Bilingual Key-Irony in *A Guest For The Night*

Yael S. Feldman  
Columbia University, New York

The subject of this study is the semiosis of the ironic message of Agnon's *A Guest for the Night* (1939). The role played by the key-motif in structuring the ironic symbolism of the novel has long been recognized; the key has been related to such central issues as truth vs. deception, authenticity vs. substitution, and continuance vs. annihilation. The fact that all these issues are so clearly antithetic poses an intriguing question: How is it possible for a single signifier, the word *mafte'ah*, 'key,' to convey the contrariness inherent in its paired signifieds? This question grows especially troublesome when we consider the fact that the universally positivized symbolism of the key as a literary convention is coupled in Hebrew with the semantic transparency of the language (the derivative meaning of *mafte'ah* being an \*openér). Our study aims, therefore, at unravelling the full meaning of Agnon's irony via the analysis of his 'semiotic design'. It illustrates the ways in which the author de-auto-matizes cultural conventions (on the levels of semantics, myth, and psychological archetypes), thereby compelling them to generate meanings that are contradictory to their "original" (or expected) ones. The outcome of such a reading is a reinterpretation, not only of Agnon's self-image as a novelist, but mainly of his position on issues still crucial to contemporary Jewish identity (e.g., Zionism vs. Diaspora, Hebrew vs. Yiddish).

„ופתח ואין סוגר,  
וסגר ואין פותח“.  
(Isaiah 22:22)

The novel, *A Guest for the Night*, has long been recognized as one of the major works in the oeuvre of Hebrew author, S.Y. Agnon (1888–1970). This absorbing and haunting narrative is generally considered one of the pinnacles of modern Hebrew prose fiction.<sup>1</sup> It is even placed at the

(1) For a recent evaluation see Hillel Halkin, "On Translating the Living and the Dead," *Prooftexts* 3.1 (1983) 88; see also his critique of the English translation of the book, *A Guest for the Night* (tr. from the Hebrew by Misha Louvish, ed. by Naftali C. Brandwein and Allen Mandelbaum; New York: Schocken, 1968). For a comprehensive study of Agnon's oeuvre in English, see Arnold J. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Los Angeles: U. of California Press, 1968). Band prefers the literal translation of the Hebrew title of the novel *Ore'ah nata lahum*, namely, "A Wayfarer Who Tarried for a Night," see *ibid.*, pp. 283–327.

zenith of the *European* novelistic tradition by some critics.<sup>2</sup> The importance assigned to this work is not surprising. Written as it was on the brink of World War II (1938–39), it addresses itself to fundamental dilemmas still relevant to Jewish existence today. Furthermore, the existential complexities motivating this work in no way overshadow its artistic achievements — as we hope the following discussion clearly demonstrates.

Narrated in the first person, this novel tells of the protagonist's visit to his East-European hometown after the Great War. Having left for the land of Israel as a youth, despite his father's objections, the narrator-protagonist returns as a mature man — a writer by profession — in search of the past he remembers.<sup>3</sup> That this past is forever lost is a lesson he learns by the end of his sojourn. But before this stage is reached, he goes through different phases of hope and expectation in his attempt to reconstruct days gone by. While recording these attempts Agnon convincingly highlights both the physical and spiritual desolation of post-World-War I European Jewry. Yet it is the psychological drama of his protagonist — his very personal struggle to come to terms with irreversible facts — that lends this story its gripping quality.

Needless to say, the narrator's desperate project of reconstruction is ironically thwarted by the text on the levels of both action and discourse. This irony is to a great extent structured by the motif of the *key*, the massive, old key to the *beit midrash* [the house of study], which is given to the protagonist by the townspeople on the eve of the Day of Atonement. They themselves are on the verge of leaving the town, consequently telling the narrator: "Since we have no need of the key, let us give you the key so it won't lie about in the muck."<sup>4</sup> Charged with the key to the study of the Torah, the protagonist embarks on a mission of restoration: he reopens the house of study, trying to recapture what he conceives of as the old way of life.

From this moment on the subplot of the key-motif assumes a life of its

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For his appreciation of the novel see pp. 284, 386. Cf. also, Baruch Hochman, "Between the Then and Now," *The Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Ithaca & London: Cornell, 1970), pp. 112–134.

(2) Gershon Shaked, *The Narrative Art of S.Y. Agnon* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1976), p. 228.

(3) On the autobiographical background of this story line, see Band, pp. 284–85. Band insists, and rightly so, that despite the biographical correspondences the novel should be treated as a work of fiction and not as a historical or autobiographical document.

(4) *A Guest for the Night*, p. 15. All page references are to Louvish's translation. However, where his rendering is too free for the purpose of my stylistic or semantic analysis, my own literal "corrections" are provided.

own. It takes unpredictable and sometimes unlikely turns. The key is lost and replaced by another key; often used and suddenly neglected; it is mistaken for still another key and is even spoken to by its owner; finally, the substitute key is bequeathed to a new-born baby, while the original one unexpectedly turns up in Jerusalem.

Critical consensus has long recognized the role played by the key-motif in establishing the ironic or grotesque symbolism of the novel. In his pioneering interpretation of this work the late critic, Baruch Kurzweil, averred: "The subplot of the key represents all the symbolic, tragic and grotesque options inherent in a belated homecoming [returning]."<sup>5</sup> Some of these options were later enumerated by Gershon Shaked in his study of the narrative techniques of Agnon's fiction:

The key-motif is instrumental in creating contexts for various themes such as: authenticity vs. substitution; truth vs. deception; the hotel as temporary lodging vs. the house of study as a permanent center for the people of Israel; finally, the issue of continuation or annihilation of the diaspora.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that all these issues are so clearly antithetical poses an intriguing question: How can the single word *mafte'ah* 'key,' bear the burden of these binary oppositions? In other words: How is the ironic message encoded *verbally*, above and beyond the *dramatic* irony created by the plot? Or, using semiotic terminology: How does the single signifier *mafte'ah* ['key'] point to the thematic duplicity of its paired signifieds?

