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“And His Heart a Precious Violin”: The Musical Layering of S. Y. Agnon’s Yiddish Story “Toytntants”

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ABSTRACT

The 1908 Yiddish story “Toytntants” was the last creation of the young Galician author Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes before his transformation into S. Y. Agnon of the Land of Israel. The story, which can be understood as a farewell to the romantic-sentimental style identified by Agnon with his writing in Yiddish, was also his longest and most elaborate creation in either Yiddish or Hebrew up to the time of its writing. It stands in sharp contrast to the “single-storied” structure of Agnon’s previous tales, some of which were even integrated into “Toytntants.” This article analyzes Agnon’s use of “musicalization” in the text, a phenomenon that scholars have also identified in James Joyce’s writings. When read in historical context, “Toytntants” reveals new aspects of the cultural atmosphere in which Agnon lived while he resided in Galicia.

Key words: S. Y. Agnon, modern Yiddish literature, danse macabre, Camille Saint-Saëns

In April 1908, on his way to Palestine, Shmuel Yosef Halevi Czaczkes, later known as Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970), writer of Hebrew literature and Nobel laureate, visited the city of Lemberg (today, Lviv). While there he met with the pioneer of the Jewish press in Galicia, Gershom Bader (1868–1953), an energetic, multilingual Jewish activist whose writings appeared in the Hebrew, Yiddish, German, and Polish presses. Agnon had met Bader the year before, when

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the publisher had offered him an attractive salary to come to Lemberg to participate in the editing of a Hebrew-language periodical, *Ha-et*. However, *Ha-et* had folded and Agnon had returned home to Buczacz, frustrated and jobless. Now, in 1908, Bader was asking Agnon to submit a piece for his long-established Yiddish yearbook, the *Yudisher folkskalendar*.¹ The Yiddish story Agnon handed him, entitled “Toytntants” (Dance of Death),² was published in the 1912 issue, which turned out to be the publication’s last.

Coincidentally, this story was also the last one Agnon ever wrote in Yiddish. On the eve of immigrating to the Land of Israel, he had decided not to write in that language anymore—or so Agnon claimed almost 40 years later, in his semiautobiographical story “Hemdat,” published in 1947. Hemdat was the same name the author used for his literary alter-ego. At the end of chapter 7, Agnon writes:

A year before [i.e., in 1907], Hemdat had spent several weeks in Lemberg as an assistant to Mr. Yehonatan Biderman [i.e., Gershom Bader], editing a Hebrew-language newspaper. Mr. Yehonatan Biderman was one of the heralds of the [Jewish] renaissance; he published newspapers, periodicals, booklets, and pamphlets that served as mouthpieces for the Hebrew language and Zionism. Because of bad things that happened to Mr. Biderman at the hands of the new Zionists, he came to feel despair, and everything that was dear to him in the beginning was not dear to him at the end. Nevertheless, Hemdat went to visit him. When Mr. Biderman heard that Hemdat was going to the Land of Israel, he began to make fun of the land and its inhabitants, who, he said, were stirring up the whole world with false hopes and shouting, “woof, woof.” . . . Hemdat knew that Mr. Biderman was bitter. Remembering in his favor his first deeds, Hemdat refrained from expressing his own opinion regarding Mr. Biderman’s last words. Thank God that our course is correct, and any libels against the land and its inhabitants will not divert us from our good course. Finally Mr. Biderman said to Hemdat, “I am about to publish a collection in Yiddish. If you have a poem or story, give it to me.” Hemdat took a story out of his pocket and gave it to him. This was the last of his stories that he wrote outside the Land of Israel and in Yiddish. From then on he wrote only in Hebrew.³

Whether or not this account is entirely accurate,⁴ the story, “Toytntants,” was the last literary creation of the Galician Czaczkes before his transformation into the Agnon of the Land of Israel. The story was also Agnon’s longest and most elaborate creation in either Yiddish or Hebrew up to the time of its writing. It stands in sharp contrast to the “single-storied” structure of his previous tales, which had been published regularly in Jewish periodicals in Galicia and some of which were

even integrated into “Toytntants.” The unique characteristics of this work, when read in historical context, reveal new aspects of the cultural atmosphere in which the author lived while he resided in Galicia.

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A Jewish-European Narrative

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Dan Laor, in his biography of Agnon, reconstructs the circumstances in which Agnon handed Bader the story. “And what name shall be given to this story?” Bader asked, and Agnon answered, “Toytntants.”⁵ Whether Agnon’s response was the result of a spontaneous decision or of one made previously (assuming the conversation actually took place) is of little consequence. The name was well-known to both Jewish and non-Jewish readers in Europe, including, without a doubt, to Agnon, as his own testimony about his early contacts with European and Jewish literature shows. As a result of his mother’s influence, Agnon was a voracious reader of books in German. He began with Schiller’s *The Robbers* and continued with Goethe, Hauptmann, German translations of the Scandinavians Ibsen and Hamsun, and others.⁶ Lists of new books publicized in the newspapers of Buczacz and its surroundings, often with Agnon’s participation, reveal further examples. Thus, a 1906 issue of the Stanislavov Hebrew-language monthly *Ha-yarden* lists several new books in German by the authors Hans Ostwald, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Georg Brandes, and Houston Stewart Chamberlain.⁷ Agnon and his Buczacz friends were, of course, strongly bound to the traditional world of the *beit midrash* (talmudic academy), but at the same time they also lived in a milieu of German culture, as we learn from the memoirs of another native of Galicia, the geographer and historian Abraham Jacob Brawer (1884–1975).⁸

