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Multivocal Narrative and the Teacher as Narrator: The Case of Agnon's "Two Scholars Who Were In Our Town" (שני תלמידי חכמים שהיו בעירנו)

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In this article, I seek to demonstrate how a hermeneutic of multivocal narration suggests several areas for educational inquiry. The dissonant styles and explicitly stated narrative development in Agnon's story, "Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town," suggest the presence of more than one type of narrative voice guiding the reader through the story. The core story is presented primarily as a traditional tale, handed-down orally from previous generations, whereas the story's broader framework can be considered a modern narrator's efforts to distance the reader from the tale (and from its storyteller). Agnon, thus, positions his modern narrator between the traditional storyteller and the reader. The core enigmatic tale is apparently too transgressive for the narrator as it seemingly dismantles his idealized reconstructed memory. The presence of two dissonant narrative voices suggests how narrative mediation functions in teaching and how modern fiction can provide a landscape for engaging students in ethical reflection that transcends a plot's illustration of normative principles.

Preface—The Teacher as Narrator and Storyteller

In recent years, teaching increasingly has come to be recognized as a narrative act. In this sense, teachers of cultural or religious traditions have a dual role of conveying stories and narrating a broader cultural landscape and tradition in which to situate those stories. As "narrators," educators assume responsibility for both the ambiguous indeterminate aspects of unmediated tales and for their contextualization within a normative framework, engaging students with

the less apparent, idiosyncratic meanings of the storyteller's art along with the more encompassing meanings of broader cultural metanarratives.

S. Y. Agnon's story, "Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town," provides a particular narrative multivocality that can inform how educational theorists can meaningfully differentiate a teacher's responsibilities to engage as well as to instruct.[1] Equally important, what I will suggest are the distinctive, agonistic narrative voices within this story reflect how a teacher may overly mediate narratives that were once directly connected to the folk and therefore had less of a global, meta-intent. The tendency to frame a traditional tale expansively can lead a teacher into an undesirable role analogous to that of an over-totalizing narrator.

As will be reflected in my reading of Agnon's "Two Scholars," I offer the two analogies between storyteller and teacher and between modern narrator and teacher, to indicate the need for educators to be circumspect in their judgments and selections of these narrative "voices." There are times when we frame stories within the broader values and ideals of a tradition, as does our narrator here when he idealizes the era of valuing Torah study and of elevating the status of Torah scholars to the highest level. And there are other times when there is value in focusing on the tale itself—its uncertainties, tensions, and problems that transgress the broader, mythic story of a people. Sometimes a story's context is best considered simply to be "our town," rather than an expansive cultural tradition and collective.

In providing different types and degrees of context, the teacher, in effect, is deciding what to reveal and what to conceal. How these kinds of textual, hermeneutic trade-offs are recurring motifs in making curricular and teaching decisions would be a useful area of inquiry, revealing the more stratified nature of how we teach modern and traditional narrative texts.

If we consider the modern need to make sense of tradition through honest engagement with those ironies and contradictions embedded within it, I suggest that secular Jewish fiction should be squarely within the scope of contemporary Jewish education. Students (and teachers) need a sense of continuity with those who have preceded them as well as sensitivity to the need for discontinuity such as that reflected in the distinctions between modern fiction

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[1]S. Y. Agnon, "Two Scholars Who Were In Our Town" (Hebrew) (*Shnei talmidei ḥakhamim she-hayu be-'irenu): Kol sipurav shel Shmu'el Yosef Agnon* 6, *Samukh ve-nir'eh* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1979) pp. 5–53. Hereafter designated as "Two Scholars." To the best of my knowledge there are no English translations of this story to date. All translations are my own.

and traditional storytelling. Such recognition can allow the student to recognize the human, individual stories within a polyphonic narrative tradition and see her particular reflection in this inheritance of cultural achievements.[2]

Jewish culture now has a century and a half of tradition of modern Jewish writing that calls out for interpretation, no less than ancient, timeless, sacred texts do. I therefore suggest that educators should no longer consider modern Jewish literature too new in Jewish life to be an integral dimension of efforts to engage and to teach.[3] Mining and interpreting this "new tradition,"[4] this "modern Jewish canon,"[5] may yield a fruitful investigation into the ways teachers mediate interpretation and students uncover cultural meanings.

Beyond the argument that authentic cultural continuity and adaptation are at stake, I suggest that that there is also value in considering the ethical dimensions of modern Jewish literature.[6] Fiction provides an imaginative landscape in which to consider ethical issues that surround and engage students and teachers every day and the ethical character of the implied authors whose "company we choose to keep."[7]

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[2]On being "born into an inheritance of human achievements," see Michael Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching," in Timothy Fuller, ed. *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[3]Cynthia Ozick once made a similar claim in broadening the notion of Jewish cultural texts: "Jewish mainstream culture was once confined to the content of the traditional religious texts, hundreds of classics that were oceanic enough even without novels and secular poetry, and which of course preceded the existence of such forms, and, when they arose, never dreamed of admitting them. The old definition didn't include imaginative literature as we know it now, or what we might term, if the term were still useful, belles-lettres. . . . But since the rise of Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, which arrived in Eastern Europe a century later than in the West, the idea of what Jewish culture is about has been radically altered. We seem not to know exactly what to do with this difference in perception of the nature of textual culture; it is simply too new in Jewish life" (Cynthia Ozick, "An Interview with Cynthia Ozick," *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 3 [Fall 1993]: 358).

[4]Gershon Shaked, *The New Traditions: Essays on Modern Hebrew Literature* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2006).

[5]Ruth R. Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon: A Journey Through Language and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

[6]Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Here I am drawing on Wayne Booth's (not uncontroversial) notion of "ethical criticism."

[7]Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) and *Ethics of Fiction*.

As I suggest below in my analysis of the narrative voices in Agnon's "Two Scholars," considering the ethics of fiction, to use Booth's felicitous term, need not diminish the intrinsic, artistic value of a work. Indeed, as I hope to demonstrate, even the structure and artistry of this story reveal its ethical dimensions, including the need to recognize multivocality, multiple meanings, and pluralist dispositions toward different modes of telling and retelling.

