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Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon (review)

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Greenberg; Carole Kessner on Marie Syrkin; Arthur Goren on Ben Halpern; Deborah Dash Moore on Trude Weiss-Rosemarin; Milton Konvitz on Morris Raphael Cohen and Horace Kallen; Stanley Chyet on Ludwig Lewisohn; Ira Eisenstein on Henry Hurwitz; Susanne Klingenstein on Marvin Lowenthal; Emanuel Goldsmith on Maurice Samuel; Milton Hindus on Charles Reznikoff; Rachel Feldhay Brenner on A. M. Klein; Jack J. Cohen on Mordecai Kaplan; Simon Noveck on Milton Steinberg; and David Dalin on Will Herberg.

The essays on the whole are elegantly written and informative biographically, and reflect really ripened thinking by the authors about their respective subjects. Some of the contributors have written prior books on their subjects and/or knew their subjects personally and intimately. Although most of the essays celebrate rather than criticize, their thoughtfulness, engaging style, and evocative admiration for the Jewish thinkers discussed make the book a pleasurable and, in many respects, insightful volume for anyone interested in Jewish culture in America between the '30s and '50s.

While one can quibble with the categorization of certain individuals—it is not clear, for example, why Cohen and Kallen were placed within the “Men of Letters” unit and not that of “Opinion Makers,” while one can more seriously question the representative selection here—most of the subjects are secular cultural Zionists or come out of Conservative Jewish orientations: were there no Reform or Orthodox Jewish intellectuals of note in this period?—nevertheless, one can still admire the end product. Among those essays that particularly stood out for their freshness, subtlety of interpretation, and penetrating critical perspectives, I especially commend those by Seltzer on Greenberg, Goren on Halpern, and Chyet on Lewisohn.

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Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon, by Nitza Ben-Dov. Brill's Series in Jewish Studies, Volume VII. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993. 167 pp. \$57.25.

Agnon's fascination with dreams and dream-like accounts has been known since his early years when, as a young boy, he began composing stories inspired by hasidic themes, among them that of the dance of death.

Undoubtedly, his development was also affected by the legacy of the likes of the master of Hebrew (and Yiddish) literature, Mendele Mocher Seforim, against whom he continued to write his fiction for years. It is out of these wells that Agnon drew inspiration in launching his tales which, while emerging from the roots cultivated by his predecessors, took Hebrew literature to new heights.

Nitza Ben-Dov's reading of a selection of Agnon's fiction focuses topically on the protagonists' dilemmas and repressed psychic world. In so doing, she indirectly demonstrates Agnon's leading role in pointing the way for today's Hebrew writers' preoccupation with the deeper layers of the psyche driving the modern hero. In more than one instance, Agnon's hero is shown struggling with a series of repressed sexual urges or personal fantasies which, when confronted by reality, come up short in realizing for him the Edenic life s/he has constructed in her/his imagination. So whether it be the protagonist of *Thus Far*, whose "cherchez la femme" is thwarted by his ambivalence, or Hirshl of *A Simple Story*, whose longing for Blume is forever blocked, the message Agnon shares with his reader is that in order to realize the ideal in this world, one must learn to accept the sobering message that half a loaf is all one can have, at best.

The book's seven chapters are devoted to a close examination, in reverse chronology, of four of Agnon's works—the yet-untranslated "Ad bena," (Thus Far, 1952), *A Simple Story* (1935), "In the Prime of Her Life" (1923), and the also untranslated "The Dance of Death" (1907, 1920) — accompanied by a lesser emphasis on other stories to which these tales are compared.

In her central thesis, the author asserts that the latent meaning in Agnon's narratives is concealed in accounts of dreams, dream-like situations, seemingly innocuous remarks, and, of course, his rich allusive style. Through a close reading, these accounts may be elucidated to reveal the complexities of an equivocal meaning and the protagonist's repressed psychological state.

It is regrettable that in her exploration of some affinities between the works she closely studies and the rest of Agnon's *œuvre*, Ben-Dov does not proceed further than she does. More than a few illuminating parallels and constructive insights might have been shown to bridge Agnon's narratives. For example, *Thus Far* appears to share many elements with the author's 1949 short story "Fernheim." Werner Fernheim, a World War One P.O.W., has returned home, and to the land of the living, only to find it unalterably changed, and he finds he must accept a world wherein even his traditional values no longer hold true. In her penetrating reading of *Thus Far*, Ben-Dov demonstrates that the First World War's impact on the author's

Weltanschauung echoes "Fernheim"'s message. She interprets the protagonist's peregrinations through Germany, ostensibly in search of a proper residence during the years of the War, as an indication of his attempt to resolve his sexual ambivalence, and shows that, set against the backdrop of the First World War, the hero's inner turmoil is testimony to his "fractured ego and to his concealed preoccupation with, and search for, integrated identity" (p. 51). These activities are, as Ben-Dov asserts, a manifestation of the chaos outside.