This question grows especially troublesome when we consider the semantic transparency of Hebrew. Unlike the English word "key", the Hebrew word *mafte'ah* is a derivative of the verb *p.t.h.* 'to open.' This morphological derivation controls the semantic range of the noun.<sup>7</sup> Any native-speaker of Hebrew would intuitively associate *mafte'ah* with *pote'ah* 'opens', despite his awareness that a key locks as often as it opens (there is no Hebrew equivalent for 'unlock'). The verb *pote'ah*, in turn, generates a cluster of idioms — open one's heart . . . one's hand . . . one's door — all of which are positively marked. Consequently, the lexical unit *mafte'ah* (the word, not the actual referent) readily evokes positive connotations of "openness", such as the hopes entertained by the protago-

(5) Baruch Kurzweil, *Essays on the Fiction of S.Y. Agnon* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1963), p. 54. Translation is mine. Cf. Band, "The *bet midrash* and its key," pp. 316–18.

(6) Shaked, *The Narrative Art*, p. 243. Translation is mine.

(7) On "morphological motivation" and "semantic transparency", see S. Ulmann, *Semantics* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 80–115.

nist of our novel. And it is precisely this positive markedness that renders *mafte'ah* inadequate as a signifier of double meanings, of ambiguities, and of paradoxes that are all involved in an ironic message. Furthermore, this particularly Hebraic semantic inadequacy is compounded by the universal overuse of a literary convention: The "key" is one of the most worn out, even trite, positively marked literary symbols.<sup>8</sup>

It would therefore seem that a full comprehension of Agnon's irony cannot be attained without unravelling the ways in which he compensates for the semantic inadequacy of this convention. Guided by this premise, we discover that the semantic compensation is inseparable from the mythic and psychological layers superimposed upon it. Consequently, our analysis consists of a three-fold argument:

1) Semantically, the irony is conveyed not through the "key" alone, but rather via the hitherto-neglected combination of "lock and key". It is further suggested that Agnon's use of "lock" (as well as of the substitute key) derives from the German-Yiddish word for "key", *Schlüssel*, which connotes locking rather than opening.

2) The mythic core of the story reveals another transformation which is quite reminiscent of the semantic one. Although the archetypal myth of "the death and rebirth of the hero" is clearly alluded to in the narrator's dream, the key plot does not progress from "death" to "life", but rather in the opposite direction. Consequently, positive expectations aroused by the imputed archetypal paradigm are ironically frustrated: the original key is not to be recovered.

3) Predictably, the psychological archetype invoked in the novel is underscored by a similar reversal. What appears as a positively marked rabbinic intertext (an idealized depiction of a pre-natal existence) actually points to a latent *thanatic* motivation, namely, to a repressed death wish.

Our re-reading discloses, then, that analogous modes of compensation for the semantic inadequacy of *mafte'ah* operate on all levels of the narrative discourse — the semantic, the mythic, and the psychological. All of them, furthermore, share a common feature which, when perceived, determines the nature and direction of the author's irony. As such, Agnon's text corroborates Umberto Eco's semiotic definition of "art": a message that is organized in *precise* but *ambiguous* design, which is

(8) For a recent list of the symbolic usage of "key", see J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, tr. Jack Sage (London: 1962). His final comment is of particular interest for our issue: ". . . it is the key that derives from the anserated cross [of the Egyptians], the archetype of the key of Eternal Life that opens up the gates of death on to immortality." (p. 160) And cf. fn. 35.

the same on all levels (or systems) of a given structure.<sup>9</sup> As we shall presently see, the unravelling of this technique in *A Guest for the Night* enables us to reach an interpretation of the text which is both fuller and more adequate than the one generally accepted.

1) *The semantic irony and its bilingual roots: a "national" reading.*

Semantic transparency of the kind involved in deriving the meaning of the Hebrew word *mafte'ah* is less common in English, which is generally considered a "lexical" rather than a "grammatical" language.<sup>10</sup> The noun "key" does not owe its meaning to the verb "to open" nor to its opposite "to lock"; it is therefore semantically freer than *mafte'ah*, and is open to a larger range of associations. German, on the other hand, is another grammatical tongue: here the noun *Schlüssel*, 'key', belongs to the morphological paradigm of the verb *schliessen* 'to lock'. Thus, just as the Hebrew "key" automatically evokes "opening", the German key automatically evokes "closing" or "locking".<sup>11</sup> Together, it seems, Hebrew and German 'keys' would constitute a composite semantic field, making possible a verbal play between the opposing poles "opening" vs. "locking".

This suggestion might have remained no more than an inter-lingual jest, if not for a third party, namely: Yiddish. Yiddish features an analogous pair: *shlisl* and *shlissn*. That a Hebrew writer would at least be familiar with the Yiddish terms is quite obvious. Agnon, furthermore, began his literary career writing in Yiddish, like many Hebrew writers of his time.<sup>12</sup> In addition, his verbal self-consciousness is well known.<sup>13</sup> It is quite possible, then, that he was aware of the potential playfulness inher-

(9) See Umberto Eco, *Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: 1976), p. 271.

(10) On the distinction between "lexical languages" and "grammatical languages" see C. Bally, *Linguistique générale et linguistique française*, 4e éd. (Berne: 1965), pp. 341-45.

(11) Cf. Gaston Bachelard's contention that "the door-knob (. . .) expresses the function of opening, and only a logical mind could object that it is used to close as well as to open the door. In the domain of values, on the other hand, a key closes more often than it opens, whereas the door-knob opens more than it closes." *The Poetics of Space*, tr. from the French by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 73.