The content, too, provides rich sources for ethical inquiry: the vicissitudes of the two scholars' relationship, their missteps, the value of family traditions, the dissonance between societal ideals and actual conduct, the values and risks of friendship, forgiveness, empathy, self control, and not embarrassing a human being in public, in addition to the need to recognize what would be considered society's "betrayals of the times" in which we live and the infinite import of seemingly incidental acts, as well as the character of the implied author.[8]

One way in which Jewish teaching traditionally has expressed values is, as Abraham J. Heschel reminds us, through maxims and sayings stating ultimate, hyperbolic normative claims such as "Better to throw yourself into a burning furnace than to embarrass a human being in public."[9] But another way is through teachers transporting themselves and their students into an empathic experience of reading and listening to narratives that have preceded them—including modern fiction, with all its inconsistencies, contradictions, and implicit critiques—and to confront them honestly and directly.[10] Indeed, we need, then, to consider how the normative and the narrative are both important dimensions in teaching values. Inquiry into education might consider how teaching modern fiction can provide a way to graciously accept what Booth calls narrative "gifts" that transcend any one set of maxims, allowing students to form relationships with new "lasting friends."[11] This stance demands an active role for students. Modern authors can serve as models in that they are both readers of prior texts and writers constructing new texts that respond to or rebel against "sayings of the fathers."[12] The research challenge, then, is to

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[8]Booth, *Ethics of Fiction*.

[9]Abraham J. Heschel, "The Values of Jewish Education," *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America* (1962): 26, 83–100.

[10]On this role of narrative in education and educational research see Harvey Shapiro, "Cultivating a Viable Relationship Between North American Jews and Israel," Ph.D. Dissertation (Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, 1996).

[11]Booth, *Ethics of Fiction*.

[12]Students who draw upon these models are aptly characterized in Geoffrey Hartman's notion of the creative work of reading: "Refusing the subterfuge of a passive or re-

consider how teaching modern Jewish fiction might engender the self-perception of the student as the subject of her own narratives as well as the creative interpreter of the legacy she inherits.

So I here offer three agendas for educational inquiry: 1) the educational functions of revealing the narrative mediation and multivocality in modern fiction and how these narrative voices provide a language for considering analogies between teacher and narrator; 2) the value in finding an essential place for this new tradition in contemporary curricula and; 3) the nuanced way in which modern stories can provide a landscape for ethical inquiry that goes beyond illustrating expository, normative principles, that engages the learner with ethical questions and struggles of the implied authors, and that considers how these authors' stories and our own, to use Dewey's words, may be "wrought into the texture of our lives."[13]

"Two Scholars Who Were In Our Town"

> "When two scholars are amiable to each other in [their discussions in] *halachah*, the Holy One, blessed be He, gives heed to them.." (BT *Shabbat* 63a)
>
> א"ר ירמיה אמר ר' שמעון בן לקיש שני תלמידי חכמים
> הנוחין זה לזה בהלכה הקדוש ברוך הוא מקשיב להן.
>
> "If two scholars are in one town, that contradict themselves in Halakha, to them is this verse applied: 'Moreover, I gave them laws that were not good and rules by which they could not live.'" (BT *Megilah* 32a)
>
> שני תלמידי חכמים היושבים בעיר אחת ואין נוחין זה
> את זה בהלכה עליהם הכתוב אומר וְגַם-אֲנִי נָתַתִּי לָהֶם
> חֻקִּים לֹא טוֹבִים וּמִשְׁפָּטִים לֹא יִחְיוּ בָהֶם.
>
> "When two scholars go for a walk together without exchanging Torah insights, they deserve to be consumed by fire." (BT *Sotah* 49a)
>
> שני תלמידי חכמים המהלכין בדרך ואין ביניהן דברי תורה
> ראוין לישרף באש.

In reading Agnon's short story's title, "Two Scholars Who Were in Our Town," one familiar with these Talmudic maxims cannot help wondering if it portends success or doom. Fraught with an abiding dynamic tension between both, the story's narration waffles stylistically and substantively. I wish to explore this

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strictive role, he becomes at once reader and writer—or takes it fully into consciousness that he is both an interpreter of texts and a self-interpreting producer of further texts" (Geoffrey Hartman, "The Work of Reading," in Hartman, G., ed., *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980]).

[13]John Dewey, "Desire and Intelligence," in *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: Modern Library, 1922), p. 263.

story's particular narrative tension as it expresses multivocal, even contradictory, characterizations of the past. I will show that the story's shifts in narrative tone and its apparent internal contradictions may be understood by considering how it is structured around a narrative multivocality. Distinguishing the story's different narrative voices—the first, that of a traditional storyteller, the second, a modern narrator[14]—allows us to read against the grain of a narrator's efforts to present a coherent image of the past. This reading will help explain the tensions between a modern narrator's rendering of the past, on the one hand, and traditional dynamics of storytelling, on the other.

First, a few words about the story's central relationship will provide a context. The relationship between the two young scholars in Agnon's story is marked by stark contrasts in family background, socio-economic position, marital status, deportment, and disposition. Rabbi Moshe Pinḥas is a downtrodden, unfortunate, introverted, socially coarse and aloof rural villager, whose father had died when he was young. In contrast to him, Rabbi Shlomo, a charismatic, pleasant, engaging young man, is from the wealthy, venerable rabbinic Horowitz family line.

Though close study companions for a short time, the scholars' relationship deteriorates precipitously, beginning with an unfortunate public encounter. Normally calm and reassuring, R. Shlomo impulsively responds to Moshe Pinḥas's sudden, unseemly shouting out of a legal opinion concerning the synagogue's repair:

> Leaping up, Moshe Pinḥas declared, "It is forbidden to alter the interior space of a synagogue by reducing it even by one finger's length, as this would violate a prohibition of the Lord your God!"[15]

Though R. Shlomo wishes to "politely silence" (לשתקו בנעימה) and reassure him, he, instead, shakes his finger at Moshe Pinḥas dismissively, while mockingly scolding, 'An [unmarried] boy should just make kiddush on kasha grains!'"[16]

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[14]This is a differentiation distinct from that of "the narrator" and Agnon (as "implied author).

[15]"Two Scholars," p. 11.

"קפץ משה פנחס ואמר ,אסור לשנות חלל בית הכנסת
ולמעטו אפילו כדי אצבע אחת ,שיש בזה משום לא תעשון
כן לה' אלקיכם."

[16]"Two Scholars," p. 11.

