

Red, Black, Blond and Olive: Studies in Four Civilizations: Zuñi, Haiti, Soviet Russia, Israel

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W. H. ALLEN (LONDON 1956)

ISRAEL (1954)

The Fiction of S. Y. Agnón, pp. 443-451

The Fiction of S. Y. Agnón: This obsolete Galician world, preserved in Meá Shearím, has been brilliantly presented in literature by a man of unquestionable genius, Shmuél Yoséf Agnón, who today resides in Jerusalem and occupies, at sixty-six, the undisputed position of foremost living Hebrew writer. I do not hesitate to speak of his genius, though I am unable to read him in Hebrew and have had access only to those of his works that have been translated into English -- the novel called *The Bridal Canopy*, out of print but obtainable through Behrman House, New York; a long short story called *In the Heart of the Seas*, which is one of the volumes of the Schocken Library; and a shorter piece called *Chemdat*, in the autumn, 1952, issue of the Jerusalem periodical *Israel Argosy*. (A book called *Days of Awe*, a treasury of legends and traditions connected with the Jewish high holidays, also published by Schocken, is of less interest to non-Jewish readers.) In Israel, people complain that these versions do nothing like justice to Agnón's remarkable style, but the two books, at any rate, that have been translated by I. M. Lask certainly read very well, and even in the alien medium it is evident that the texture of the writing is distinguished, poetic and strongly personal.

Since I know nothing save at second-hand of the very considerable literature in Hebrew that has come out of Central Europe, Russia and Palestine in the course of the last century and this, I cannot speak of Agnón's relation to other Hebrew writers. But one is struck at once, in reading him, by similarities to two other Jewish artists -- Marc Chagall and Franz Kafka, both born, like Agnón, in the eighties. The picture of Jewish life in Agnón is, as in their cases, completely different from any kind of "genre" work that is derived from nineteenth-century naturalism. Involved in this picture, to be sure, is a definite local -setting of domestic interiors and taverns, poultry yards and village crafts -- long journeys in wagons on country roads, with the landlords looming remotely as menaces more often than patrons, the Gentiles, in general ("forgive me for mentioning them"), present only, as it were, offstage, to be shunned when they parade their "images" out-of-doors in religious processions. (The religion of the Gentiles is so little understood even by the masters of Talmudic learning that the symbolic Christian fishes on tombstones are taken as indicating the graves of Jewish descendants of Jonah.) But far more important than any of this are the rituals of the Jewish holidays, the marriage and funeral ceremonies, the devotions of the synagogue and the pursuits of the yeshiva, House of Study, where young and old pore over the Talmud, memorizing pages, disputing in form. It is these that make the frame on which everything rests -- a life of the spirit that requires concentration and is always more or less intellectual, a constant solicitude as to the attitude toward one of God, who is usually called the Name and remains rather impersonal as well as invisible, since He does not, as in Christianity, figure as the Heavenly Father of a parthuman intercessor, yet is somehow, in His infinite wisdom, arranging and projecting everything.

The humor and the pathos of Agnón -- and he is truly a master of both -- result from the spectacle of men and women living in a homely environment, which has been searchingly observed by the author but is only implied by his delicate art, yet *imagining* in terms of a universe that has no real locale or date except possibly in the hoped-for return to that distant idealized Israel toward which

the most pious among them have never ceased to yearn. The whole content of Agnón's work -- at least, in those of his stories I know -- is the poetry and irony of this situation. It is, I fear, not very impressive merely to read *about* Agnón; the mixture of Galician village life with esoteric rabbinical learning may well not appear enchanting. And yet Agnón makes it so. He has partly the same sort of charm as Chagall, the charm of a peasant world -- though these Jews are not really peasants -- both enlivened and veiled by folklore, in which the domestic animals become almost the equals of men, and visions of husbands or brides seem, in broad day, to float in the heavens. The dream of the boy in Chemdat, in which he sees his unloving stepmother sitting in the top of a tree and whistling like a bee-eater, is very much in the vein of Chagall, as is such an animal parable as that in *The Bridal Canopy* by which one of the wagoner's horses, Ivory, demonstrates to his companion, Peacock, that it would be wise not to kick at the yelping dogs of the unfriendly Gentile foresters: "There was a cock that lived with a Jew" and who became very much depressed from brooding on the Eve of Atonement, which requires, as he has learned from the prayer book, the taking of a cock by the worshipper and whirling it about his head, with the words "This cock shall go to death," and then handing it over to the slaughterer. He communicates his anxiety to a mouse, and, as the upshot of a conversation in which a good deal of Scripture has been quoted by both, the mouse makes an offer to help him. "Choicest of Poultry," he says, "the days of the Night Prayers of Penitence that precede the New Year do approach, when men arise betimes to the synagogues; I shall go to eat up the prayer book so that not so much as a single letter shall be left." Says the cock, "For thy salvation have I hoped, O Lord!" When the family of his owner have left the house, the mouse is as good as his word and comes out to eat the prayer book, but "thereupon the cat on the watch fell upon him and consumed him." And when Peacock heard this story, "be kept his legs out of the argument and never interfered with what wasn't his own affair."

