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AGNON'S TALES OF MYSTERY AND IMAGINATION

I

S. Y. Agnon has achieved the rare distinction of the Nobel Prize; but he has achieved the even rarer distinction of having provoked in his own lifetime a quite impressive literature of criticism about his own work — almost all of it, of course, in Hebrew. Not only have his three major novels (*The Bridal Canopy*, *The Day Before Yesterday*, *A Guest for the Night*) attained the rank of classics of modern Hebrew prose, but whole books have been written about even single short tales, and critics have hotly debated the interpretation of individual passages. Perhaps only Kafka and T. S. Eliot among twentieth-century authors have generated the same degree of intense critical discussion. The reason for this may be in something that all these three writers have in common, namely, an impacted quality of meaning, an occult dimension. They all three stir ripples in the soul's depths, and invite us to speculate on the ultimate questions. They are, in the technical language of literary scholarship, metaphysical poets, in whom word-play, symbolism, and ideas combine to produce in the art-work a palpable spiritual tension, an unmistakable seriousness.

But here Agnon stands apart from the other serious poets and prose writers with whom he, in other respects, claims comparison. When reading him, it is possible to be oblivious, or almost oblivious, to the symbolism, to what I have termed the impacted quality of meaning. It is possible to read his tales — and thousands of people of all ages enjoy them thus — as simple fables, made up of anecdote, rambling reflections, and bits of out-of-

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the-way information culled from here and everywhere. He is in a way extraordinarily artless, extraordinarily unsophisticated. But this artlessness of Agnon is only of the surface. The real fact is that he is one of the subtlest of storytellers: his fables have behind them a complex hinterland of verbal suggestiveness, ambiguity, and metaphysical resource. The careful reader will suddenly be pulled up with the sense of some door being opened within the house, some echo, some mystery, some inward conflict disturbing the calmness and mildness of the surface.

A word or a phrase is thrown out and sinks into the mind's depths, sending out ever-widening ripples of meaning. Thus, in the novel *A Guest for the Night*, the period after the first World War is described:

When the sword of battle rested in the land, the people supposed in their error that the days of the Messiah had come about, and so the wife of Daniel Bach took her daughters and returned to her native town. But they did not know that the Messiah was still busy binding and loosening his wounds, and that the world had not yet returned to a state of health (Chapter VIII).

If the reader of this passage has had a traditional education, he will certainly recall Rashi's comment (quoting the Midrash) on Genesis xviii, 2, where Abraham is described as sitting at the door of his tent on the third day after his circumcision, "binding and loosening his wound." At first one may feel this use of rabbinic echo is merely a matter of stylistic color, but the more thoughtful reader will inevitably pursue its implications. Abraham's wounds are covenantal wounds, they are the signs of promise; not only that, but Abraham is about to be visited by three angels: his wounds are the herald of revelation. The passage from Rashi opens up a whole world of theological reference, a whole interpretation of history applicable to this tale. The sufferings of the war have scarred Europe and have left their mark on the *shtetl* where Daniel Bach lives; but there is also a kind of promise in the air: Daniel Bach's father, Reb Shlomo, is about to leave for Palestine where he will eventually be found cultivating his garden in Ramat Rachel. The history of this family is, in a way, covenant history. But this would be

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too simple an interpretation of the use made by Agnon of this particular rabbinic allusion. One is bound to note the profound irony of the context, the misery, the frustration, which causes Daniel Bach to abandon the road of piety and the simple faith of his fathers. This disillusionment is conveyed in the wording and, above all, in the bitter tone of Agnon's sentence:

But they did not know that the Messiah was still busy binding and loosening his wounds, and that the world had not yet returned to a state of health.

His use of rabbinic quotation is not unlike the ironic quotations from Spenser, Shakespeare, and Goldsmith which we note in Eliot's *Waste Land*. They highlight (among other things) the emptiness of the world which Eliot surveys, the absence in it of the charm and beauty of the past. Similarly, Agnon's use of biblical and rabbinic quotation often ironically underscores for us the relative absence in the world he describes of the piety and comfort of traditional faith.