"ניענע לו בידו דרך ביטול ואמר לו בלשון של הלצה, א בחור
מאכ"ט קידוש אוי"פ א גרוי"פ."

The narrator explains that this Yiddish saying is a common insult "used to tease unmarried men who presume to act as equals with their [married] superiors."[17] Publicly embarrassed, "Moshe Pinḥas . . . recoiled . . . From that point on, he did not speak to R. Shlomo."[18]

Despite his deep contrition and repeated valiant efforts to ask forgiveness, R. Shlomo is unable to change R. Moshe Pinḥas's unrelentingly hostile attitude toward him. Months later, just before leaving to accept the rabbinical post in another town, he tries again to make peace, only to be spurned yet again by Moshe Pinḥas: "There is no peace between us, neither in this world nor in the world to come."[19]Toward the story's conclusion, following a brief description of Moshe Pinḥas's death at a relatively young age (as he completes studying the remaining chapters of the Talmud), the narrator describes how R. Shlomo, now very ill, still struggled to offer something redeeming, albeit posthumously, for Moshe Pinḥas. Nearing death and too weak to reach the memorial ceremony, where he was to give the eulogy marking the first anniversary of Moshe Pinḥas's death, R. Shlomo requests to be buried next to him.

Like all previous efforts, this attempt at a postmortem reconciliation is also undermined. Though the gravedigger had purportedly buried R. Shlomo next to Moshe Pinḥas in the snow-covered cemetery, with the spring thaw it was revealed that R. Shlomo's grave and its marker had moved away from Moshe Pinḥas and next to that of a wealthy ancestor who had predicted that one-hundred years after the latter's own death, a descendent (i.e., R. Shlomo) would be buried next to him. As Moshe Pinḥas had previously insisted, no restitution or reconciliation was possible even in "the world to come."

Two Narrative Modes in the Story

"Let's relate a bit of what our town elders always tell about two great scholars who were in our town."[20]

(ונספר מקצת משהו שזקני עירנו רגילים לספר על שני
תלמידי חכמים גדולים שהיו בעירנו.)

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[167] "לקנטר בו את בחורים שדחקו עצמם לעמוד במקום גדולים."

[18] "Two Scholars," p. 11.
זע לאחוריו . . .מכאן ואילך לא דיבר עם ר 'שלמה."

[19] "Two Scholars," p. 16.
"אין שלום בינינו לא בעולם הזה ולא לעולם הבא."

[20] "Two Scholars," p. 5.

And so, modestly and casually, a narrator introduces his tale. But this casual, folk-like relating "a bit" (מקצת משהו) of a local tale is framed in a formal, expansive, even mythic mode:

> Three or four generations ago, when Torah was dear to Israel and learning it constituted a man's dignity, our town won the highest status in the land on account of its scholars whose Torah study would bring divine tenderness and consideration to it . . . The schools would expand wisdom as one was built after another.[21]

Here the temporal lens is suddenly pulled back from a present habitual, "always tell," to a deeply rooted past, "three or four generations ago." This narrator now invokes known classical rabbinic phrases (such as "when Torah was dear to Israel"[22]) as the provincial "our town" is now expanded to the whole collective of Israel. What began as a simple human local tale, now alludes to divine "tenderness and consideration"[23] as the "expansion of wisdom"[24] itself reflects the expansive nature of this paragraph.

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[21] "Two Scholars," p. 5.
"לפני שלושה ארבעה דורות שהיתה התורה חביבה על ישראל וכל תפארתו של אדם היא התורה, זכתה עירנו להמנות עם הערים המצויינות שבמדינה על ידי תלמידי חכמים שבה, שמשכו עליה חוט של חסד על ידי תורה שלמדו. . . בתי מדרשיות שנבנו זה אחר זה הגדילו תושיה."

[22] "היתה התורה חביבה על ישראל."
See, for example, *Yalkut Shim'oni* on Psalms 119, 126: "When you see that the Torah is dear to Israel …"
ילקוט שמעוני, תהלים קיט, קכו. "בשעה שאתה רואה שהתורה חביבה על ישראל והכל שמחים בה."
and *Jerusalem Talmud, Tractate B'rakhot*, Chapter 9: "If you have seen that the Torah is dear to Israel …"
ירושלמי - מסכת ברכות פרק ט. "וכן היה הלל אומר אם ראית את התורה שהיא חביבה על ישראל והכל שמחין בה בדר..."

[23] See for example, *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Tamid*, Chapter 1, citing Proverbs 28: "pull over him a thread of tenderness and consideration . . ."
"...חבירו לשם שמים זוכה לחלקו של הקדוש ברוך הוא שנאמר (משלי כח) מוכיח אדם אחרי ולא עוד אלא שמושכין עליו חוט של חסד שנאמר (משלי כח) חן ימצא ממחליק לשון."

[24] See Isaiah 28. "הפליא עצה הגדיל תושיה."

Temporal Inconsistencies

In addition to recurring, frictional shifts of this kind between casual folktale and more formal, mythic, even epic style, the narrative has temporal inconsistencies. Even though only a few years pass, by the middle of the story, the narrator, returning to his formal style in the form of a "lamentation on the era," moves up the story's temporal placement:

> Now let us offer a lamentation on this era's betrayal. *Three to four generations ago*, nothing was dearer than Torah; but beginning *two to three generations* ago the Torah increasingly declined.[25]

While at the beginning of the story the narrator sets the timeframe at "three to four generations ago," he seemingly moves up the temporal setting by the middle of the story to "*two to three* generations ago." Yet the plot's relatively short duration does not warrant this kind of temporal reframing, as the narrator purportedly had begun his story in the period of "*three to four* generations ago."

The narrative's temporal shift is further confirmed in the coda or colophon at the end of the story declaring that even only *two to three* generations ago the ideal of Torah learning was a defining feature of the age:

> I have related the tale of two scholars who were in our town two or three generations ago when Torah dignified Israel and all Israel would follow it. It is the joy of the Lord, our Stronghold, until the coming of the redeemer and beyond, at which time we will be able to hear God's Torah directly from our righteous messiah as he sits and learns Torah with all Israel who will have been studying it lovingly.[26]

No break in Torah learning is narrated in this concluding paragraph. Rather, the Torah held its status "two to three generations ago" and it is expected to retain its strength even into the messianic era.