In light of this, it is likely that Agnon was familiar with Goethe’s short macabre ballad “Totentanz,” and given his love for Scandinavian literature, he was probably familiar with August Strindberg’s play *Dödsdansen* (1901) as well. Is it possible that one or both of these works served as the prototype for Agnon’s 1908 Yiddish story or that Agnon used the title of the German-language drama collection *Totentanz der Liebe* (1902) by the popular Polish symbolist writer Stanisław Przybyszewski?⁹ In order to answer these questions it is necessary first of all to clarify the structure and content of “Toytntants.”

Structurally, the work is divided into three main parts (supplemented with two poems). The frame story relates the appearance of the narrator’s female friend from the past, Miriam, an enigmatic woman whose nickname is the ghoulish French phrase *Danse Macabre*

(Dance of Death). She informs the narrator of the death of his friend the poet and hands over to him the poet's writings, which include two poems and two stories: "Rafael Sofer Stam" (Raphael, the Scribe of Holy Texts) and "Ha-panas" (The Street Lamp), the latter of which Agnon had already published separately in Hebrew in 1907.¹⁰

The contents of "Toytntants" constitute a kind of distilling of the theme of death that Agnon had already touched upon in previous works, both in Hebrew and in Yiddish. Here death is examined from all sides and finally reaches an apotheosis in the dance of death itself, performed by Raphael the Scribe. From the very first paragraph, the reader is made aware of the narrator's depressed mood: he has lost "all his zest for life," and everything around him "lacks life, [suffering] a real kind of death." In these circumstances the narrator decides, paradoxically, to seek life in the cemetery. On the way there, near a church, he meets a repugnant gentile woman with a yellowish face. She is the personification of death, as commonly portrayed in European frescos and pictures dating back as far as the medieval period.

In the cemetery itself black ravens, the archetypal messengers of death, receive the visitor while dancing a polka over the tombstones. Soon the narrator receives word of the arrival of his friend Miriam, that is, Danse Macabre. She is described as "a young woman with black eyes, pale face, and a mournful ringing voice," who was "more a hypnotic medium than a human creature." In other words, she too is the embodiment of death. As mentioned above, the girl hands the narrator a package from his friend the poet, who had been the girl's lover and has recently died. The package contains several works in verse and prose, all devoted to death.

One of the poems in the package, "A maysele funem beys hamedresh" (A Tale from the Torah Study Hall), is about a yeshiva boy who yearns first to become famous and then to have the privilege of marrying his beloved, Miriam, but his strength fails him and he dies before his time. After this sad poem comes another tale from the collection of the unfortunate poet, the story of Raphael the Scribe. Here, Raphael's wife, also named Miriam, has died in the prime of her life, and Raphael is preparing a Torah scroll in her memory. As he completes his work he imagines his wife dancing with him and falls dead in the midst of this dance of the deceased.

The girl, Danse Macabre, describes the last days of her lover, the poet, noting that the "eternal Jew" appeared to him as a sign of his approaching demise. The girl also relates how, on his deathbed, the poet called to mind the image of the *Flying Dutchman*, the wrecked vessel, manned by ghosts, that appears mysteriously over the ocean. The "eternal Jew" tells

the dying poet a story about another poet, a miserable pauper who writes in the street by the light of a street lamp and in the end dies of cold. The street lamp also has a macabre tale to tell. It was erected by a convert to Judaism, the grandson of a rapacious count who had murdered a Jewish bridegroom and abducted his bride from under their huppah. At midnight, after the crowing of a cock, the bride emerges from the cemetery of the gentiles, and from the synagogue the murdered groom comes toward her. The two unfortunates meet and circle around in a dance of death. The tale includes an elderly night watchman who also dies from cold and hunger. In the end, even the brass heart of the street lamp cannot stand the all-pervading gloom, and the pole collapses by the body of the dead poet.

The seemingly endless succession of references to death in this work turns the narrative itself into a kind of dance of death. The answer to the question of what brought the youthful author to think so deeply about this weighty topic is perhaps a matter for students of the psychology of youth. I would merely note here that the issue of death was of serious concern to Agnon, appearing even in his first publication, the poem “Rabi Yoysef dela Reyne” (Rabbi Joseph de la Reina), which appeared in the Yiddish-language weekly *Yudishes vokhenblat* in 1903, when the author was not yet 16 years old.