While this exposé is eye-opening in Ben-Dov's persuasive reading, the tale also illuminates the cruelties of war, revealing its impact on the Agonesque protagonist. This man of refined tastes and traditional sensibilities is seen as one playing with a fantasy of letting his inner drives take over his behavior against his better judgment. This, one would argue, is the missing link explaining the relationship between a character's psychic turmoil and the social chaos without. Wars corrupt even those who, ostensibly, are the keepers of, or guardians over, the flame of tradition, faith, and piety. We find similar behavior exhibited in the innermost recesses of the Guest-Narrator of Agnon's *A Guest for the Night*: a married, observant, man toying with the possibility of a romantic fling with the young Rachel.

In *A Simple Story*, Ben-Dov diagnoses Hirshl's emotional crisis as stemming out of his sexual ambivalence and the inner tensions between his yearning for maternal or sexual love (p. 78). Addressing his pithy dream at the sanatorium, she posits that the source of his madness is his ambivalent stand regarding the two women in his life, Tsirl and Blume. These two represent socio-economic values, on the one hand, and emotional sustenance of which he was deprived, on the other. Dr. Langsam's treatment is focused on bringing about an integration of these so as to enable Hirshl to love and exist in a bourgeois milieu (p. 99).

While this reader was not persuaded that Tsirl thinks more of Blume than the narrative allows, Ben-Dov is particularly successful in probing Tsirl's motives from a psychological standpoint rather than the already familiar one of her socio-economic values. In the same vein, she offers a good survey and analysis of the roots of Hirshl's madness (p. 97ff.) and sees that his cure is attained by providing him with a means to compensate for lack of emotional sustenance.

The novella "In the Prime of Her Life" has served as ground for a debate among scholars. In her reading, Ben-Dov challenges those interpretations that view this work as an assertive and triumphant character moved by a sense of romantic love. Rather, Ben-Dov argues that Tirtza's marriage

is a bitter-sweet conclusion which has failed to liberate the heroine from her seclusion.

In addition to the evasiveness and indirection (and indeterminacy) created by the use of enigmatic situations or problematic statements, Agnon has always used his well-honed linguistic skills to attain similar effects by resorting to a pseudo-biblical style, one which characterizes a few of his works, including "In the Prime of Her Life," and "The Dance of Death." These two serve Ben-Dov well in discussing in her last chapter those aspects of language that promote a polyvalent reading. These tales, like other Agnon loves stories, end unhappily because of a disappointed love (p. 136). The strength of this chapter is in its exploration of the possible reasons why Agnon chose to write "In the Prime of Her Life" in a style reminiscent of the Hebrew Bible; Ben-Dov sees Tirtza as a new Isaac manipulated to be sacrificed by her elders. Also good is the contextualization of "The Dance of Death" into the tradition of tales of martyrdom, including the means by which Agnon's tale departs from these. However, the interpretation offered, while intriguing, sometimes appears forced and conditioned upon too many conjectures.

It is somewhat regrettable that Ben-Dov elected to avoid a more wide-ranging discussion of thematic similarities shared by Agnon's works. While she includes in passing more than a few, such as the beggar in *A Simple Story* and *Sbira* (pp. 105–106), she avoids considering others. Among these would be Hirshl's cure and the tale "The Kerchief," in which love of the Other serves as means of salvation that brings the hero into a state of maturity. The last scene of *A Simple Story*—Hirshl tossing a coin to a beggar—is so evocative of "The Kerchief" that a comparison of the two would have been fruitful. Similar links can be discerned between *Thus Far* and a large array of works, among them "From Lodging to Lodging," "Fernheim," and *A Guest for the Night*.

Nitza Ben-Dov has, in a moderately sized book, presented us with a series of perceptive and elucidating readings of a relative few of Agnon's works. The only regret one can express is that the works are so few at a time when so many of that period, when the author was at the pinnacle of his literary mastery, have to await future critical analyses.

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