But in Agnón you have also the moral, the theological element that is characteristic of Kafka. Kafka, born in Prague in the eighties and the son of a wholesale merchant, was one generation removed from the villages to which his father sold his wares, and he did not study Hebrew until late in life, but he derived from his mother's family a tradition of piety and learning. Though five years older than Agnón, he represents a later, more "assimilated" phase of the same Judaic culture, and it is only by reading Agnón that you come to see how deeply Judaic the work of Kafka is. (I am told that the most recent work of Agnón is even closer to Kafka.) Though in Kafka you do not get explicitly the background of Talmud and ghetto, the typical hero of Kafka, like the typical hero of Agnón, is a man who is trying to survive in an alien, often unsympathetic and only partly comprehensible world, and who is bent on maintaining or discovering a technique that will make it possible for him to live in it on good terms with the Name.

The difference between Agnón and Kafka is that Reb Judel of *The Bridal Canopy*, though equally at cross-purposes with the larger social community and even with the common conditions of life, is diverted only momentarily from the path to salvation he has taken, the path of study and prayer, whereas Kafka's all but anonymous "K.," who is never given a Jewish origin, cannot be sure of anything, and confuses, as Reb Judel would never do, his duty to an imperfectly accessible God with his duty to established society. In Kafka, the situation of the Jew in Central Europe makes connections, as Agnón does not, with a more general social situation, and he becomes the moralist and poet -- or, better, perhaps the poet of moral uncertainty -- of a baffling historical moment. It is difficult to see how Agnón can ever have Kafka's audience. Yet, inside his traditional Jewish world, the human interest of Agnón's fiction is much wider and warmer than Kafka's. You have not only Reb Judel's relation to the Name; you have also the importunate problems of his family and his neighbors -- the good-for-nothing and morally callous cantor who gets drunk on the Day of

Atonement yet can make the congregation weep; the poor young man who has slept for years on a bench of the synagogue, using his pants for a pillow, and who, finally becoming betrothed to the daughter of a well-to-do tax collector, looks forward with painful longing to the comforts of the bridal bed, but who, lifting his foot to get into it, on a prenuptial visit to his father-in-law's house, hears the crack of the whip of the coach in which his prospective bride is running away with a Gentile. You have the arrogant and choleric official the whole structure of whose life is shaken by losing his pet cat; the sterile wife, loved by her husband, whom the persistent campaign of his relatives compels him at last to divorce; the gentle daughters of the Hassid Reb Judel himself, who, dowryless, pay the price for their father's relentless piety. These personal situations -- by which the ideals of Judaism are shown as implicated with human nature, if not quite, perhaps, tied down to earth -- are always treated by Agnón with sympathy. In Kafka, the irony of the French Flaubert has tintured with a certain contempt the abstraction of Jewish analysis. The irony of Agnón is all-pervasive, too; he is never sentimental, still less melodramatic. But it may be a manifestation of the spirit of the Hassidic sect, who particularly cultivated cheerfulness and whose exploits Agnón loves to celebrate -- Agnón never blights his characters, and he cannot resist a miracle. Reb Israel Solomon's cat will be found; the wife whom her husband is divorcing will faint, in the first sign of pregnancy, when he has taken her before the rabbi; the daughters of Reb Judel will discover a buried treasure in the moment when all seems lost. In the story called *In the Heart of the Seas*, in which a group of Hassidim actually sail to Palestine, the element of the miraculous is carried even further, yet it never offends as incongruous, since it passes into the narrative as something it is perfectly natural to add to the memory, the legend-something, indeed, that is necessary in order to justify the Jews and the ways of the most Holy and Blessed to His People. So a precise and poetic notation -- "The day gradually faded. The East turned silver and a rising mist chilled the ground" -- may merge in the smoothest way with a vision that is apocalyptic, and episodes built up solidly may finish with the suddenness of a folk tale. Agnón is an accomplished storyteller with a technique of his own of suspense and surprise -- and slip without transition to something else.

