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Agnon and Appelfeld

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THE PLACE OF AGNON, the man and the author, in the writing career of Aharon Appelfeld is still a conundrum for serious students of Appelfeld's writing. It has recently been documented in an article by Dan Laor (I too have dealt with this phenomenon tangentially several years ago in an article subtitled: "The Paradox of the Missing Intertext" [*Mikan* 5 (2005): 9–15]). At the end of his article, after analyzing six instances where Appelfeld refers to Agnon, Laor sums up this relationship as one of *hashbra'ab* (inspiration) rather than *hashpa'ab* (influence), two terms that are explained in note 26: "*Hashbra'ab* is like the opening of a door or gate, that awakens and liberates a fragment of *dimayon* (imagination) in the author, while *hashpa'ab* (influence) relates to the materials that are absorbed within the work of art and color its character and style."¹ Unwittingly, perhaps, Laor follows a critical tradition in Israeli literature that tends to divorce Appelfeld's writing from the mainstream. The literary achievement of Aharon Appelfeld, however, is so prominent that one cannot write the history of Israeli literature without it, though there is a tendency in some quarters to do so. I would argue that severing Appelfeld from the overwhelming literary presence of Agnon contributes to this distortion.

We can find this severing starkly summarized in an interview Yigal Schwartz conducted with Appelfeld in 1991 (*Kol ba-'ir*). At one point Schwartz tells Appelfeld: "This reminds me that you once told me that from Agnon you learned everything and nothing. (*Ha-kol. Ve-lo kelum. Everything. And Nothing.*) In saying "everything" did you mean the permission to look back toward the lost Jewish existence?" To this Appelfeld answered: "In this matter Agnon was truly a great guide, but I couldn't

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1. Dan Laor, "Agnon, Appelfeld, ve-ha-mitus ha-yehudi," in Laor, *Ha-ma'avak 'al ba-zikaron* (Tel Aviv, 2009), 311–26.

follow in his footsteps. He came with great childhood knowledge, he came with much information, he came directly from the Jewish street. I didn't come from this; I had to build this." *Ha-kol. Ve-lo kelum*, this seemingly paradoxical statement, everything and nothing, calls for investigation and it is to the diffusing of this paradox that I dedicate this essay. I will argue that the term *lo kelum* could not apply to the entire corpus of Agnon's writing, or even to what was available in 1953, but only to those stories set in a specific setting employing the style of the pious Jewish tale with its rabbinically inflected Hebrew.

A proper understanding of these passages presented by Laor, and even more so the complicated recent (2009) quasi autobiographic novel of Appelfeld's, *Ha-ish she-lo pasak lisbon* (The man who would never stop sleeping), published after Laor's article and in which Agnon's writings also appear, requires three premises:

1. All of the documents written by Appelfeld over the years are an integral part of his literary oeuvre, and should therefore be analyzed with the same scrupulousness as all his fictions. We have, to my knowledge, no evidence from any other source, including Agnon. Most of Appelfeld's statements about Agnon are from the latter part of the twentieth century, over thirty years after his first encounters with Agnon's prose, though there is one newspaper response piece from 1963, the year after Appelfeld published his first book *'Ashan* (Smoke).

2. Throughout his writing career Appelfeld has been a self-aware, contemplative writer, always meditating upon the special phenomena of his own personal experience and his writing. The introductory chapter of *Sipur hayim* (The story of a life), with its meditation on the difference between *zikaron* (memory) and *dimayon* (imagination), is symptomatic. In it he can say: "Memory and imagination dwell at times in one basket." The retrieval or manipulation of memory is an obsession and a formative stratagem. It is also a heroic act involving much pain.

3. Reference to Agnon in Appelfeld's writing should be read in its context since it is invariably associated with Appelfeld's acceptance of his European past and rejection of the social demands for assimilation into the Sabra culture of the Yishuv or the State of Israel. By Sabra culture I refer to something very specific as described by Oz Almog.²

The crucial years for our consideration of this problem are 1946–55, the years between Appelfeld's arrival in the pre-State Yishuv and his graduation from the Hebrew University. While exact dates are hard to come by, we can divide that period into four sections. In 1946–47 he was