As far as “Toyntants” is concerned, it is doubtful that Strindberg’s play *Dödsdansen* could have served as a source of inspiration, since that work is devoted to other topics entirely. In contrast to *Dödsdansen*, Goethe’s ballad “Totentanz” does deal with the dead, but rather sarcastically—it has them dancing in cemeteries—and on the whole Goethe’s plot is much different from Agnon’s. Another ballad of Goethe’s, the vampirically themed “The Bride of Corinth,” is perhaps a better candidate as Agnon’s inspiration. Here the dead bride appears in the room of her intended groom, who is unaware of the fact that she is no longer among the living. In these hair-raising circumstances the groom addresses his bride:

Then he clasps her madly in his arms,
While love’s youthful might pervades his frame:
“Thou might’st hope, when with me, to grow warm,
E’en if from the grave thy spirit came!”¹¹

The bride has indeed come from the grave, in order to drink the blood of her beloved until he is dead. Agnon’s Raphael also meets his death through his dead wife. However, the dance element, which is so important in “Toyntants,” is lacking in Goethe’s “Bride of Corinth.”

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Of course, German literature or works translated into German were not the only possible influences on Agnon in the composition of “Toyntants.” In 1907, some months before Agnon left for the Land of Israel, Y. L. Peretz’s symbolist Yiddish play *Bay nakht oyfn altn mark* (At Night in the Old Market) appeared in Warsaw. In one scene, after night has fallen, the marketplace of the small town fills with dead people dancing. This play must surely have attracted the attention of the young Agnon, since he often spoke about Peretz and even used a motif that had appeared in Peretz’s early poem “Monish” in one of his own early poems, the above-mentioned “Rabi Yoysef dela Reyne.”

The name “Toyntants” is echoed within the story by the French phrase “Danse Macabre.” The use of this particular phrase is a rather surprising development in Agnon’s style of writing, and in light of this anomalous usage, it is reasonable to assume that Agnon came up with the idea under the influence of some other European creative work. That work, I suggest, was Camille Saint-Saëns’s tone poem “Danse macabre,” which was composed on the basis of a text written by the French symbolist poet Henri Cazalis (1840–1909). Cazalis, in his turn, was undoubtedly influenced by Goethe’s “Totentanz.”

Saint-Saëns’s “Danse macabre,” composed in 1874, amazed and disconcerted his contemporaries with its innovative and unconventional musical devices. For example, the xylophone player “knocks” on the keys of his instrument with the aim of evoking the knocking together of dry bones. In cultural salons all over Eastern Europe, in capital cities and provincial towns, the work was much discussed; orchestras played it in public parks; and at the end of the 1880s Saint-Saëns even went east for a visit in the region. It is possible that the idea of bringing together the Yiddish *toyntants* and the French *danse macabre* came to Agnon from the above-mentioned Przybyszewski, who suggested staging a part of his collection *Totentanz der Liebe*, the short symbolist drama “The Guests,” to the accompaniment of Saint-Saëns’s “Danse macabre.”¹²

The Musical Substratum of “Toyntants”

In Agnon’s Yiddish text, “Danse Macabre” is always written in Latin letters and thus can be understood as a direct reference to Saint-Saëns’s work. We have evidence of Agnon’s sensitivity to and knowledge of music from a piece of aesthetic and literary criticism that Agnon published in 1906. The article, entitled “Iber hebreishe dikhter” (About Hebrew Poets) and published in the Buczacz newspaper *Der yudishe*

veker,¹³ was a critical review of the collected writings of the Hebrew poet and artist Mordechai Zvi Mane (1859–86).¹⁴ With the aim of connecting Mane the poet with Mane the artist, Agnon begins his article with a list of the “four languages” that God instilled in the soul of man: song (poetry), sculpture, painting, and music. This opening is borrowed from Mane’s own Hebrew article “Takhlit ha-hokhmot ha-yafot ute‘udatan” (The Purpose of the Fine Arts and Their Mission), which was published in his collected writings.¹⁵ This article is of particular interest because in it Mane explains his aesthetic and artistic viewpoint and writes about the unity of poetry and music:

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They say about Beethoven that his slogan was, “If I could convey the tumult of the streets, the noise of wheels and the galloping of horses, the roar of the crowd and so on, with discipline and order, then I would be creating wonderful and pleasant music.” I do not know how much truth there is in this saying, but it is certainly the goal of the composer to reveal the beauty in the sounds of human emotion, to bring order and harmony to them, and to amaze us with their beauty. To reveal and expose in sound the beauty in things is the one aim of poetry and music. Therefore we see these two on every side walking arm in arm like twin sisters, and in their unity they continue to elevate our souls.¹⁶

In his critical review, Agnon does not repeat Mane’s whole doctrine of the pure beauty of the arts, but he does mention Mane’s idea of the symbiosis between poetry and music. Agnon writes:

Music is the fourth good gift the Holy One, blessed be He, bequeathed to man’s soul. This is where words are no longer able to express the inner feelings, the feelings inside the soul, for, in the end, the word is the cancellation of the feeling, as the great Italian poet [Pico della] Mirandola says, “The word that reaches one’s lips is a tombstone for the feeling.” When sculpture is incapable and color is powerless, then begins the reign of song, the powerful action of poetry. In the language of the Kabbalists this is called *le-eila ule-eila* (higher and higher). Music gives expression to all the inner feelings. When a person laughs or cries, yearns or belittles, loves or hates, everything that passes through the soul, all of this produces for us the sound of music. As Turgenev says, “There is one language in the world that everyone understands, even the biggest ignoramus, and that is music.”¹⁷