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[25] "Two Scholars," p. 31 (emphasis mine).
"ועתה נשא קינה על בגידת הזמן. לפני שלושה ארבעה דורות לא היה דבר חביב מן התורה, לפני שנים שלושה דורות התחילה התורה יורדת והולכת."

[26] "Two Scholars," p. 53.
"סיפרתי מעשיהם של שני תלמידי חכמים שהיו בעירנו לפני שנים שלושה דורות בזמן שהיתה התורה תפארתם של ישראל וכל ישראל היו הולכים בדרכי התורה, שהיא חדות ה' מעוזנו עד ביאת הגואל ועד בכלל, לכשנזכה לשמוע תורת ה' מפי משיח צדקנו כשישב וילמוד תורה עם כל ישראל שלמדו תורה מאהבה."

Societal Referential Contradictions

Beyond the stylistic and temporal shifts, there is a third noteworthy type of contradiction in the narrative as it offers divergent attributions for its socio-religious context. The story's plot, characters, and episodes seem to refute the assertion that Torah was the guiding priority of that era. At first, with subtle hints and textual allusions,[27] a counterplot develops, comprising a causal sequence of interpersonal and social decline due to socio-economic divisions, corruption of communal authority, and impulsive callousness (the immediate catalyst for the central unraveling conflict).

In an apt poetic characterization near its midpoint, the narrator captures these narrative tensions in two sentences, beginning with the rabbinic aphorism, "עולם כמנהגו נוהג." "The world conducts itself as it is accustomed,"[28] followed by an ironic disavowal: "ובאמת העולם לא היה עולם והמנהג לא היה מנהג." "But the truth is that the world was not a world and what was accustomed was not the custom."[29]

Explaining These Three Sources of Friction

The transitions between casual localized storytelling and formal epic-like narration, the temporal reframings, and the inconsistent characterizations of the setting may be explained, in part, by Agnon's unique integration of romanticism, on the one hand, and his modernist, realist critique, on the other. But this type of broad explanation has not been satisfactory to critics and scholars since this story's first publication in 1946, as they pose questions regarding its apparent narrative contradictions: Why does the narrator frame a tragic story that exposes the community's moral and spiritual decline within the context of an idealized era? Why the temporal shifts? How can the stylistic contrasts be understood?

Explanations have converged on the character of the story's narrator and the extent of his reliability, an issue on which scholars differ. I will summarize the range of interpretations of the narrator's motives in order to contrast them from my own argument below.

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[27]See Efraim Auerbach, "Two Scholars Who Were In Our Town: Sources and Commentary" (Hebrew), in Efraim A. Auerbach, ed., *On Judaism and Education* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Hebrew University School of Education and the Department of Education and Culture, 1966): 162–79 and the same article in *Le-Agnon Shai: Devarim al ha-sofer u-sefarav* (Jerusalem, 5726, 1965–66).

[28]*Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah* 54b .

[29]"Two Scholars," pp. 31–32.

For some, he is a credible storyteller who relates to his reader as a complicit talmudist[30], a dramatic guide[31], an allegorizing religious moralist[32], or a nostalgic, but realistic, storyteller.[33] In this view of the narrator as reliable, the narrative tensions merely create an illusion of incommensurability, as the discerning reader will see through the story's apparent contradictions. Others, however, consider him decidedly unreliable—either unwittingly or coyly. From this perspective, the frictionality testifies to the narrator's unreliability—his simplicity, ignorance, or skittish, cunning denial of the significance of what he has already related. The nature of the narrator's unreliability has been an enduring theme in Agnon scholarship. While each interpretation adds important dimensions to understanding Agnon's relationship with his narrator, they each overlook what I will argue are agonistic narrative "voices" in a kind of stratified redaction.

Most recently, Michal Arbel has offered a compelling argument for considering this narrator unreliable and calculating. Offering an insightful, helpful analysis of the work's internal formal and structural properties, particularly with regard to its symmetry and strategies for closure, Arbel argues that the narrator is proud, reluctant, and apologetic, and, most important, intentionally undermines narrative closure. Describing the narrator's efforts to preempt "any possibility of interpretation" by the reader, Arbel argues that the fragmentary nature of the narration and its awkward, contradictory conclusion reflect both the outer world as described and the story's own "breaking up, its own fragmentation." Recognizing the awkwardness of the story's contradictions, the narrator realizes that he should not have even ventured to tell this tale.[34] As I will argue below, what Arbel calls fragmentation is a function of dissonant narrative voices.

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[30]Auerbach, "Sources and Commentary" (Hebrew).

[31]David Tsimerman, "'On Two Scholars Who Were In Our Town,' of S. Y. Agnon: Comments and Insights from a Reader" (Hebrew) Al-siaḥ 12–13–14, 177–189.

[32]Hillel Weiss, *Commentary on Five Stories of S. Y. Agnon: 'Two Scholars Who Were In Our Town,' 'The Kerchief,' 'Tehila,' 'The Crooked Shall Become Straight,' and 'A Tale on Rabbi Tori Zahav'* (Hebrew) (Parshanut la-ḥamishah mi-sipurei Shai 'Agnon: shnei talmidei ḥakhamim she-hayu be-'irenu, ha-mitpaḥat, tehilah, ve-hayah ha-'aḳov le-mishor, ma'aśeh be-Rav Ṭori Zahav) (Tel-Aviv: 'Aḳad, 1974).

[33]Arnold F. Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare: A Study in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1968), pp. 402–05.