(12) See Band, "Yiddish Poetry" (pp. 33-34); "Hebrew and Yiddish Articles" (pp. 35-38); "Yiddish Stories" (pp. 48-53). Cf. my *Modernism and Cultural Transfer: Gabriel Preil and the Tradition of Jewish Literary Bilingualism* (HUCP, 1985). See also Hachman, p. 25.

(13) Most telling is Agnon's own account of his penchant for play on words, particularly of the metathesis kind: "Hunger bothered me from within and the broken bed threatened me from underneath and thoughts about the future were more bothersome than my hunger and my bed. In order to evade my frightening thoughts, I took a Hebrew root [a three letter stem] and changed its consonants around to see into how many words it branches." *Ad Hena* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1974), p. 27. (Translation is mine.)

ent in the double semantic range of [*mafte'ah* + *shlisl*] which either language by itself could not provide him with.

Of course, we could not prove today that such bilingual awareness was indeed instrumental in Agnon's creative processes. But the Hebrew text itself may offer some intriguing clues. Subjected to a rigorous re-reading, the text makes us realize that the familiar key-motif should be really defined as the motif of the "lock & key," a fact hitherto unnoticed by the critics. By its derivational meaning, the Hebrew "lock" *man<sup>c</sup>ul*, constitutes a semantic equivalent of the German-Yiddish *shlisl*, even though it points to a different referent. Generating a number of negatively marked idioms — to face a locked door; locked up by lock and bolt — *man<sup>c</sup>ul* acts as a natural complement of *mafte'ah* for producing the binary axis: open ↔ lock. It is clear, then, that the combination *man<sup>c</sup>ul umafte'ah*, 'lock and key', provides Agnon with a bi-polar signifier to accommodate his playful paradoxes and ironic statements.

That this argument is not farfetched is evidenced by one of the focal points of the key-subplot, the episode of the locksmith (ch. 19). Paradoxically, it is to the locksmith that the narrator turns in his search for a new key. This semantic irony does not work in English, of course. In Hebrew, the polar opposition between *masger* ("locksmith", from the root *s.g.r.* 'close') and *mafte'ah* is quite obvious. When this transparent contradiction is compounded by the repetitive use of the collocations *man<sup>c</sup>ul umafte'ah*, *man<sup>c</sup>ul* and *petah* ('doorway'), or of other derivations of the components *p.t.h.* vs. *n.<sup>c</sup>.l.l.s.g.r.* (13 times in one short chapter), the ironic tension is inescapable. This should not surprise us: the locksmith-episode is what structuralists would call the "junction of inversion" of the plot. It is here that both semantic and actantial tensions reach their peak and take a dramatic turn.<sup>14</sup> That such an inversion or turn indeed takes place in this episode becomes clear upon examination of its mythical and psychological semiosis. Yet before we get to these aspects, a closer look at the semantic level is in order.

Surprisingly, the actual introduction of the key-motif is done not via the principal key, that of the house of study, but rather through a secondary key, that of the hotel. Early in the plot (ch. 2) the narrator recounts:

I went back to my hotel and found it *locked*. I was sorry I had not

(14) See A.J. Greimas, *Sémantique structurale* (Paris: Larousse, 1966), pp. 192–203; *Du Sens* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 187. Cf. the analogous function of the 'bridge' episodes in *Crime and Punishment* and "Misaviv la-Nequda" in my "From Dostoyevsky to Brenner," *Hebrew Annual Review* 3 (1979) 91–103; and "Between the Mythic and the Tragic," *Mahbarot Brenner* 3–4 (Hebrew) (1984) 217–238.

taken a *key* with me. . . . I extended my hand to the door, as one extends his hand when he does not expect it to *open*. But as I touched it, the door *opened*. (p.7) (emphasis added).

When we read this passage for the first time we are liable to dismiss it as the insignificant ramblings of a garrulous narrator. Not so on a retroactive reading.<sup>15</sup> Bearing in mind the centrality of the bi-polar “key vs. lock” motif, we must account for the change in the referent (the hotel key). In order to do this we have to circumvent the surface actualization of the motif and delve into the logic underlying it. The principle we come up with is that *occurrences do not necessarily follow one’s expectations*. The fact that the hotel’s door opened without a key, in contrast to the narrator’s expectations, sets the backdrop for the rest of the plot. Obviously, it is not the overt theme which is realized in the text at this point; on the contrary: doors are going to be locked despite the presence of a key. It is rather the paradoxical *relation* between the thematic components *p.t.h.* ~ *n.c.l.* that is the clue to the semiotic code of the novel; the internal rule governing the logic of the plot is that of *expectations being frustrated*, sometimes quite unpredictably.

This semantic tension is further reinforced by the connotative contradiction between the titles of chapters four and five: *The Key* and *The Closing Service* (in Hebrew literally “The \*Opener” vs. “The Locking”). The sequence itself is not arbitrary. The title of Chapter Five marks the *time* of the action — the last prayer of the Day of Atonement (*Ne<sup>c</sup>ila*), the last opportunity for repenting and returning. There is no better timing for providing the protagonist with a key — the proper tool for opening the way back to his past.<sup>16</sup> But the word *ne<sup>c</sup>ila* does not mark the *timing* only; it also indicates the *reason* for the action: the key is transmitted to the narrator precisely *because of the ne<sup>c</sup>ila*, namely the “locking” of the house of study; this indirectly points to the locking, or closing down, of the town itself, perhaps the diaspora as a whole. The emotive loads of these two interpretations of the word *ne<sup>c</sup>ila* are diametrically opposite. The locking of the house of study evokes the negative pole of annihila-

(15) On the retroactive reading and the significance it accords to the work’s closure, see, for instance, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: U. of Chicago, 1968); Wolfgang Iser, “The Reading Process,” *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1974), pp. 274–94; Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington and London: Indiana U.P., 1978); Jane P. Tompkins (ed.), *Reader-Response Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1980).