In this description Agnon presents *shirah* as both poetry and music, which he designates alternately by the Hebrew words *koah ha-shirah* (the power of poetry/singing) or *koah ha-shir* (the power of the poem/song). Further on, Agnon states emphatically:

The poet who died in his youth [i.e., Mane] inherited two of those gifts of God, poetry and painting, from nature. We shall talk about the first gift only, about his *koah ha-shir* (power of the poem/song), about how deeply he entered into the temple of *shirah* (poetry/singing) and to which step he climbed in the *gots melodye* (divine melody).¹⁸

Agnon continues to describe Mane the poet in musical terms until the very end of the review. He concludes his article thus:

Unfortunately Mane died too young, and the violin string of his poetry/singing was broken too quickly . . . but in the sheet music of the Jewish people the music of his soul is preserved.¹⁹

A direct comparison of the passage above with the relevant passages in “Toyntants” will make it possible for us to appreciate the similarity of the two texts. In “Toyntants,” Raphael the Scribe is described as follows:

His soul was a tangled tumult, his nerves strings of sensation, and his heart a precious violin. And when the wind of love began to blow on the strings of this violin, magical tunes emerged, melodies of tenderness, and of happiness that had been silenced. Such beautiful, such warm tones burst forth, such as someone else would not be able to produce even if they cried out at the top of their lungs.²⁰

In these two passages appear the same violin strings, along with the violin to which they are attached. These parallel images argue for a “family resemblance” between Mordechai Zvi Mane and Raphael the Scribe. Behind the sentimental musical description in “Toyntants” we see clearly the image of the real-life poet who died at the age of 27 of tuberculosis and who was one of the pioneers of the new lyrical Hebrew poetry. The image of Mane surely occupies a place in the conceptual substratum of “Toyntants,” if only as raw material from which to obtain ideas about how to design the work, as the scholar and critic Gershon Shaked has supposed.²¹ The fact that Mane’s presence can be detected in the story, thanks to Agnon’s use of violin imagery, is interesting in and of itself, but by focusing further on the musical backdrop of “Toyntants” we can illuminate it from quite a new perspective.

Between “Verbalization” and “Musicalization”

The musical substratum of “Toyntants” is more extensive than the violin imagery mentioned above and can be described rather easily in phonological and musical terms. Every movement in the story is

conveyed using a musical expression of one kind or another. Agnon employs a well-developed music-oriented semantic field that, upon consideration, exposes his intention of inverting the work of Saint-Saëns. Whereas the French composer exemplified brilliantly the “verbalization” of music, Agnon’s aim was the “musicalization” of the textual flow, a task that at first glance may seem to have produced merely a rather naïve piling up of words.

At the very beginning of the story, Agnon’s narrator, sunk in existential disgust, decides to go to a cemetery, to seek real life among the dead. This strange decision appears to be a kind of parody of Henri Cazalis’s poem “Danse macabre,” which, as noted above, served as the verbal infrastructure for Saint-Saëns’s work of the same name. Cazalis’s poem reads in English as follows:

Zig, zig, zig, Death in cadence,
Striking a tomb with his heel,
Death at midnight plays a dance-tune,
Zig, zig, zag, on his violin.

The winter wind blows, and the night is dark;
Moans are heard in the linden trees.
White skeletons pass through the gloom,
Running and leaping in their shrouds.

Zig, zig, zig, each one is frisking,
You can hear the cracking of the bones of the dancers.
A lustful couple sits on the moss
So as to taste long lost delights.

Zig zig, zig, Death continues
The unending scraping on his instrument.
A veil has fallen! The dancer is naked.
Her partner grasps her amorously.

The lady, it’s said, is a marchioness or baroness
And her green gallant, a poor cartwright.
Horror! Look how she gives herself to him,
Like the rustic was a baron.

Zig, zig, zig. What a saraband!
They all hold hands and dance in circles.
Zig, zig, zag. You can see in the crowd
The king dancing among the peasants.

But hist! All of a sudden, they leave the dance,
They push forward, they fly; the cock has crowed.
Oh what a beautiful night for the poor world!
Long live death and equality!²²

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Here the action takes place in a cemetery at midnight on Halloween (All Saints' Eve), when the dead come out of their graves and dance to music conducted by death personified (played by a violin in Saint-Saëns's work) until the cock crows. Agnon, for his part, begins his story "One miserable day in winter." This foul wintry scene, it seems, is meant to evoke the celebrations of the Galician Slavs close to Christmas, when they dress up as folkloric figures and put on street plays. The connection to the (semi)religious festival becomes even more vivid when the narrator approaches the *kloyster* (Catholic church) on his way to the cemetery and sees the yellow-faced old woman—perhaps a beggar, perhaps someone dressed up as death, or perhaps death itself. The ravens dancing a polka on the tombstones evoke another Slavic element and parody Cazalis's dancing dead. In addition to the morbid ravens, the narrator perceives a *gelekhter fun yashtsherkes* (laughter of lizards). Agnon's audience, steeped in Yiddish culture, would understand this as a reference to the idiomatic Yiddish phrase *lakhen mit yashtsherkes* (to laugh with lizards), that is, to laugh in a bitter, and even macabre, manner. Hearing the sounds of the lizards, the narrator comes to the conclusion that "in this way they are telephoning my soul, for which a disaster has been prepared." Soon he is handed a telegram informing him of the coming of his female friend. At this point the narrator says, "anxiety began to play a march of suffering on my thin nerves."