[34]Michal Arbel, "Societal and Strategic Closure Dilemmas: Two Scholars Who Were In Our Town" (Hebrew) ("*Dilemot ḥevratiyot ve-'estragegiyot shel siyum: Shnei talmidei ḥakhamim she-hayu be-'irenu*") in Judith Bar-el, Yigal Schwartz, and Tamar S. Hess, eds.,

Sharing the conception of the narrator as unreliable, Leah Goldberg and Esther Fuchs see this storyteller as a coy, naïve, sentimentally endearing, pious simpleton. Somewhat ahead of her time, Goldberg was the first to argue for distinguishing Agnon from his narrator in the story: "The writer, S. Y. Agnon, does not identify completely with the narrator of the story, and surely does not identify with its concluder."[35] She argues that the narrator, in fact, is a character in the story, Agnon's "hidden hero" whose contradictions result in "blurring of [the narrator's own] image," unwittingly creating an "elusive identity, that misdirects us." To Goldberg, Agnon uses this narrative technique "to enrich the work's content, to transfer it from one realm to another, to show the image from different points of view, to reveal the multiple meanings in the event, to open different possibilities hidden in any one situation, to bridge contradictions, and to present reality in all its nakedness."[36]

Echoing Goldberg, Fuchs agrees that Agnon is fabricating his unreliable narrator as an important character in the story. In her aptly-titled work, *'Omanut ha-hitamemut* (Cunning Innocence), Fuchs maintains that much of the confusion around the story (and with Agnon scholarship in general) is that critics have identified the narrator with Agnon himself.[37] This misidentification causes misreadings, blurring the critical distinction between "reality and literature, existence and art."[38] As she demonstrates, often there is inconsistency between the narrator's omission of facts or of any sound explanations and our own (and Agnon's) sense of actual historical conditions and experience, when we, as readers, know full well the kind of predicaments and struggles of the characters.[39]

But in our story, there is not merely oversight or omission by a narrator who is ironically distant from the author's (and often from our own) perspective. Rather, this is an act of commission by a narrator who seeks to dominate

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Literature and Society in Modern Hebrew Culture: Papers in Honor of Gershon Shaked (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Keter and Ha-kibutz Hameuchad, 2000), pp. 137–154.

[35]Leah Goldberg, "S. Y. Agnon: The Author and His Hero" (Hebrew) (*"Shai Agnon: Ha-sofer ve-giburo"*), in *Le-Agnon Shai: Devarim al ha-sofer u-sefarav* (Jerusalem, 5726), pp. 47–61.

[36]Goldberg, "S. Y. Agnon: The Author and His Hero."

[37]Esther Fuchs, *Cunning Innocence: On S. Y. Agnon's Irony* (Hebrew) (*'Omanut ha-hitamemut: 'al ha-ironiah shel Agnon)* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1985), pp. 39–40.

[38]Fuchs, *Cunning Innocence*, pp. 39–40.

[39]Esther Fuchs, "Ironic Characterization in the Works of S. Y. Agnon," *AJS Review*, Vol. 7 (1982): 101–128.

the narrative, to overwhelm another narrative voice that is very present. So in our story there is more than distance and ironic incongruity between what Fuchs calls "auctoral and figural points of view," and there is less reliance on what she calls the reader's assumed "referential context" that contradicts the narrator's depictions. Rather, here the incongruity stems from a multivocal narration. And the contradictions and oversights described by Goldberg are perhaps a function of our experienced tension in the relationship between narrative voices competing for our attention.

The narrative problems have also been explained, in part, by theories of Agnon's unique style and concerns. This story may reflect what Dan Miron calls the "unnatural" relationship between Agnon and modern fiction (the novel, in particular), as he attempts to blend that genre with traditional forms such as Yiddish folk literature, exempla and romances, and communal record books.[40] Miron may thus explain this story's narrative tensions as functions of Agnon's broader struggle to adopt the novel as a modern form for his writing.[41] What appears particular in this story, however, is Agnon's expressing this discomfort or awkwardness by a struggle between two voices. And, as I will suggest, this agonistic relationship is actually part of the story's structure and is displayed implicitly and explicitly throughout.[42]

Gershon Shaked has also offered a helpful explanation for these kinds of tensions, maintaining that many of Agnon's narrators often need to invoke a superimposed, miraculous intervention that saves the plot from its "proper

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[40]Dan Miron, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre: Agnon's Transactions with the Novel," *Prooftexts*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 1987): 6.

[41]Miron, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre," p. 4. Miron points out how, in his novels, Agnon tried to "connect the particular with the general, personal lives with history, the individual soul with collective culture" (Miron, p. 5), as the author sought to "break out of its impasse," (Miron, p. 6) as he "stood against a narrative perfection based on a finished past" (Miron p. 6). I see this struggle for interconnection portrayed in the two narrative voices of "Two Scholars." Most illuminating, for our purposes, is Miron's insight that "[i]n Agnon's oeuvre then two long narrative patterns serve side by side, competing yet integrated one with the other: that of the *pinkas* or *midrash* or *geste* preceded the novelistic one and served as an alternative to it. When Agnon finally took up the novel, it is as if he submerged the first kind of narration into the depths of his work" (Miron p. 8).

[42]As Miron points out, there are times when Agnon's narrator is sensitive to the modern novel's demand for a kind of closure not befitting the traditional tale. So we have cases of forced, or seemingly artificial endings, such as the "apologetic inscription" ending of *A Simple Story*: "Hirshl and Mina's story is over, but Blume's is not" (Miron, "Domesticating a Foreign Genre," p. 9).

advancement."[43] But in this story, the "saving" of the plot is the function of one narrator's agonistic relationship with another. What Shaked elsewhere suggests is Agnon's "Jewish-Western dialectic" here unravels before any synthesis can take place.[44]

So what does the implied author in this story demand of his readers beyond what has been previously suggested?[45] I suggest that even those who see the narrator as unreliable are overlooking how this story is a uniquely layered set of narratives. I maintain that efforts to resolve the story's discordance, particularly with regard to a single narrator's persona, have not fully explained the dissonance between the narration's differing appraisals of the story's characters, setting, and period. How is a reader to reconcile the positive characterizations such as:

> Standing by the well, even menial laborers would fill their hearts with Torah interpretations.[46]

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[43]Gershon Shaked, "By a Miracle: Agnon's Literary Representation of Social Dramas," in Gershon Shaked, ed., *The Shadows Within: Essays on Modern Jewish Writers*" (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p. 136. "Agnon believes that this doomed society, in its parlous state, can be saved only in the imagination, not in the proper advancement of the plot."

[44]Gershon Shaked, "Jewish Tradition and Western Impact in Hebrew Literature," in Shaked, *The Shadows Within*, pp. 92–3.