(16) There seems to be room for a discussion of the key-motif in the framework of the folktale: the key functions here as a magic tool given to the hero by the “destinateur”. Cf. “functions” 14–15 in Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1958).

tion, while the *ne'ila* prayer implies the positive option of continuity (see Shaked's list of oppositions). This ambivalence gives rise to an obvious question: Which of these connotations foreshadows the actual future of the key-motif? Will it "open" as its name signifies or will it lock as is signalled by the circumstances surrounding it?

There is no way the reader can answer these questions at this stage of the narrative. The information offered by the text only reinforces the ambiguity of the situation and further postpones an unequivocal interpretation. Consider, for example, the role of the key in the narrator's childhood reminiscences at the end of Chapter Four: "This was the great key with which I used to *open* our old Beit Midrash when I was a boy and I used to study the Tora from early in the morning till late at night." (p. 16). The positive markedness could not be mistaken. It is obviously meant to arouse expectations for a resurgence of this openness in both protagonist and reader. Yet, the first action in which the key is actually used is that of locking up: "When they were all gone, I *locked* up the Beit Midrash" (end of ch. 5, p. 20). Of course, this step is natural enough on the surface level of the plot. So much so, that on first reading it is hardly possible to sense the semiotic or deeper meaning of the action. Only with the unfolding of the plot do we begin to grasp its significance. Thus, the syntagmatic accumulation of the bi-polar paradigm of open↔lock evolves in three stages:

1) As we have seen, Chapters 1–5 show a balanced use of the two components, thus establishing an initial ambivalence that arouses unanswered questions in the reader's mind. Obviously, such an exposition draws the reader into the narrative and demands his active participation in the reading process. Using Wolfgang Iser's terminology, we can easily classify *A Guest for the Night* as a modernist text, marked by its air of "indeterminacy".<sup>17</sup>

2) However, in the next stage this indeterminate state seems to be resolved. In Chapters 6–19 only the opening function of the key is operative (pp. 23, 25, 49, 98, 99). This is stressed by a well-grounded connection between the key and its derivative meaning, which is established by the closure of Ch. 6. When the narrator is detained from going to the house of study by an idle conversation, he complains: "I returned to my hotel as if the key [of the house of study] is of no use at all" (p. 26). What he seems to be saying is: When a key is not used for opening it does not fulfill its function.

(17) See Wolfgang Iser, "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction," *Aspects of Narrative*, (ed.) J. Hillis Miller (New York: 1971), pp. 1–45.

3) From Chapter 23 on we follow the adventures of the substitute key, the one made by the locksmith in Chapter 22. Unlike its authentic counterpart, the new key is used only once for opening (p. 131).<sup>18</sup> In all further instances it is mentioned in connection with locking and closing (pp. 185, 218, 242, 312, 454) or is associated with the inability to open (p. 245).

What is the reader to deduce from this statistical distribution? On the surface it looks like a case of a clear-cut value judgment. The original key which functions in accordance with the semantics of its *Hebrew* root signifies the positive pole; its substitute, on the other hand, fulfills the negative function which is implied by the German-Yiddish *shlisl*. In other words, despite the lexical consistency (the word *mafte'ah* is used throughout, of course), we witness here a semantic and judgmental inversion; the authentic key has been in fact substituted not with a new "opener" but rather with a "locker", or a *shlisl* if you will.<sup>19</sup> This value judgment is reinforced by the final adventure of the original "key". It "makes aliya" [immigrates to the Land of Israel], so to speak, behind the protagonist's back (the protagonist unexpectedly discovers it in his backpack when he returns home to Jerusalem [Ch. 79]). Taking this final stage in the key's plot as the closure of the novel, critical consensus appropriately arrives at a "national" interpretation of the motif. The attempt to restore the world of the diaspora is doomed to failure. Concomitantly, it is represented by a negatively marked substitute-key, the *shlisl*. The positively marked "key", the Hebraic "opener", represents the Zionist solution which points, predictably, to the Land of Israel.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, a neatly structured interpretation of this kind, as much as it may be comforting (at least partially, from a Zionist perspective), does not do justice to Agnon's artistic irony. The newly found key,

(18) This is the first time the new key is used; its positive function constitutes part of the *illusion* of success just before it is undercut; and see section 2 below.

(19) Needless to say, such an inversion in the role of the key functions as a welcome "de-automatization" of the overused convention of the "key" as a literary symbol. For this insight I am indebted to Professor Arnold Band.

(20) See, for instance, Band's final conclusion:

Usually considered the most tragic of Agnon's three major novels, *Ore'ah nata lalun* is really his most affirmative statement of belief (. . .). [It] reaches a positive ending in spite of the mood of decay which pervades it. (. . .) It is the child, who now has the key to the old bet midrash (. . .) who will someday settle in Eretz Yisrael [the land of Israel]. . . . (Band, pp. 326-27).

Band's approach deviates from Kurzweil's reading only in its value judgment; Kurzweil saw the substitute "key" as a symbol of the new secular ways of life which he vehemently lamented and to which he objected (Kurzweil, p. 55).

although in Jerusalem, is finally *locked up* in a box. To avoid any mistake, Agnon repeats this symbolic action twice, as the closures of the last two chapters: "I went into my house, put away the key in the box, locked the box on the outside, and hung the key of the box on my heart" (p. 476; cf. pp. 471–72). The language of these passages brings us back full circle to the focal point of the plot, namely, the episode of the locksmith. Rereading this episode we realize that the full irony of the novel's closure cannot be recovered without juxtaposing the narrator's final gesture with its internal intertext, the encounter with the locksmith. And since this encounter is suffused with the recollection of dreams and wishes that originate in childhood consciousness,<sup>21</sup> the reader is encouraged to consider a personal-psychological interpretation. He may soon find out, though, that it is precisely such a reading that is the generator of the ironic tension of his interpretation, for the personal-psychological reading stands in opposition to the national-ideological one, thus ironically undermining the protagonist's restorative endeavors.