Embedded in the text of "Toyntants," we can now see, are numerous sound effects. By noting the opening of the story as a kind of reverse libretto, we obtain a sequence of elements from "Toyntants" and corresponding sonic expressions: "the dance of bitterness and the anguish felt by the author" and the tumult of the town; "the ravens dancing in the cemetery" and the dance of death in the cemetery; the ravens' polka dance and the sounds of a polka as an expression of Slavic celebration; "the laughter of lizards" and macabre laughter; "telephoning my soul" and the ring of a telephone; "a march of suffering on my thin nerves" and the tune of a march; the appearance of *Danse Macabre* and the last chord of the music.

This list could be carried through to the very end of the story, the verbal text paralleling the musical score. Many scholars have made similar arguments about James Joyce's writings, which are rich in musical allusion. There are nearly a thousand such allusions, mainly to songs, in *Finnegans Wake*.²³ In just one chapter of *Ulysses*, "Sirens," the scholar Zack Bowen found 158 references to diverse kinds of musical works; for example, the song "Love and War" indicates the transition from the theme of love in the first part of the chapter to the theme of patriotism

in the second part.²⁴ Not just text within a Joycean literary work, but the work as a whole, can be conceived as a musical composition. Ezra Pound, for example, contended that *Ulysses* was written in the form of a sonata.²⁵ The “genetic” link between “Toyntants” and Saint-Saëns’s “Danse macabre,” which is a symphonic poem based upon the sonata form, makes it possible to use a similar approach in analyzing Agnon’s story.

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Agnon’s “Orchestra”

The sonata form consists of three main elements: exposition (that is, the initial presentation), development, and recapitulation. The exposition presents the basic thematic material, which is usually divided into a first theme and a second theme in a different key, ending with a codetta. The developmental segment is devoted to differentiating the themes and motifs, whereas the recapitulation is a return to the exposition, although with variations. The work is sometimes sealed with a coda, which can be of very short duration.

In “Toyntants,” the walk to the cemetery presents the main theme of the whole story, death. This is the exposition. The appearance of the strange woman constitutes a kind of counter- or second theme. The codetta in the recapitulation here is the news that the narrator’s friend from the past, the poet, has died. This is followed in the story by a lengthy sequence in which death is mentioned over and over, turning the tale into a kind of dance of death in and of itself. This sequence constitutes the main developmental segment of the work, which reaches its climax in the story of Raphael the Scribe. The inner story “Ha-panas,” which concludes the piece, can be designated as the recapitulation, in which the theme and the countertheme become unified as the powerful final coda is reached: “Demolt hot geplatst dos kuperne harts funem lomp un iz anidergefaln nebn toytn dikhter” (At that moment the brass heart of the street lamp broke and it fell down by the dead poet).²⁶

As noted above, the theme of death presented in the exposition (that is, in the framing of the story) reappears in various forms in the development and recapitulation segments (that is, in the round of stories related in “Toyntants”). Agnon’s “orchestra” splits into lonely voices singing the same melody, but with tonal variations of one kind or another. First the strange woman informs the narrator of the death of his friend the poet and hands him a bundle of the poet’s writings. These pages open with a short poem entitled “Vos???” (“What???”) that

Agnon had written in Yiddish previously and decided to insert into “Toytntants.”

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Awaken, my thoughts,
Discover a pretty song for me,
I want to sing a song, I'd like to compose a song.²⁷

The words “I want to sing” clearly express the creative imperative revealed further on, with greater force, in the opening segment of the story of Raphael the Scribe. The “violin” in Raphael’s heart plays solo under the direction of the “wind of love,” just as Saint-Saëns’s violin of death plays solo under the direction of the winter wind in the cemetery. Both violins invite the dead to a dance. Saint-Saëns employs all kinds of acoustic tricks to achieve his purpose. Agnon, in contrast, creates an authentic musical language of his own.

Raphael the Scribe “would listen and pay attention to every scratch of his scribe’s quill, as if he wanted to hear from within it the voice of God.” As he finishes preparing the Torah scroll, he recalls that “the melody that would be sung during the ‘celebration of the completion’ was a melody that he himself composed.” The allusion here is to the music sung while dancing with the Torah scrolls on the holiday of Simhat Torah, marking the completion of one Torah-reading cycle and the beginning of a new one. This was also traditionally a time when, contrary to everyday practice, women entered the men’s section of the synagogue. And it is precisely in such circumstances, against the background of the Simhat Torah melodies, that the meeting between Raphael the Scribe and his future wife, Miriam, takes place. As the holiday tunes are being sounded, Raphael, clasping the Torah scroll covered with his deceased wife’s wedding dress, dances his last dance, until he finally falls down and dies.