Agnón is a classic; he is taught in schools; he has been mentioned for the Nobel Prize. One is quite ready to accept him as a true representative of that great line of Jewish writers that begins with the authors of Genesis. But one feels that he comes at the end of a culture. He himself is evidently as saturated with the learning of the Bible, the Talmud, the Cabala, and all the rest as one of his own Hassidim, yet -- so far as I have read it, again -- there is always an element of pastiche in his work. The larding of literature with ancient quotations has long been a feature of Hebrew writing, and the poetry of the eleventh-century *Jebúda Halévi* seems almost as much put together from the Bible as a medieval cento from Virgil; but isn't there, after all, a great difference between the attitudes toward the passages they quote of Agnón and of *Jebúda Halévi*? It was said to me in Israel by an admirer of Agnón that he is marvelously noncommittal -- that he never gives it away that he does not see his people in their own terms, that he does not believe as they do. And this made me aware that his public must apprehend Agnón somewhat differently from the reader with no Jewish background. It may be possible for such a reader to misunderstand Agnón's humor. These stories seem at first to belong to the category of the false-naive. One assumes that they could not have been written by a man who took Judaism seriously in the sense that his Hassidic heroes do. Yet even a slight acquaintance with the Talmud will make us realize from how far back the elements of fantasy and irony have been intimately associated, in literature, with the strictest Jewish religion. Mr. Michael L. Rodkinson, the translator of the Talmud into English, speaks of "the vein of satire or humor that runs through" this variegated work, so difficult for the Gentile to get the hang of. And one remembers Renan's theory that the Book of Jonah was a work of humor, a satire on the prophets of the Exile, so much in love with their predicted dooms that they were furious when these were

averted. It may be that this Jewish self-mockery, tragic in its implications, this drollery that is also moral, goes back to the first great defeat at the hands of the Babylonians, and the impotence for action, the minority status, that this for a time imposed. It is, in any case, very old, the irony which still gives its accent to Agnón and to the Yiddish humorists. For the Jew, the fundamental irony is that God should have made him promises of special protection and favor, and then have allowed him to suffer a succession of crushing disasters. There is a story of a medieval rabbi who, at a time of savage persecution, made a public confession of sins that he would have been quite incapable of committing, in order to save face for God. Is he a comic or a tragic figure? The non-Jew must be on his guard against failing to appreciate how deep the Jewish irony goes, and not merely in terms, thus, of Jewish tradition, but also -- since our ideals at moments, must seem to fail us all -- in experience of human life.

Yet, even allowing for this, is not Agnón's work a monument to a culture that has lost much of its reality, that can no longer/be accepted as valid? One of his other two long novels, I understand, deals with the Polish-Jewish world in the period after the First World War, when it was already disintegrating, and the other with the second immigration to Palestine, at the beginning of the present century. It all sounds rather elegiac, and I learn from Mr. Simon Halkin's book, *Modern Hebrew Literature*, that a nostalgia for the life of the ghetto has become an important motif in the writing of Agnón's generation. On the other hand, not quite all Israelis share the general taste for Agnón. I met a few who did not approve of him. These were young people, impatient of the synagogue, who desired to get as far away as possible from Reb Judel, with his drug of study, in his closed-in precarious world.

I encountered a postscript to Agnón's world as I was coming from Meá Shearím one Sabbath. I had not been there before, and, although, consulting a map, I had identified the Abyssinian Church House by a colored nun who was gardening, I presently became confused by the convents and churches and schools of the many nationalities and religions, so uglily and grimly entangled in the great barricades of barbed wire that have not been removed since the Arab war. My objective, as a landmark, was Barclay's Bank. Stopping to examine my map, I caught the eye of a black-hatted, black-bearded, bespectacled little man standing all by himself in the sun on the other side of the street. He came over and addressed me in German. I asked him the way in English, and he walked along to show me. I noticed that he omitted the articles in English and asked him whether he was Russian. "Away back, perhaps," he said. "I don't know." He made a remark or two in clumsy Russian, and then explained that he came from Poland. I asked how he had learned English. "I took ten lessons," he said. How long had he been in Israel? "A year and three-quarters," he answered, "but it only seems a few months." I saw that he was happy to be there. He practiced some craft -- I don't remember what. As we went on, I got the impression that he was perhaps a bit off his head. At one point, he slipped into Yiddish -- "Do you speak a little Yiddish?" he asked. There were stories I did not understand: a tennis match, and then someone fell dead. But I got an impression of a dreadful experience that he had now at last put behind him and from which he had now ascended into a realm of freedom and peace. "I never had a quiet day in Poland," he said, in concluding these memoirs. When he had brought me to Barclay's Bank, we shook hands, and he beamed and went back.