If, therefore, all interpretation of Agnon's writings necessarily begins with his use of the language and symbolism of the Bible, his use of Midrash and Kabbalah, this does not mean that he is in any simple sense a religious novelist, much less an Orthodox novelist. We can say truthfully that Agnon's writings reveal more clearly perhaps than do any other series of present-day documents the crisis of modern Judaism, the tension and even the alienation of the modern Jew from his traditional way of life. Agnon is very far from confidently announcing the message of the written and unwritten Torah and making of that a simple affirmation of faith, so much so that some critics have been led to conclude that he is fundamentally a non-religious, even a secular writer!¹ On the other hand, he is undoubtedly concerned with the religious quest, with the life of the soul, with the meaning of Jewish history, and the dialogue between the Jew and his God. The religious issue arises in Agnon's work in a dialectical form, as an aspect of the clash between the generations — the generation of Daniel Bach and that of his pious father. The author mediates between them, holding these two conflicting positions together in a certain ironical perspective, and treating

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the past with a veneration and sympathy which falls short of absolute devotion. He looks back with nostalgia to the life of the *shtetl* in *The Day Before Yesterday*, and in such a story as *Tehillah*. But elsewhere — for instance in *The Simple Tale* (*Sippur Pashut*) — he reveals something of the decadence within the *shtetl* itself in the early part of the century. There is ugliness, meanness, and narrowness there, as well as grandeur and simplicity of soul. Agnon is profoundly attached to the past and to the pattern of Jewish life which it reveals, but Agnon's piety is very complicated: it is harshly streaked with realism and disillusionment.

Paradoxically enough, his most affirmative Jewish statement is often made in tales which have little or no overt Jewish message, and which are not located either in Palestine or in the traditional Jewish settings of Eastern Europe. One of his shorter tales, *The Doctor's Divorce*, tells of the life of a Jewish couple from Vienna. Dinah and the doctor she marries are modern, sophisticated, cultured folk with intellectual interests far removed from traditional Judaism. The tale relates their gradual estrangement from one another following the discovery (made actually before their marriage) of a moral lapse on the part of the young wife. The knowledge of this corrodes the thoughts and imagination of the doctor until the only solution left them is a divorce. The acute reader will sense a metaphysical dimension to this tale: the "divorce" is also the divorce between "Knesset Yisrael" and her divine Partner. The emptiness, the longing, the uneasiness of the characters has a meaning which transcends the immediate limits of the tale; it has a theological bearing. Dinah is the erring wife, the unhappy Israel, haunted by the past, by her sins. The doctor, apparently enlightened, modern, unbound by old-fashioned prejudices about the importance of virginity, becomes strangely obsessed by his wife's infidelity. Both are bound to the past by unbreakable bonds. But the bond of the past is no healthy bond; it is compulsive, wearying, fatal to health and joy; it cannot be thrown off:

And so we parted from one another, in the way a man and wife part outwardly. But in my heart, my friend, the smile on her lips is still

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locked up, and I see that blue-black in her eyes, as on the day I first saw her. Sometimes at night I sit up in bed like those patients she used to take care of, and I stretch out both hands and call out, 'Nurse, nurse, come to me.'²

On the surface of it, the tale is as far as possible from being an affirmation of the values of Judaism. The characters are almost completely "divorced" from Jewish tradition: the description of the *Chuppah*, for instance, is without any attractiveness — it takes place in the presence of a paid *minyán*, "miserable creatures who an hour or two ago were called for a funeral and now were summoned for my wedding." But at the symbolic level, this very "divorce" from Jewish values is of the substance of the tale. The alienation of the doctor from his wife symbolizes the alienation of the modern Jew, and in the pathos of the finale we sense the power of longing, the haunting desire for renewal, for a lost faith, which the story ultimately yields. But it is a defeated longing.