Reality and imagination intertwine, and “suddenly the echo of a voice reaches his ears from the hollow of the room. Who is dancing with him? Who is assisting him?—Miriam? . . . [A]nd a voice from under the wedding dress answers:—Miriam!” This scene concludes the story of the scribe Raphael, and Agnon the narrator brings us back to Saint-Saëns: “My eyes filled with tears. I looked at Miriam, and her name shocked me to my very core—*Danse Macabre*.”

After this, the strange woman describes the last days of the dead poet: “Raphael remembered the legend of the *Flying Dutchman* ship.” The allusion here is not just to the legend but also to the well-known opera by Wagner. Using this imagery, Agnon strengthens the musical substratum of his story. As we have seen, he also employs sound

effects that are especially familiar to a Jewish audience, like the “scratch of his scribe’s quill” and the Simhat Torah melodies. By writing in this way, Agnon stimulates the imagination of his readers and brings about the “musicalization” of his text. In addition, this technique makes it possible to rise above the concrete plot and reach a more universal meaning. Agnon’s mention of the *Flying Dutchman* symbolizes the hero’s nearness to death, for that vessel, in Agnon’s own words, “always appears when some ship is destined to sink into the depths.” When one adds to this the association with Wagner’s opera, an abundance of additional motifs emerge, such as unavoidable fate, faithful love, and death as atonement.

The well-known Wagnerian parallelism between the *Flying Dutchman* and the “eternal Jew” was not lost on Agnon either, and he does not miss the opportunity to mention the “eternal Jew” explicitly in “Toytntants.” This figure, he notes, is one who becomes visible “when the death of an important Jew is expected.” But he immediately adds, facetiously, “However, the ‘eternal Jew’ only comes to ‘visit the sick.’” The irony of the term “visit the sick” in this context would not be lost on an audience steeped in Jewish culture, for whom “visiting the sick” is a common saying and a mitzvah (good deed). The usual expectation, however, is that such a visit will aid the ill person in recovering, not announce his coming end.

In his opera “The Flying Dutchman,” Wagner views the renunciation of the search for a faithful woman as salvation from certain death. Agnon, for his part, completes his story about Danse Macabre’s friend, the poet who has died, in a different spirit: “Who was it that they had to bury? Isn’t the poet alive?” Several theories can be offered to explain this sudden resurrection. We can imagine Agnon smiling to himself as he wrote the words, an oblique reference to his own flesh-and-blood self. After all, he wrote the story not long before leaving the land of his birth—and perhaps some lover as well—to begin a new life elsewhere. Does this passage thus reflect the circumstances of Agnon’s life at the time? Perhaps these words should be understood metaphorically, as a farewell to the romantic-sentimental style, which, it would seem, Agnon identified with his writing in Yiddish, the language of *galut* (exile).

Farewell to the Romantic-Sentimental Style

Judging by Agnon’s own words in the 1947 story “Hemdat,” quoted at the beginning of this article, it is quite possible that Agnon had already decided in 1907 to stop writing in Yiddish. Nevertheless, on his way to

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the Land of Israel in April 1908, as he was emigrating out of what he liked to call *hutsah la-arets* (the lands abroad), he carried with him stories in Yiddish. “Toyntants” turned out to be the only Yiddish story published after Agnon’s departure from Buczacz, but there is no doubt that the majority of the writings in Yiddish that he possessed on the eve of his aliyah found their way into the Hebrew stories he wrote during his residency in Jaffa from 1908 to 1912 and even later. This is what happened to “Toyntants”: Agnon’s Hebrew work “Beerah shel Miryam” (Miriam’s Well) immediately reused some of the “Toyntants” materials, in particular an abridged version of the tale about Raphael the Scribe entitled “Luz” (Hazelnut), published in Jaffa in 1909.²⁸ Ten years later, in 1919, a freestanding Hebrew version of the scribe story, entitled “Agadat ha-sofer” (The Scribe’s Legend), was published in the Warsaw collection *Arakhim* (Values), edited by Fishel Lachover.²⁹ However, comparing the Yiddish and Hebrew texts, we find that the musical description of Raphael the Scribe given in “Toyntants” is not repeated in either “Beerah shel Miryam” or “Agadat ha-sofer.” The latter version is much expanded over the former and develops well beyond the mysterious scene of Raphael the Scribe, dancing the dance of death with a Torah scroll in his arms.³⁰ The musical structure of the story has been totally abandoned. Was this revision the direct result of the language change from Yiddish to Hebrew? It would seem that the answer to this question can be found in the transformation of Agnon’s writing style, in which, according to Gershon Shaked, the “epic” triumphed in “the struggle with the abundance of sentimentality.”³¹

It is not possible in the framework of this study to go into detail regarding the ways in which Agnon radically transformed his approach to creative writing. However, this much can be said: there is good reason to conclude that after saying goodbye for good to his mother tongue, Yiddish, Agnon gradually became estranged from his earlier sentimentalism or, in Shaked’s terminology, from “the table of romance” he had been so “close to” during the years of his youth. It would seem, then, that to a large extent it was this sentimentalism that made it possible for Agnon to blend the European and the Jewish so purposefully and fruitfully in “Toyntants.”