2. Oz Almog: *The Sabra: The Creation of the New Jew* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000).

in various institutions of *'aliyat ha-no'ar*, where he began to learn Hebrew intensively. German was his native language in Czernowitz, but during and shortly after the war he learned some Yiddish, Ruthenian, and Italian. From 1948 to 1949 he was mostly in the Agricultural School established by Rachel Yannait Ben Zvi in Talpiot or in a similar institution in Nahalal. He often recalled seeing Agnon visiting the school in Talpiot. Apparently during this period he began to attempt to write in Hebrew, first poetry. During the next two years, 1950–51, he did his military service, and though these were recalled, on the whole, as desolate years, he did succeed in publishing his first poem in 1952. From 1953 through 1955 he enjoyed productive, liberating years at the Hebrew University, where he was encouraged in his study of Yiddish, and the world it reflected, by his professor Dov Sadan and by the Yiddish writer Leib Rochman. According to recollections published in *Sipur hayim*, he visited Agnon frequently during those years. During Appelfeld's university years, Agnon was widely hailed by the professors he most admired, Sadan and Scholem, for instance, as the greatest Jewish writer of the generation. From that period on, Appelfeld established his home in Jerusalem, thus recuperating the stability of place he lost in the fall of 1941 when he was driven into the ghetto of Czernowitz.

Appelfeld's struggle to become a Hebrew author involved not only learning the language, beginning in late 1945 or early 1946, but also confronting the prevalent ideology of the various Zionist organizations and individuals who fostered and "represented" Hebrew. For them, Yiddish was an anathema, the refugee youth had to be Hebraized and, in a sense, Sabraized. Appelfeld understood this cultural situation and has written about it repeatedly—often bitterly; this intellectual attempt to undo the trauma of the Holocaust by ironically erasing the language and ethos of the victims and replacing it with an assertive Hebrew actually traumatized him by forcing him to erase, to forget, to repress what he remembered of his past, of his home and parents. Forgetting and recuperating memory are motifs that recur pervasively throughout Appelfeld's fictions and essays.

A young man setting out to write Hebrew fiction in the early days of the State of Israel had a variety of models to choose from, but they fell into two streams. To understand this situation, we should avail ourselves of a synchronic perspective of Israeli literature, asking what works were being published at the same time. Too often, we lose track of what was really going on in the early years of Israel precisely because of our interest in the creativity of the new State of Israel as exemplified by its younger Sabra writers. But any solid historiographic approach must take into

account all of the writing published in this period, roughly between 1948 and 1955. We can divide this varied prose publication record into two main groups: the style of such popular young Sabra writers as Moshe Shamir of *Hu' balakh ba-sadot* (He walked in the fields) (1948) or S. Yizhar, particularly of *Khirket khiz'eh* (1950); and the style of older writers like Agnon and Hazaz, men still at the peak of the powers.

While Hazaz never seemed to interest Appelfeld, Agnon was clearly the great Hebrew author of those days. In 1950 he published a revised version of *Oreah nata la-lun* (A stranger for the night), for which he was awarded the Bialik Prize. In 1951 he published *Samukh ve-nir'eh* (Close and visible), which contained the "Kafkaesque" stories of "Sefer ha-ma'asim." In 1952 he published both a revised version of *Temol shilshom* (Only yesterday) and *'Ad hena* (Up to now), which contained the novella "'Ad hena" and such varied classics as "Tehilah," "Shevu'at emunim," and "'Ido ve-'Enam." And in 1953 he published the second edition of his collected works, all seven volumes. A young, ambitious author in Israel in the early 1950s would certainly be aware of the overwhelming stature and versatility of Agnon, often proposed for the Nobel Prize by Israeli critics. Agnon was lionized in the circles of European-born professors such as Buber, Bergmann, Scholem, and Sadan, whom Appelfeld mentions repeatedly in his essays and interviews. If the leading author of Israel could write about non-Sabra experiences, so could Aharon Appelfeld.

With these contexts in mind, we can turn to what Appelfeld himself wrote about Agnon. His first brief article in *Masa* in 1964 makes three assertions: (1) Agnon inspired him to return to the locale of his childhood since that is what informs and shapes one's existence throughout life. (2) Agnon reintroduced him to "the Jewish myth," that is, the totality of Jewish lived experience which sustains one's identity. (3) Agnon legitimates the expansion of perspective beyond the constrictions of Eretz Yisrael and relatively current events. In *Masot be-guf rishon* (Essays in the first person) of 1979 Appelfeld recalls the impression that the original reading of Agnon's *Oreah nata la-lun* (A guest for a night) made upon him, the great novel lamenting the disintegration of Galician Jewry after World War I, which Appelfeld, like others, calls "Sefer ha-Shoah lifne ha-Shoah." (The book of the Shoah before the Shoah). The essay in *Masot be-guf rishon* titled, "Ha-gar'in" (The kernel) attempts to describe how certain powerful Hebrew authors—Agnon, Brenner, Gnessin, and Fogel—analyzed in their fictions the disintegration of the kernel of Judaism in their days that affected the Jewish intelligentsia. This internal disintegration was followed by the Holocaust. While Appelfeld is careful to

avoid attributing the Holocaust to the destruction of the kernel in the minds of the middle-class intelligentsia, he cannot escape noting, here and elsewhere, the sequence of destructive events in Jewish history. He identifies here closely with Agnon, since the novel *Oreah nata la-lun* describes the desolation of Galician Jewry, and Galicia was geographically close to Bukovina, where Appelfeld was born and reared. This novel and other stories situated in the author's hometown impress upon Appelfeld the importance for a writer to have a hometown to inhabit in his imagination and his fictions. In 1994–95 Appelfeld gave a course at the Hebrew University devoted to the writing of Agnon and Fogel. The transcripts of those lectures would, I believe, strongly support my contentions.