[45]In his seminal work on fictional narrative and authorship, Booth argues that the narrator "is only one of the elements created by the implied author who may be separated from him by large ironies" (Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 73). As he further developed his theory of "unreliable narrator" and "implied author," nearly three decades later, Booth, citing Jean-Paul Sartre, suggests "that I as reader have the right to make demands on the author—particularly the right to demand that he demand more of me" (Booth, *Ethics of Fiction*, p. 127; Jean-Paul Sartre, "What is Literature?" [1948], Bernard Freedman (trans.) (London: 1981), p. 40). Monika Fludernik refers to the implied author as "the entire novel's frame of values," "the frame of the text's values as a whole," "non-attributable features of discourse", "an abbreviation for the narrative's overall meaning structure," "the world view that the reader constructs for the text as a whole" (Monika Fludernik, *Towards a "Natural" Narratology* [London: Routledge, 1996], pp. 183, 203, 218, 381, 395). Seymour Chatman refers to the implied author as "the source of the narrative text's whole structure of meaning—not only of its assertion and denotation but also of its implication, connotation, and ideological nexus" (Seymour Chatman, "Defense of the Implied Author," in Seymour Chatman, ed., *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990] as quoted in David Darby, "Form and Context: an Essay in the History of Narratology," *Poetics Today*, Vol. 22, No. 4 [2001]: 845).

[46]"Two Scholars," p. 5. "ואפילו שאבי מים שאצל הבאר היו ממלאים לבם דברי תורה."

with portrayals of duplicitous business practices like:

> But the carpenter was not diligent, as is common with artisans who constantly pursue work and then, upon securing a project, neglect it and just continue to look around for other work.[47]

or veneration of the times such as: "in those very days when everyone would make the Torah their priority"[48] with indictments for overemphasizing family lineage as a basis for scholarly respect:

> like most of those in our land who have family connections . . . who come [to be ordained] because of their respected lineage.[49]

or generalizations like "nothing was dearer than Torah"[50] with the "lamentation on the era's betrayal" (קינה על בגידת הזמן)[51] bemoaning the decline of Torah values.

These differences in appraisal are coupled with stylistic differences in the narrative's shifting between formal, temporally expansive declarations like

> One bet midrash after another would be built, encouraging further study. Even in our town's markets and lanes, the scriptural proverb would be confirmed: "Wisdom resounds in the streets (Proverbs 1:2)."[52]

or

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[47] "Two Scholars," pp. 10–11.
"אבל האומן לא נזדרז, כדרך האומנים שרצים כל ימיהם אחר עבודה, כיון שבאה עבודה לידיהם אינם פונים לעשותה, ומחזרים אחר עבודה אחרת."

[48] "Two Scholars," p. 5.
"באותם הימים שהכל היו עושין את התורה עיקר."

[49] "Two Scholars," pp. 8–9.
"כרוב הייחסנים שבמדינתנו שבאים בזכות אבותיהם."

[50] "Two Scholars," p. 5.
"לא היה דבר חביב מן התורה."

[51] "Two Scholars," p. 31.

[52] "Two Scholars," p. 5.
אף שאר בתי מדרשות שנבנו זה אחר זה הגדילו תושיה ואפילו שווקים ורחובות שבעירנו נתקיים בהם מקרא שכתוב חכמות בחוץ תרונה וברחובות תתן קולה.

> Our town's eminence is due to its being one of the venerable communities. Even before the year 5408 [1648] it was highly regarded.[53]

and casual, locally-focused storytelling by a more transparent, human narrator such as:

> *I do not know* where this saying comes from, but it was used in our town to tease unmarried men who would presume to act like equals with their [married] superiors.[54]

While shifting in and out of a formal, expansive, epic mode is not unusual in Agnon's fiction, the stylistic divergence, along with contrasting appraisals, and the temporal-frame inconsistencies suggest that previous assessments of the narrative's internal oppositions may be insufficient. Like R. Yudel's ironic, absurd vicissitudes in Agnon's *Bridal Canopy*, our story is set against a backdrop of traditional society's efforts to hold its shape when being buffeted by modern economic, political, and cultural forces, and their accompanying inevitable human missteps that compromise values and increase societal tensions.[55] But a distinguishing feature of our story is that its depictions of tensions, conflicts, and losses are contextualized by a narrator who seemingly wishes to smooth over their rough edges or, at the very least, to suggest that they are not representative of the epoch in which they occurred.

The Stratified Nature of the Narration

I suggest, then, that the previous explanations do not fully explain the stratified nature of this particular story. The story, rather, may be viewed as having more than one narrator because of its different forms and its explicitly stated narrative development. Removing the opening and closing of the story (and intermittent glosses) reveals that its core is presented primarily as a traditional tale, handed down orally from previous generations.

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[53] "Two Scholars," p. 33.
"הרי מעולה היא עירנו, שהיא מן הקהילות הישנות, וכבר קודם לשנת ת"ח היתה מפרסמת לשבח."

[54] (Emphasis mine.) A Yiddish expression:
"א בחור מאכ"ט קידוש אוי"ף א גרויפ."
"פתגם זה איני יודע מניין הוא, אבל מקובל היה בעירנו לקנטר בו את בחורים שדחקו עצמם לעמוד במקום גדולים."

[55] Shaked, "By a Miracle," pp. 133–44.

As mentioned, following a formal introductory opening, the story makes a transition in its narrative style: "Let's relate a bit of what our town's *elders* tell."[56] This opening of what I consider the casual, personal, or folkloric part of the story not only introduces us to the subject but, more important, makes clear that this is a tradition not fabricated by the narrator and surely not related first hand. It is something that was told a number of times by the town's elders. And even the elders do not have first-hand knowledge of the events or of the characters, but rely on the testimony of the bet midrash's (the house of study's) beadle who, in turn, has related it to the collective voice in the narrative, the "we":

> If the beadle was not being a sensationalist, *we* have to believe that he [the poor scholar, Moshe Pinḥas] would drink the cholent lukewarm and that it appeared that he never even rested his head on the pillow that had been given him."[57]

And much of the information in the story comes from a tradition passed down from the collective "mothers" and "men." Like the elders of the town, the women did not come upon their information and impressions first hand, but received them from the men:

> *Our mothers*, who heard from the *men* who knew him [i.e., Moshe Pinḥas], tell of his average height, broad shoulders, square face, and how the separate strands of hair sprouting from his jaw would not quite form a beard.[58]

Throughout the story, the narrator makes it clear that this is a community's inherited tale that he has heard from others. A few further examples will suffice:

> *They* relate further that, throughout his life, he never appeared to laugh.[59]

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[56] "Two Scholars," p. 5.