Agnon’s change of attitude toward the musical culture of Europe becomes quite clear from his lively correspondence during the 1920s with his wife, Esther. “There is opera in Jerusalem,” he wrote her in January 1925. “But I haven’t gone to the opera, even though they say wonderful things about it. I don’t want there to be opera in Jerusalem, City of the Holy, and I do not want to assist those who are committing a sin.”³² This does not mean that Agnon stopped relating to

fine music altogether. From time to time in his later writing, one catches a glimpse of his former affection for it. Thus, for example, the names of the famous musicians Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy and Arthur Nikisch appear in his late novel *Be-hanuto shel Mar Lublin* (In Mr. Lublin's Shop, 1962–68). In this regard, the story “Ke-nagen ha-menagen” (When the Musician Played), which was written in the 1940s or later and was published posthumously, is noteworthy. The words of one of its protagonists, Nehemia Gedalia Posek, evoke the connection between the violin and the human soul made in “Toytntants,” as well as Mane’s theory of the “four languages” that God instilled in the soul of man:

[A]nd Posek said to Mira, the whole land [of Israel] is waiting for him, for Kratsonelion, that he should come, and Mira said to Posek, are there so many people in the country who understand music that you say the whole country is waiting for him, and Mr. Posek said to Mira, when they’ll hear the voice of his violin, everyone will understand, that this is the power of genuine music, that bends ears to hear and to understand.³³

However, the similarity between “Toytntants” and “Ke-nagen ha-menagen” is purely superficial. The musical aspect of the latter work has nothing in common with European music. “Ke-nagen ha-menagen”—which was dedicated to the town of Jaffa during the years of the Second Aliyah (1904–14)—has a certain musical stratum that is already hinted at in the title³⁴ and even more in the image of the gifted violinist Vitorio Kratsonelion. The latter’s name is a transparent pun using Hebrew words that harbor a prophetic promise: *ke-ratson ‘Elyon* (according to the will of the One Above). The manner in which Agnon portrays the famous violinist demonstrates clearly the epic imperative in his creative work after his aliyah, which overwhelmed his earlier lyrical sentimentalism. Agnon has the violinist leaving Europe for the Land of Israel, where he is awaited by the whole Yishuv. He is a genuinely messianic figure. Once he is in the land, his concert brings together all the Jews and raises the people of Israel above all nations.

The world of music remained close to Agnon’s heart, as is shown in the great attention he paid to cantors and cantorial music throughout his creative works.³⁵ Nevertheless, after leaving Europe once and for all in 1924 and establishing his home in Jerusalem, he no longer had any intention of exploiting the associations that would be called up by European musical images. He expressed his view of this matter

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quite directly toward the end of his life. In *Mr. Lublin's Shop*, he placed fine European music in opposition to the treasures of Judaism:

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It's a pity for every single breath that I breathe, that goes out of me without the Talmud. They sent me a ticket to the concert in *Gewandhaus* [the famous Leipzig concert hall], and I'm giving it to you. A concert under the direction of [Arthur] Nikisch is something that not everyone gets to experience. Go and prepare yourself for the concert, and I will go and learn a page of *gemarah* [Talmud].³⁶

Notes

This is an extended version of the paper "Agnon in Yiddish: Words and Music," presented at the 2010 National Association of Professors of Hebrew conference on Hebrew language, literature and culture, July 19, 2010, Stern College, Yeshiva University, New York. Unless otherwise noted, the translations from Hebrew into English are by I. Michael Aronson. The translations from Yiddish into Hebrew are my own.

- 1 Bader had been publishing the *Yudisher folkskalendar* in Lemberg since 1896.
- 2 See the story in the collection of Agnon's Yiddish works: Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Yidische verk* (Jerusalem, 1977), 73–83.
- 3 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Me-'atsmi el 'atsmi* (Jerusalem, 1976), 17.
- 4 Evidence indicates that Agnon had more Yiddish stories that remained unpublished. See, for example, the remarks of the Hebrew writer Asher Barash (1889–1952), first published in *Haaretz* in celebration of Agnon's fiftieth birthday and republished in Asher Barash, "Igeret le-'Agnon," in *Sefer Butshatsh: Matsevet zikaron li-kehilah kedushah*, ed. Israel Coehn (Tel Aviv, 1956), 34–35. Barash describes Agnon's last evening in Lemberg, in the home of the literary figure Eliezer Meir Lifshitz (1879–1946): "You went over to the coat . . . felt around and brought to the table a bunch of sheets of paper, large and small, facing every which way, and placed them before you. You sifted through them bewilderedly, selected some and put them down, until you began to read to us one thing after another: a story and a poem, and again, a story and a poem, mostly in Yiddish, which is easy to read aloud." Agnon traveled through Kraków on his way to the Land of Israel and met the poet Abraham (Avrom) Reisen (1876–1953) there. Reisen reportedly also took a Yiddish-language manuscript from Agnon with the intention of publishing it in the monthly journal he edited in Warsaw, *Kunst un lebn*. However, such a story never appeared in that publication. See Yitshak Bakon, *'Agnon ha-tsa'ir* (Tel Aviv, 1989), 25.