2) *The psychological-mythical irony and its personal implications.*

Describing his childhood yearning for a key, the protagonist suddenly concedes: "I pictured this key in various shapes, but all shapes were less important than its function and final purpose" (p. 98). What this final purpose is we are not told.<sup>22</sup> But the answer is indirectly given by the repetitive style of the monologue. In a passage of about 20 lines (in the Hebrew original) the root *p.t.h.* 'open' occurs nineteen times in a variety of nominal and verbal forms.<sup>23</sup> This constant reiteration of a

(21) "When I was a child . . . I longed for a box with a key and a lock . . ." (p. 98). Cf. Hochman, pp. 120–121.

(22) As a matter of fact the translator did not trust his English reader and added an explanatory or complementary phrase; the words added to the passage quoted here ["the act of opening" (p. 98)] do *not* exist in the original.

(23) "This is the gentleman who wants you to make him a *key*," said Bach. The locksmith stretched his hands to welcome me, clasping my hand joyfully, and I too rejoiced over him. First, because he will make me a *key*. Secondly, because when I was a child I used to stand at the doorway [*petah*] of his store looking at the *keys* and locks. For in those days I desired a box with a lock and *key*. And when I gave up on the box later, I did not give up on the *key*; I would lie in bed at night contemplating the *key*, a big and heavy *key* that one takes out of his pocket to *open* his home with. That *key*, for which I wished, would take different shapes, but all shapes were incidental to its function and final purpose. Just imagine: At the hub of a town there stands a house, and that house, just like any other house, has a door on which hangs a lock. A child comes from school, puts his hand in his pocket to take out the *key*, thrusts the *key* in the lock turning it this way and that, and right away the whole house is *open* before him. What is there in this house? A table, a bed, and a lamp — namely, nothing that other houses do not have; but to that moment of *opening* the

single semantic nucleus is nothing but an emotional outburst of both nostalgia and farewell to the world of childhood, a world in which all options are still open. In this world any “key” would function as a metaphor of the child’s ego, of his hopes and aspirations.<sup>24</sup> Only on this level can we understand such a statement as: “The man who has come to this place (. . .) is well along in years and is far from childhood, but he is still seeking a key” (p. 99). In a way, the subplot of the lost and substituted key functions as a metonymic transposition of one of the most basic types of plot — the myth of the death and rebirth of the hero.<sup>25</sup>

With the loss of the original key, the protagonist, too, feels lost and alienated (Ch. 15). This feeling is objectified by his visit to the *cemetery* and by his discussion with Yeruḥam Hofshi, a young pioneer-turned-communist, whose world view is underlined by frustration and bitterness. Yeruḥam blames the narrator for tempting him to try “aliya”. In Yeruḥam’s opinion there is only one way the protagonist can expiate his “sin”: he should have died, committed suicide, disappeared, or obliterated his name, so that “nobody should know of [his] existence” (Ch. 17).<sup>26</sup> These “delicate” hints predictably trigger a nightmare, in which an old man leads the protagonist to a place resembling “a burial vault” (p. 93, end of Ch. 18). This clearly corresponds to the “enclosed space” characteristic of most plots dealing with the death and rebirth of the hero.<sup>27</sup> Faithful to its imputed model, the dream reaches a happy end: “No sooner did the old man utter the magic word ‘life’ than he shrank and his face was turned to dust and his voice sounded like a rusty key.”(!) (p. 94). The protagonist, on the other hand, releases himself from the rusty pangs of death: “My limbs filled out and my body began to grow until I became as tall as a mountain. The vault split and I

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house with the *key* that the child is holding, no other moment can compare. Now you can imagine how great was that old man with more than a hundred *keys* hanging on his *doorway*. There are stored-away treasures one can *open* with a saying, as when you say, ‘Open Sesame!’; yet I did not seek invisible matters but rather the visible ones, and all I wished for was that their *key* would be in my hand. (P. 98; my translation; emphasis added.)

(24) This fact is demonstrated by the child’s admiration for another owner of keys, “the collector for the Land of Israel”: “When he would enter, and with a key from his pocket open the collection box (. . .) I would stand astonished” (p. 99).

(25) See Jury M. Lotman, “The Origin of Plot in the Light of Typology,” *Poetics Today* 1, no. 1–2 (Autumn, 1979), 161–84.

(26) This “deadly” atmosphere is reinforced by the Hebrew associations of Yeruḥam’s last name: *Hofshi*, literally “freeman” and in this context “free of the traditional commandments and way of life,” also echoes the homily on Psalms 88.6: “*bametim hofshi*”, namely, “free in death” [among the dead], thus functioning as another ironic, double signifier.

(27) See Lotman; cf. Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (London: Oxford, 1951).

emerged" (*ibid.*). After being "reborn" in his dream, the narrator is smoothly transferred to the threshold of the locked house of study, and from there to the locksmith, in search of a new "key".

The transition from the old man of the dream to the old locksmith is utilized by the narrator to draw a detailed comparison between the two. Despite their similarities, the locksmith is clearly preferred; he is marked by his joy of life and by his Hasidic laughter. The childhood memories which he arouses add to his positive valorization and this is metonymically transferred to the new key which he is making for the protagonist. It therefore seems quite natural to read this part of the key-and-lock motif as corresponding to the dream plot: the Transition from death to life in the dream seems to be duplicated by the lost and recovered key. Such an interpretation is initially encouraged by the direct analogy drawn between the new key and the protagonist at the beginning of Chapter 22:

I took the key and said: Yesterday you were a lump of iron; the craftsman cast his eyes upon you and made you into a precious thing. Similarly, I said to myself: Yesterday you were a lump of flesh, now the Beit Midrash has been opened to you, and you have become a man (p. 108).