[57] "Two Scholars," p. 7.

"אם אין השמש מן המגזימים, צריכים אנו להאמין לו,
שחמין שהיה מביא לו היה שותה פושרין והכר שנתן לו לא
ניכר בו שהניח ראשו עליו."

[58] "Two Scholars," p. 7.

"אמותינו ששמעו מאנשים שהכירו אותו רגילות לספר,
קומתו בינונית היתה וכתפיו רחבות ופניו מרובעות וקמצים
קמצים של שער שלא נתחברו כדי זקן היו מבצבצים
מלסתותיו."

[59] "Two Scholars," p. 8 (All emphases are mine.)
"עוד זאת מספרים, שמימיו לא נראה שחוק על פניו."

> Moshe Pinḥas had not yet found his mate. *Some say* this was because he gravitated so much to his studies leaving no time for marriage arrangements. And *some say* that his mother deterred him.[60]
>
> There are *those who say* that R. Shlomo [the wealthy, distinguished scholar] would drop hints that this scholar [Moshe Pinḥas] was well qualified and that they should seek out his teaching.[61]
>
> *They tell* of a butcher who shouted excitedly, "I hereby stand ready to stick out my neck for slaughter for the sake of our new rabbi [R. Shlomo]!"[62]
>
> *They even say* that when he delivered his sermon, they saw tears in the eyes of the venerable Gaon, R. Shlomo's father, and, as R. Shlomo nodded his head toward him, his father would gesture toward the holy ark. *Some speculate* that nodding his head toward his father was as if to say, "Father, this is all from your [Torah]," and that his father's gesturing toward the holy ark was as if to say, "Your Torah, my son, comes from there."[63]
>
> The bet midrash's *elders would say* that if you have not seen a man who was to die while studying Torah, take a look at R. Moshe Pinḥas."[64]

These recurring references to collective voices that express the community's tradition are not surprising when we recognize that the story, to use Vladi-

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[60] "Two Scholars," p. 10.

"משה פנחס עדיין לא מצא זיווגו. יש אומרים שמתוך שנמשך אחר תלמודו לבו לא היה פנוי לעסקי שידוכין, ויש אומרים יד אמו היתה לעכבו."

[61] "יש אומרים , רמז רמז ר' שלמה, שראוי תלמיד חכם זה שיבקשו תורה מפיו."

[62] "Two Scholars," p. 17.

"מספרים שקצב אחד צעק מרוב התפעלות, הריני מוכן ומזומן לפשוט את צוארי לשחיטה בשביל רבינו חדש."

[63] "Two Scholars," pp. 17–18.

"אף הם מספרים שבשעת דרשתו ראו דמעות בעיני הגאון הישיש אביו של ר' שלמה וראו שפעמים היה ר' שלמה מנענע ראשו כלפי אביו, ואביו הראה בידו כנגד ארון הקודש. דורשי רמזים אמרו, הבן ניענע ראשו כלפי אביו לומר אבא הכל משלך הוא, ואביו הראה בידו כנגד ארון הקודש לומר, תורתך בני היא מכאן."

[64] "Two Scholars," p. 24.

"זקני בית המדרש היו אומרים, אם לא ראיתם אדם כי ימות באוהל, ראו את רבי משה פנחס."

mir Propp's language, bears many classic folktale "functions"[65]: a disquietude leading to a hero's disappearance, often a kind of return to seek a solution or redemption (Moshe Pinḥas's return to the primitive, superstitious world of his mother and his return to seek the counsel of his childhood rabbi); a hero's departure on a quest for resolution or fulfillment, often following a parent's death (R. Shlomo's departure from his town, leaving his rabbinic post in order to assume his late father's rabbinic post in another town, while urging his former town's leadership to accept R. Moshe Pinḥas as their rabbi to succeed him); the veneration of ancestors (the seemingly supernatural or magical fulfillment of R. Shlomo's great-great-grandfather's prophecy that one of his progeny would be buried next to him one hundred years in the future and the reverence for the rabbinic Horowitz family lineage); the public foibles of stereotypical characters who, in dramatic episodes, are presented as foolish or as subversively discrediting established authority (Moshe Pinḥas's misguided, naïve attempt to publicly embarrass and discredit R. Shlomo during the latter's inaugural sermon); a mocking of those who transgress communal norms (R. Shlomo's public insult of R. Moshe, the bachelor, when the latter acts as if he had the status of married scholars); the use of cultural archetypes (the poor Talmud student, the privileged, charismatic scholar, the superstitious mother, the gullible common folk, the venerated ancestor). In addition, the brief references to the "lamentation on the era's betrayal" and to the messianic era resonate with the classic folk experience of chanting laments on the physical, moral, and even eschatological descent of characters or communities.[66]

The archetypal characters' flaws appear as our storyteller narrates ineluctable perturbations in their encounters with each other while modernity's economic and social realities encroach.[67] The implied author invokes, often ironically, these classic folkloric functions, as he displays the broader story's narrator's attempt to marginalize or trivialize the characters' distressing circumstances.

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[65]Maintaining that "functions" appear with "surprising regularity" in folktales, Propp defines "function" as "the action of the character from the point of view of its significance for the progress of the narrative" (Vladimir J. Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984], pp. 73–74. Also see Propp's classic work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott, Second revised edition [Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1968]).

[66]Faith Wigzell, "Folklore and Russian Literature," in Neil Cornwell, ed., *Routledge Companion to Russian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 44.

[67]Wigzell, "Folklore and Russian Literature," pp. 37–42.

The story, then, may be interpreted as a narrator's reframing of a traditional tale. The narrator's efforts to distance the reader from the tale (and from its storyteller) become transparent as he, literally and figuratively (and somewhat artificially), reframes it as his new redaction. Agnon, as implied author,[68] displays this transparency of the narrator's standing between the core folk story and the reader.

Traditional Folklore and Modern Fiction

In reading this story, we experience how traditional stories and storytellers have grown distant from us.[69] This form of narration placed a high value on communicating authentic, shared experiences with human vocal resonance and bodily gesture. No synthetic explanation is required for such sharing of experience; no grand theory is needed to appreciate and value the story; no information or discrete data must be conveyed. Rather, storytelling is an act of sharing and companionship.