II

The key to Agnon's writing lies in this sense of the compulsive quality of the past: his characters are haunted by the past. They are contemporary figures, strangely laden with the weight of bygone days. This burden is not pleasant for them, but it is real. It is the condition of existence for the Jew. Such reflections are newly prompted by a reading of two of Agnon's finest short novels in the English translation of Mr. Walter Lever which has just been published.³ *Betrothed* (*Shevuat Emunim*) tells of Jaffa before the first World War, with its small but colorful community of traders, officials, intellectuals, and the occasional farmer. Dr. Jacob Rechnitz, a young scholar hailing from central Europe, teaches German and Latin in the local high school to the sons and daughters of the settlers. So far everything is straightforward and realistic, and we may be sure that Agnon here has drawn heavily on his own observations of the life of the period and of the locality which he knew so well. But there is a remoter, more occult dimension to the story: it is symbolized in the first place by Rechnitz's chosen hobby, that of

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collecting and classifying the seaweed that he finds on the beach. This interest, first kindled at the University, becomes for him a scientific passion. But he is a methodical scientist, a botanist of the sea, whose discoveries are published in the professional journals dealing with this curious specialty. Eventually his labors will be recognized, and he will be offered a professorship in an American university. But if the academic aspect of his profession is stressed, the romantic aspect is not lacking. He can say with Eliot's Prufrock,

I have heard the mermaids singing each to each. . .
We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown.

The mermaids are seven: six of them are young ladies of Jaffa, Rechnitz's older pupils who are in the habit of promenading with him on the beach talking of poetry and of things more mundane as well; the seventh and more mysterious maiden is Susan (Shoshana), the daughter of the consul Ehrlich from Rechnitz's home-town of Vienna. They have been known to Rechnitz from his earliest youth and now they are come to Jaffa on a visit after touring many parts of Africa and the East. The oath of undying love which binds Susan and Jacob together was first uttered beside the goldfish pool in her father's garden when they were both small children. Susan had once jumped into that pool and had emerged covered with seaweed like a veritable mermaid (p. 104). The oath is ratified on the beach at Jaffa amid the sound of the waves, whilst a solitary fisherman stands waist-deep in the water. Susan will finally win her beloved by means of a moonlight race along the shore with the other six maidens, and having run her race she will be crowned with a garland of dried seaweed taken from Rechnitz's desk. Here is the strange mingling of the quotidian and the mysterious which constitutes the essential quality of Agnon's fiction just as it is the essential quality of all great fictive art. The symbolic invades the everyday world, and the imagery of everyday gives substance and actuality to the world of symbols.

It is easy to see to what region of archetypal symbolism the sea, the seaweed, and the mermaids belong. They symbolize the

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past ages, the depths of our spiritual memory. The sea-symbolism takes us back to the origins of our life as individuals, as members of a nation, and as members of the human race. It signifies the attachment of Rechnitz and Susan to their common beginning and to the oath of eternal love and loyalty that they have sworn:

At the sound of the waves, at the sight of the limitless expanse of sea, Rechnitz closed his eyes. And now he saw his mother kneeling down before him. He was a small boy; she was threading a new tie round his collar, for it was the day Susan was born and he was invited to the Consul's house (p. 136).

Here the bond linking Jacob to Susan is taken back to the day she was born. It represents the weight of the past, its sweet inexorability. But sweet as the memory of his and Susan's youth is, it is also compounded with images of death (the death of her mother who also in a mysterious way is confused with his own mother) and with a sense of constraint and sadness. Upon Susan lies the shadow of disappointment and of melancholy far-off things. Moreover, she draws Jacob with her into the melancholy sphere of her own obsessive rootedness in the past. A supporting motif here, which picks out the connection of Susan with death and the past, is her interest in Egyptian mummies and in the stuffed animals made by the taxidermist at Ein Rogel:

"What was the name of the taxidermist at Ein Rogel?"

"His name was Ilyushin."

Susan opened her eyes. "That's it—Illusion."

(Mr. Lever has here brilliantly caught the play on words: in the original Hebrew the name was *Arzav* which Shoshana mishears as *akhzav*, i.e., disappointment.)

"And what has Ilyushin to do with us?" asked Jacob.

"Since you mentioned him, I wanted to know what he was called. Now that I know, you don't have to say any more about him. Cattle and wild beasts may enjoy a privilege granted to no man except the mummies in Egypt. Don't you smoke? I'll call a waiter to bring you