This optimism seems to be reinforced by the opening of the house of study, where the warm hearth attracts a number of people who join the protagonist in his studies. However, soon enough this reopening is revealed as an illusion. With the retreat of the winter cold the house of study loses its audience, including the protagonist himself. Interestingly, this forthcoming ironic twist is metaphorically implied even before it materializes in the course of the plot. In contrast to the mythic model involved in the dream (death→life; negation→affirmation), the key-plot proceeds from affirmation to negation. This inversion in the direction of the action is obliquely introduced by a rabbinic text to which the protagonist himself alludes. Comparing his studies now to his studies "before" (without specifying when this "before" was) he recounts:

Dear brothers, there is no time when a man is more blessed than the time he spends in his *mother's womb*, for then he is taught the entire Torah; but as soon as he comes out into the air of the world, along comes an angel and strikes him on the mouth, making him forget the entire Torah (p. 108) (emphasis added).

So far, the allusion is quite faithful to the original. But Agnon makes his protagonist add a little twist of his own:

Great is the Torah that he was taught in those days — but even so, there is no joy in the Tora unless one toils for it. It is like a man who has lost his key and then found it (*ibid.*).

No doubt this is a strange juxtaposition: In what way is the present better than earlier times? Isn't this preference based on a false assumption? Had the *old* key been recovered, there could perhaps have been some truth to this analogy; but since it was not — what is the cause of the protagonist's rejoicing? The present joy is likened to the joy of a man who has found his key, but this is really not the case here. Thus the rationalization for finding joy in the present fails to convince. What unwittingly emerges from this false analogy is the true object of the protagonist's yearning. His affirmation is granted not to the present, but to the time "before", to the safe and protected, "locked" so to speak, pre-natal existence depicted in the rabbinic intertext.

In order to comprehend the full meaning of this preference we must first understand what this rabbinic homily stands for. An excerpt from Gershom Scholem's monumental work, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, may be of help here:

The "Midrash on the Creation of the Child" relates that after its guardian angel has given it a fillip upon the nose, the new born child forgets all the infinite knowledge acquired before its birth in the celestial houses of learning (. . .) truly a remarkable variant of the Platonic conception of cognition as recollection, anamnesis.<sup>28</sup>

In other words: in the Jewish sources the Platonic "ideas" are replaced by the equally eternal Tora. If we continue with this analogy we may conclude that the study of Tora in *this* world is actually a process of "recollection", an attempt to recover or reconstruct an ideal pre-natal existence. Concomitantly, life is viewed as a secondary reflection, a poor imitation of the original; it is only a necessary hiatus in the cyclical flow of an ideal reality which both precedes it and follows it.<sup>29</sup> What renders this heavenly existence superior to life itself is its direct contact with the source — the Platonic ideas or (in the Jewish version) the Tora. Conse-

(28) Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), p. 92. The homily which both Scholem and Agnon refer to appears in *Midrash Tanhuma*, Pequdei 3. The platonic myth is "Phaedo"; see *Great Dialogues of Plato*, tr. W.H.D. Rouse (New York and Toronto: The New American Library, 1965), pp. 460-522.

(29) For a similar interpretation, which I have discovered *after* the present essay was written, see Erich Neumann, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (Princeton, 1973), p. 23. Neumann's thesis provides abundant documentation for the symbolic valorization of "light" that I discuss below.

quently, affirmation is clearly granted to the existence of pre- or after-life, and this value-judgment is traditionally symbolized by various images of "light". In the later neo-Platonic stages of this myth *light* becomes the principal symbol of the process of "emanation" (the flow from the celestial sources down to the low world of matter).<sup>30</sup> In the rabbinic version, the study of the Tora in the womb is also accompanied by the image of a *burning candle*, which is so powerful it illuminates the whole universe. Similarly, in another rabbinic source (*Hagiga* 12), the afterlife of the righteous is marked by a unique light, a remnant of the original light of creation which had been especially stored away for this purpose (*ha'or haganuz*).

Curiously enough, the image of the burning candle is omitted by Agnon (or by his narrator) in the retelling of this myth. This omission is indeed intriguing, since it is repeated in the second recounting of the same myth, when the narrator attributes it to the thoughts (!) of the newly born baby, to whom he bequeathes his substitute key (Ch. 76, esp. p. 460). Even more curious is the fact that rekindling candles (or other vehicles of light) is one of the most prevalent activities obtaining throughout the novel. Furthermore, a statistical examination shows that all occurrences of studying the Tora or even contemplating doing so, are accompanied by a "ritual" of light. Seen from this perspective, the protagonist's endeavor is in fact an attempt to concretize the mythical image of an ideal cyclical existence, which takes place not only "before" life, but after life as well. Read this way, his visit to his hometown is more than an attempted journey to childhood. It is actually a symptom of an *escapist impulse, a latent wish to regress into the womb*. Translated into psychological terms in this way, the "innocently" told homily undergoes an evaluative reversal; it is hardly conceivable that a modern reader would escape the *negative* connotations attributed to "womb" imagery in psychoanalytic teachings. Consequently, the very same wish (to recapture the pre-natal existence) which is highly glorified in the myth of the pious, is interpreted in the modern consciousness as the expression of a negative impulse — *thanatos* or death wish.<sup>31</sup> We could argue, then, that by tying

(30) See, for instance, the "light" imagery in Ibn Gabirol's *Fountain of Life*, as it is discussed by Vincente Cantarino, "Ibn Gabirol's Metaphysics of Light," *Studia Islamica*, no. 26 (1967) 49-71. Cf. Scholem, pp. 111, 113, 115.