It appears that the storyteller of the core narrative in "Two Scholars" falls within this category. What Walter Benjamin would call his "living immediacy," his "present force," however, is made "something remote," "more distant," by narrative reframing. That narrator does just what the storyteller does not: offering explanatory glosses, presenting a totalizing metanarrative, and providing a rationale for relating the story.[70]

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[68]See note 25.

[69]Ten years before the publication of Agnon's story, Walter Benjamin wrote his famous essay, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (1936). In a sense, the essay is a lament over the loss of the traditional story—the intimacies of its re-tellings, its personal communicability, and its groundedness in human experience. Though not simply offering a sentimental romanticization of the storyteller, Benjamin demonstrates how modern fiction and historiography have, perhaps by a dialectical necessity, eclipsed the valued but fading narratives of the storyteller and supplanted the phenomenology of their tellings and re-tellings. For Benjamin, the storyteller is a receding form of life: "Familiar though his name may be to us, the storyteller in his living immediacy is by no means a present force. He has already become something remote from us and something that is getting even more distant" (Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Harry Zohn, trans., Hannah Arendt, ed. [New York: Schocken Books, 1968], pp. 83–109).

[70]But to Benjamin, while the storyteller does not totalize the narrative, he does provide counsel—though not the counsel of resolute answers or definitive interpretations. His counsel is an invitation into the story's world and an offering of its reception into one's own: "After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continua-

The storyteller, nevertheless, is trying to offer a kind of wisdom that is not to be confused with providing explanation. As Benjamin suggests, "Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it."[71] The wisdom of storytelling lets contradictions speak for themselves, resisting a modern tendency to universalize narratives that render a "meaning of life" over and above the "simple or profound meanings in a story."[72]

Agnon may have sought to achieve a re-creation, ironically, by revealing a narrative eclipse of the storyteller. The storyteller's footprints appear as we read the core of this tale. But their contours are framed by a narrator who simplifies, generalizes, abbreviates, and even contradicts the real. The outline of the storyteller becomes visible, however, "from a certain distance," to use Benjamin's language:

> Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him, or rather, they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head or an animal's body may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision.[73]

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tion of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. . . . Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out" (Benjamin, "Storyteller," Section IV).

[71]Benjamin, "Storyteller," Section VI, XIV. 20. Also see Miron, "Agnon's Transactions": "What bothered him especially was the simplistic optimism of these ideas and their faith in the power of human and national will—in short, their positivist self-assurance that disregarded the subtle complex of difficulties, mistakes, blindnesses, and just plain foolishness that abound in all realms of life." Also see Dan Miron, "The Literary Image of the Shtetl," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1995): 1–43.

[72]Benjamin, "Storyteller," Section XIV. While nostalgic for the storyteller, Benjamin recognizes that this distinction between meaning and moral is what allows the novel to achieve "an end which is more proper to it, in a stricter sense, than to any story." The novel's form requires a kind of closure not befitting the traditional story. The reader's or listener's response to a story always can elicit the legitimate query: 'and then what happened?'" Benjamin argues that the unresolved question is an essential storytelling feature: "Actually there is no story for which the question as to how it continued would not be legitimate." Not so, for the novelist. For Benjamin, "the novelist . . . cannot hope to take the smallest step beyond that limit at which he invites the reader to a divinatory realization of the meaning of life by writing 'Finis.'" Beyond the novel, to Benjamin, the brevity and precision of the short story reflects modern man's impatience for the slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers with their varieties of retellings of the past (Benjamin, "Storyteller," Section IX. Section XII).

[73]Benjamin, "Storyteller."

Reading Agnon requires these variegated vantage points through which to see and comprehend the narrative. This type of reading involves a careful, imaginative recovery of the past in a context of a present that wittingly or unwittingly, cunningly or innocently, recasts it.[74]

The storyteller in "Two Scholars" calls out to share experience even as the narrator awkwardly, but deliberately, seeks to mute his voice and tries to provide a kind of guide to the perplexed reader. The core enigmatic tale is apparently too transgressive for the narrator, as it seemingly dismantles an idealized reconstructed memory.

Agnon is perhaps enjoining us here not to settle for forced contextualization of the past, even as we may hold dear its ideals and romanticize what might have been lost. But a clearer vision will help us recover that authentic beloved past, even as we come to recognize its human fallibilities, societal instabilities, and moral uncertainties. This implied author wants us to put a check on the subjectively recast story; he demands our overcoming the interdicts of presupposed emplotment.[75]

Perhaps the narrator who reframes this story is partially correct. Perhaps we should recognize the value placed on Torah learning and embrace the ideal of societal wholeness in our memory. Maybe we should try to feel that world's "preeminence" and simply "salute it from afar," to use Matthew Arnold's characterization of literary criticism's relationship to great literary epochs of the past.[76]

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[74]It is a recovery of what Benjamin calls "the securest among our possessions . . . the ability to exchange experiences" (Benjamin, "Storyteller").

[75]Geoffrey Hartman has warned that "[i]n the matter of art we cannot draw up a Guide for the Perplexed. We can only urge that readers, inspired by hermeneutic tradition, take back some of their authority and become both creative and thoughtful, as in days of old." But Hartman, echoing Benjamin, would enjoin us to avoid simplistically interpreting past events and memories as discrete happenings, separate from one another with no coherent story linking them. This would be an offense of "a trivialized theory of reference," a subversion of our critical mandate to interpret, to tell, to re-tell, "to discharge our powers" (Geoffrey H. Hartman, "The Work of Reading," in Geoffrey Hartman, ed., *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980], p. 161).

[76]Matthew Arnold, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," in William Savage Johnson, ed., *Selections from the Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* (Boston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), p. 61. "In an epoch like those is, no doubt, the true life of literature; there is the promised land, towards which criticism can only beckon. That promised land it will not be ours to enter, and we shall die in the wilderness: but to have desired to enter it, to have saluted it from afar, is already, perhaps, the best distinction among contemporaries; it will certainly be the best title to esteem with posterity."

Agnon, however, does not settle for simply saluting a lost world from afar. His distinction is that he carries us to that world, to "our town" with its textures, imperfections, tensions, and ideals, as if to recapture its paradoxical web of meanings and even to somehow reconstruct a world view that is both authentically his and uniquely our own.