- 5 Dan Laor, *Hayei 'Agnon: Biyografiyah* (Tel Aviv, 1998), 46.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 22–23.
- 7 David Pur, *Ha-'ihui mi-Stanislavov: Avraham Lebensart* (Tel Aviv, 2001), 247.
- 8 A. Y. Brawer, “Rash”i ‘Agnon ve-erets ne‘urav,” in *Measef le-divrei sifrut, bikoret ve-hagut*, ed. Shlomo Tanai and Dov Sadan (Tel Aviv, 1954), 237–38. Brawer himself was educated in a Polish gymnasium and was thus influenced by Polish culture.
- 9 Stanisław Przybyszewski, *Totentanz der Liebe* (Berlin, 1902), and see Gabriella Safran, “Dancing with Death and Salvaging Jewish Culture in *Austeria* and *The Dybbuk*,” *Slavic Review* 59, no. 4 (2000): 770.
- 10 Shmuel Ya‘akov (Shmuel Czaczkes), “Ha-panas,” *Ha-'et*, March 10, 1907.
- 11 See Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “The Bride of Corinth,” *Goethe's Works*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, 1885), accessed August 2, 2012. http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2110&chapter=162920&layout=html&Itemid=27.
- 12 Przybyszewski, “Die Gäste,” in *Totentanz der Liebe*, 258–90.
- 13 See the review in Agnon, *Yidische verk*, 87–95.
- 14 Mordechai Zvi Mane, *Kol kitvei Mordekhai Tsvi Mane: Kovets shirav, maamarav u-mikhtavav*, 2 vols. (Warsaw, 1897).
- 15 Mane, *Kol kitvei*, 2: 31–35. About this article and its place in Mane’s writings, see Avner Holtsman, *Malekhet mahshevet tehiyat ha-'umah: Ha-sifrut ha-'ivrit le-nokhah ha-omanut ha-plastit* (Tel Aviv, 1999), 105–6.
- 16 Mane, *Kol kitvei*, 2: 32.
- 17 Agnon, *Yidische verk*, 88.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*, 95.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 21 Gershon Shaked, *Omanut ha-sipur shel 'Agnon* (Tel Aviv, 1973), 77–80.
- 22 See Jean Lahor (Henri Cazalis), “Danse Macabre – Dance of Death,” in Graham Johnson and Richard Stokes, *A French Song Companion* (Oxford, 2002), 458.
- 23 Matthew Hodgart and Mabel Worthington, *Song in the Works of James Joyce* (New York, 1959), 12.
- 24 Zack Bowen, *Bloom's Old Sweet Song* (Gainesville, 1995), 11, 27.
- 25 Ezra Pound, “James Joyce at Peouchet,” *Mercure de France*, June 1, 1922, p. 313. Robert Boyle examines this insight in “Ulysses as Frustrated Sonata Form,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (Summer 1965): 247–54.
- 26 Agnon, *Yidische verk*, 82. On this particular story, see Nitza Ben-Dov, *Agnon's Art of Indirection: Uncovering Latent Content in the Fiction of S. Y. Agnon* (Leiden, 1993), 146–47.
- 27 Agnon, *Yidische verk*, 74–75. The poem “Vos???” was first published in August 1906 in *Der yudische veker*.
- 28 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, “Beerah shel Miryam,” *Ha-po'el ha-tsa'ir*, July 1, 1909, p. 8.

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- 29 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, "Agadat ha-sofer," in *Arakhim: Kevatsim li-sheelot ha-hayim ule-sifrut*, ed. Fishel Lachover (Warsaw, 1919), 13–23.
- 30 About this story see, for example, Ariel Hirshfeld, *Li-kro et Shai Agnon* (Tel Aviv, 2011), 63–89.
- 31 Shaked, *Omanut ha-sipur*, 20.
- 32 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Esterlain yekirati: Mikhtavim 1924–1931* (Tel Aviv, 1983), 56–57. Half a year later Agnon felt compelled to attend the theater to see the play *Halom Ya'akov* in order to report on its quality to its author and his friend, Richard Beer-Hofmann. He wrote to his wife that the production "was bad and tiresome" (ibid., 114).
- 33 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Pithei devarim* (Tel Aviv, 1974), 89.
- 34 See 2 Kings 3:15: "And it came to pass, when the musician played [*kenagen ha-menagen*], that the hand of the Lord came upon him [the prophet Elisha]." Translation based on the Mechon Mamre online Hebrew Bible, accessed August 2, 2012. <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt09b03.htm>.
- 35 Hillel Weiss, "Sipurei ha-hazanim le-'Agnon," *Amudim* 614 (1997): 21–25.
- 36 Shmuel Yosef Agnon, *Be-hanuto shel Mar Lublin* (Tel Aviv, 1977), 113–14.