(31) The conflict between the protagonist's restorative drive and his latent regressive impulse parallels Freud's hypothesis of the teleological contradiction between the conservative Nirvana principle (the wish to return to the inorganic), popularly known as the 'Death Wish', and the life-seeking libidinal instincts (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920). In our text, the protagonist's libidinal regression is signalled by his distance from his wife and

the key-plot with this specific myth Agnon actually contradicts and ironically undercuts his protagonist's restorative endeavor. However, this latent negative motivation is not overtly acknowledged by the text. The omission of the burning candle from the two retellings of the myth is an attempt to repress the metaphoric matrix from which the text is generated. In a way, this omission functions as a defense mechanism (a 'disguise' or even a 'denial'), intended to prevent the thanatic wish from surfacing to consciousness (and to the surface of the text). Predictably, this process of denial or repression is only partially successful, because, to use the formulation of literary semiotician Michael Riffaterre,

As the matrix is repressed, the displacement produces variants all through the text, just as suppressed symptoms break out somewhere else in the body.<sup>32</sup>

No wonder, then, that throughout the text candles are often lit before studying the Tora (pp. 38, 75), and that the connection between Tora and light is openly discussed (in Hebrew there is also a play on words: "Torah-Orah," p. 116).

But to no avail. For all his hard work and outward enthusiasm the protagonist's endeavors remain largely unsuccessful. The few people he manages to gather around the rekindled light of the house of study are motivated by physical rather than spiritual needs; they come in to escape the bitter winter cold. One of them dreams — comments the narrator — about "an open(!) Paradise, where the righteous sit and study Tora. . . ." (p. 115). Gradually the rekindling ritual moves from the candles to the hearth (stove) and with this we move from the unequivocal image of the light (Tora is light) to the ambiguous image of "fire" — the perpetual fire of offering in the ancient Temple in Jerusalem (*Esh Tamid*, p. 163), but also the fires of Hell.<sup>33</sup> Soon a clear-cut distinction is made: The house of study is transfigured from a source of spiritual light to a source of physical warmth, and with the coming of spring it ceases to function altogether.

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children. Their reunion takes place only when his conflict is resolved, namely, when he resigns to the irreversibility of his "locked" existence.

(32) See Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 19.

(33) A detailed allusion to the fires of Hell figures in one of Agnon's central short tales, *A Whole Loaf*. As convincingly demonstrated by Abraham Holtz, the fire imagery of this story stems from the opposition between the valorized fire of Tora (hence of Sabbath) and the punitive fire of Hell, which is described in the Zohar. Curiously enough, this imagery was introduced into *A Whole Loaf* only in its second version, which was published in 1940, shortly after the publication of our novel. Cf. A Holtz, "Studies in S.Y. Agnon's 'Pat Šlema'," *Hasifrut/Literature*, vol. III, no. 2 (November, 1971) 295-311.

A similar failure awaits the protagonist on the personal level. We have already seen that his key is now used only for locking, and finally he closes both his book and the house of study (pp. 242, 244). There is no doubt now: The lost key has not been found and the way to a closed and secure fetal existence is locked forever. The prediction of the mythic dream ("the vault split and I emerged," p. 34) has not materialized in the plot of the narrator; his new key did not bring new life, nor did it effect a new opening.

Nevertheless, the realization of a "locked" reality is not easily acceptable. Before reaching this stage, the narrator experiments with another substitute — the "opening" (= doorway, entrance) of the Gordonia club.<sup>34</sup> But he is disappointed here too: "When I reached the house of the group, I could not find the opening, and when I found the opening, I did not find the steps by which to go up" (p. 243). Although this failure is realistically rationalized ("Later I heard that the Revisionists had dragged away the steps and thrown them into the river"), its semiotic significance is inescapable. This incident is bracketed by a dialogue which the narrator carries on with his shadow. Since there is a long literary tradition of considering (or using) such a dialogue as a symbol or metaphor of a split personality or an internal conflict, it is plausible to interpret these dialogues as the objectification of the bi-polar tension signified by the key. That this is indeed the case is evidenced by the closure of the episode, the dialogue with the shadow ends with a playful "jingling" of the *two* keys (of the house of study and of the hotel) and this leads to the unavoidable result: "I *stuck* the key in the lock, but it did not open" (p. 245). This terse statement clearly contradicts the child's wish as told in the locksmith episode: "Along comes a child from school, puts his hand in his pocket, takes out a key, *sticks* the key into the lock and twists it this way and that — and immediately the whole house is open before him" (p. 98).<sup>35</sup> The contrast is obvious: Present reality negates not only

(34) "Gordonia" was a Zionist (secular) organization (named after the Zionist leader A.D. Gordon), whose members prepared themselves for immigration to the Land of Israel by training in agriculture. In the novel, this group's enterprise functions as a counterbalance to the protagonist's diaspora-oriented line of action. The protagonist's attitude towards them is quite ambivalent, moving from admiration to reproach (of their secularism). The Revisionists were a rival (more activist) Zionist group.

(35) Since the verbal link between these two utterances, which are textually quite removed from each other (pp. 98, 245), is the unusual use of the verb *n.'z.* for "inserting" the key (it literally means 'stick' or 'thrust'), a word on the "sexual" connotations of the key-motif is in order. Even the most superficial familiarity with "Freudian" symbolism will suffice to recognize the obviousness of the psychoanalytic meaning spelled out by the detailed description of the child's wishes (see fn. 23). The 'box', the 'house', the 'room' — are all firmly established symbols of female genitalia (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, Ch. vi):

childhood dreams but even expectations expressed in the exposition of the novel; while then (p. 7) the door opened without a key, now it does not open even with the key; “the master,” it seems, “does not know how to open. . . .” (p. 245).