Many of these same themes are repeated in *Sipur hayim* (1999), and in the autobiographical novel *Ha-ish shelo pasak lisbon* (2009). At two instances in the latter book, the hero, Erwin/Aharon, expresses his amazement at the seductive beauty of two Agnon passages, the first the opening to *Biḏmi yameha* (In the midst of her days; chapter 49) and the second, the opening of *Tehilah* (chapter 56) The cadences of *Biḏmi yameha* overwhelmed him with their calmness. The tone of *Tehilah* seduced him with its melody. Commenting on the latter, he says: "I knew that this enchanted melody was not mine. The storms that rocked me destroyed my tranquility. It is impossible to write about the ghetto, the hiding places, and the forest with this composure." But, we must object, this is not always true in the many volumes of Agnon's oeuvre. If one peruses even the seven volumes of the 1953 edition, one finds much material that does not evoke the world of the pious Jews of Galicia. If one merely looks at the volume in which "Tehilah" was first collected, *Ad hena* of 1952, one finds in addition to the novella "'Ad hena" such wondrous stories as "'Im kenisat ha-yom" (At nightfall) and "Laila min ha-lelot" (One of the nights), both of which could have been included in the "Kafkaesque" "Sefer ha-ma'asim" published a year earlier, in 1951, let alone such classics as "Shevu'at emunim" and "'Ido ve-'Inam."

In his recent book on Appelfeld, *Ma'amin beli kenesiyah* (Believer without a church) (2009), Yigal Schwartz includes a brilliant chapter in which he compares two remarkable passages from Appelfeld: the third chapter of *Sipur hayim* and the opening chapter of *Tor ha-pela'ot* (The age of wonders), both describing nightmarish night trips on a train somewhere in Eastern Europe. Strangely absent from this ingenious analysis is the unmistakable echo from Agnon's "Sefer ha-ma'asim."

Any discussion of the Agnon-Appelfeld nexus must end with a reference to chapter 26 of *Sipur hayim* (1999), which is devoted to Appelfeld's

account of his last visit to Agnon several months before the latter's death in 1970. In an opening narrative gambit, he tells us: "Several months before Agnon's death I was passing by his house in Talpiot. One window was open and music burst forth from it. I felt something was wrong. I walked about near the window, but did not dare knock on the door." When he does finally knock, Agnon opens the door, invites him in, and prepares coffee.

The rest of the chapter is framed as the last visit of the student with his master: "I loved Agnon's writing since I first became acquainted with him. He was my guide in the great confusion in which I was mired at the beginning of my way." And though their conversations had often been strained over the years because of Agnon's habitual irony, that evening Agnon was different, and he plied Appelfeld with simple questions about his wartime experiences, the forests, and how he survived in them.

This was Agnon without himself. That evening he sought to tell me what my parents had not told me, and what I was prevented from hearing because of the war, and it was as if he said to me: "Every writer must have his own city, his own river, his own streets, but instead of learning from them, you learned from the forests" . . . That evening there stood before me an old man . . . who knew . . . that what would endure for a long time would be that voice which had no ambiguity or cleverness or irony, but the voice he inherited from his ancestors, the voice of "Bidmi yameha" of "Tehila" and "Oreaḥ nata lalun" . . . That evening he spoke to me in the tone of his ancestors, a fragment of which my ear had absorbed from my grandparents in the Carpathian mountains . . . It was late and I sought to go. But Agnon delayed me and said: "Stay, why are you hurrying?" . . . And he revealed to me that evening that he had been thinking about his parents in recent months. If he now had the time, he would go back and tell about them in an entirely different way . . . But now writing is difficult for him . . . And thus I left him. My heart told me that I would not see him again, and the heart knew what it guessed.

The sensitive reader of this passage must realize that he has just read a chapter in an Appelfeld novel in which Agnon is now a character and in which one hears echoes of an Agnon story. This chapter invites us to revisit the Agnon-Appelfeld nexus, thus reopening a rich vein in Appelfeld research. Further research in this area will certainly do much to establish Appelfeld's oeuvre as an integral part of Israeli literature, no more the writing of an outlier than that of Agnon.