What is of utmost significance here is the fact that the negative function of the key (the “locker”) seems to accompany the narrator’s process of withdrawal and soul-searching. As we near the end of the novel the key loses its referential and functional significance and becomes a personal token. In one of the last visits to the house of study the key-motif disappears altogether and only a verbal memorandum is gleaned from the double negation describing the desolation: “For months the prayerbook had *not* been *opened* and no prayer had risen from it, and the doors of the Ark had *not* been *opened* . . .” (p. 439). The added comment, “except by the dead who come to the Beit Midrash,” attests to the fact that the “pre-life” wish of the narrator (the regression to fetal existence) has nearly materialized here in the “post-life” existence of the house of study. This journey to the brink of death compels the narrator to face himself (Ch. 72: “Between me and myself”). He finds out that the process of locking and of being locked out is not reversible — not on the national-collective level nor on the personal level. Furthermore, escaping this process is just as impossible; the holiness and wholeness of the mythical world is not recapturable and no key is going to “open” it again. The key (the “opener”) is replaced now by the key-hole (in Hebrew: *hor-haman<sup>ul</sup>* ‘the lock-hole’) through which the protagonist peeps in order to see his desired world before parting: “I stood in front of the door of the Beit Midrash and looked through the key-hole. The space of the Beit Midrash shrank within the ball of this man’s eye, and a shining, clarified light shone from it” (p. 463). This shining light — the pre-natal candle or the stored light of after-life — is an out-of-reach ideal, a locked-up existence (or perhaps a state of mind), one that could only be observed from the outside. Furthermore, this partition between “man’s eye” and an idyllic-ideal world is reminiscent, in both theme and image, of Plato’s famous allegory of the cave. However, even here Agnon “plays” with the relational makeup of this imputed model and turns it

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“The question of whether they are ‘open’ or ‘locked’ will be readily understood in this connection,” says Freud, and then adds: “There is no need to be explicit as to the sort of key that will unlock the room.” (*The Basic Writings*, tr. A.A. Brill, The Modern Library: 1938, p. 372). Agnon, on the other hand, seems to be so extremely explicit in his use of dream symbolism, that he almost challenges the reader to go beyond the obvious in his search for an integrating reading; and this is indeed what we attempted to do in the present interpretation.

inside out. It is not man who is locked inside, thereby deprived of direct contact with the “ideal” sunny light on the outside; here the shining light is locked in (*ganuz* ‘hidden, stored away’ in the traditional Hebrew myth), and man is abandoned to the light-less outdoors. This inversion summarizes the narrator’s unfulfilled wish to withdraw from the world and escape inside.

There is only one more illusion left, for the narrator as well as for the reader: Perhaps this ideal world is locked up just because the authentic key has been lost; but once this key is found. . . . Well, this very key does turn up in the Land of Israel yet its last adventure seems to cap the key irony of the novel. The narrator puts it in a box which he then locks up. Only if we remember the “box” that the narrator-as-child longed so much to open, will we fully appreciate the final irony: “I went into my house, hid the key away in the box and *locked the box* on the outside . . .” (p. 476). Nevertheless, Agnon does not allow his protagonist to express his despair freely. The tragic sense of finality which in fact underlies the last episode in the key subplot is muted by the allusion to the myth that “the synagogues and houses of study of the diaspora are destined to be established in the Land of Israel” (p. 471; cf. pp. 472, 476). It is the reiteration of this homily that prompts a “hopeful” critical reading of the closure of the novel: “. . . the life of the Tora, as represented by the *beit midrash* and its ponderous key, is no longer viable in *Shibush* [his European hometown], but only in *Eretz Yisrael* [the Land of Israel].”<sup>36</sup> This reading is further reinforced by the birth of a baby (the only one in the story) towards the end of the novel, and particularly by the fact that he now “holds” the key to the house of study (Ch. 76).<sup>37</sup>

Unfortunately, this optimism is not borne out by a careful textual perusal. Agnon does *not* resolve the indeterminant air of his novel to the very end: he heralds the future in the figure of the new-born baby, but equips him with a substitute key (a “locker”, rather than an “opener”); he miraculously produces the authentic key in the land of the future, then prudently stores it away because “the early craftsmen used to make their keys too big and heavy for the measure of our hearts” (p. 472). Thus authenticity is locked up by a *third* key, which is twice removed from the original, a pale reflection of its “brass and iron” forefather. Yet this is the only one the protagonist is capable of bearing, for the authentic one “was too heavy for my heart to bear” (*ibid.*). This is a rather dubious affirmation of the Zionist solution, as well as an indirect personal

(36) See Band, p. 308.

(37) *Ibid.*, p. 301.

indictment. In fact, one could see in this ambivalence concerning modern Jewish socio-cultural processes a repressed precursor of Agnon's direct critique expressed in his later story *Kisuy ha-Dam* [Covering of the Blood], which was only posthumously published.<sup>38</sup>

More complex is the nature of the protagonist's self-criticism, which touches upon an aspect of the narration not treated in the present study. The protagonist being a writer by profession, the dilemmas of writing and specifically of being a *Jewish* writer of (secular) *fiction*, often recur in the novel. In view of other Platonic motifs we have noticed, it could be suggested that the triad of keys corresponds to Plato's three planes of creation: the authentic "ideal" one made by the "early craftsman" (namely, the Tora); the locksmith's imitation of this key (namely, man's handmade world); and finally, the narrator's "light-weight" key (his fiction). Thus, the protagonist's expression of dissatisfaction with his craft can be traced back to his sense of guilt for relinquishing the direct study of *the* source, the Tora, and for replacing it by the "imitation of imitation," his narrative art.

No wonder, then, that it is precisely this novel, which comes closest to Agnon's autobiography *qua* fiction-writer, that ends on a note of "locking"; at the same time, the option of "re-opening" is prudently relegated to the unknown extra-literary future, awaiting both writer and reader beyond the boundaries of the text.<sup>39</sup>

(38) Cf. Gershon Shaked, "Kisuy ha-Dam' as Agnon's Social Testament" (Hebrew), *Moznayim* 45:1 (June 1977) 3–11. Shaked rightly treats the story as a belated (and tragic) epilogue of *A Guest for the Night*. Cf. also Hochman, pp. 120–121, and esp. p. 134: "A Guest for the Night (1939) intimates the limits of Zionism; *Yesteryear* (1945) spells them out."

(39) A preliminary version of this essay appeared in *HaSifrut* 32 (July 1983) 148–154 (Hebrew).