

On Jews and Judaism in Crisis

S E L E C T E D E S S A Y S

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S. Y. Agnon—The Last Hebrew Classic?*

I

In order to understand the greatness or genius of a contemporary Hebrew writer such as S. Y. Agnon, it is necessary to consider the state of Hebrew and Hebrew literature before Hebrew once again became a language absorbed by infants at their mothers' knees, children playing in the street—before its use again as a natural means of communication and education. Before the present generation, Hebrew enjoyed none of these advantages. It was nourished from another source. Hebrew was the language of a great religious tradition, and almost everything written in it was valuable and significant in the context of that tradition. Even after Hebrew (or, for that matter, Aramaic, so closely related to Hebrew that to the Jewish mind it was something like a younger sibling) was no longer in use as a spoken language by Jewish communities, it could still hold its own as a written language because for generation after generation it occupied a central place in education, in the study of the Bible and the Talmud and all writings connected with them.

Nor did Hebrew remain significant only for a numerically small elite, as was the case with Latin, but for a very considerable part of the community. Everyone was expected to have a working knowledge of Hebrew, and the study of the Bible and

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the Talmud was by no means limited to those who intended to become rabbis or judges. In countries where Jewish intellectual and religious life was particularly vigorous—such as Poland, Italy, or Turkey—Hebrew represented the principal means of expressing the spiritual life of an important segment of the male community.

It is true that the spark of vitality which comes to language from women was lacking, and this lack was indeed very much in evidence. What remained, however, was of overwhelming richness. Hebrew became the language of literary tradition insofar as the latter claimed higher significance. Books for womenfolk were composed in the vernacular, but almost everything else—not only scholarly literature, but also chronicles, poetry, and even parodies—was written in Hebrew. Biblical and talmudic associations were employed up to the hilt; the works contained a never-ending stream of witty and surprising uses of old phrases or of playful variations upon them. Quite often, the measure of a Jew's education was not only his command of Bible and Talmud, but his ability to use these sources ingeniously for secular purposes as well.

When modern Hebrew literature began to develop, especially in the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth, it was built on a paradox from the start: it fed on a language of predominantly religious tradition but strove for secular goals. Writers of considerable talent and some, indeed, of genius did their best to achieve this metamorphosis of Hebrew into a language of secular literature. In its earlier stages this new literature was directed mainly against the petrified state of Jewish tradition and came to criticize the many shortcomings and basic defects of East European Jewish society.

Later, however, with the emergence of the Zionist movement, the renaissance of Hebrew gravitated toward a more positive purpose. A new life was springing up in the old land of Israel, and Hebrew literature undertook to serve as the connecting link between the disintegrating life of the Diaspora, with all its contradictions, and the new society being erected in Palestine. Still, even this renaissance and such outstanding representatives of it as Bialik, Tchernichowsky, and Shneur were as yet limited in the means of expression at their disposal. Hebrew remained a

language of literary tradition, and though the great writers I have just mentioned spent their later years in Israel, the spoken Hebrew of the new generation had no formative influence on their language.

Agnon occupies a position at the crossroads of Hebrew. That is a position enabling a writer of genius to attain the rank of a classic. He can be heir to the totality of Jewish tradition and have the chance to give the highest artistic form to the life of the Jewish people under the reign of tradition and under the impact of the historic forces that make for its disintegration. If he is a great artist, he will remain incomparable. He can become a classical master—but he will be the last of his line.

Agnon, who has spent most of his creative years in Israel, has witnessed the development of Hebrew as a “natural” language, as a language spoken at first in consequence of a moral decision made by a small number of Utopians, and later by an ever-increasing number of youngsters who have grown up in Israel and know no other language. He was fully aware of this process, and he knew that this metamorphosis of Hebrew involved a decisive loss of form. When a language is no longer forged by the study of ancient texts and conscious reflection, but rather by unconscious processes in which the power of tradition is a minor factor, that language is bound to become chaotic. This chaotic quality of present-day Hebrew, which was already becoming apparent about forty years ago, when Agnon settled permanently in Israel, may one day become the vehicle of expression for a new genius, but by then that language will be essentially different in its means and potentialities.

Agnon, with his highly developed sense of form, was obviously alarmed by this prospect of a Hebrew language liberated from the fetters of tradition. He, too, strove for the renaissance of Hebrew, but he worked for it in the quarries of tradition and through the potential of great forms contained in it. Being a writer of supreme gifts, he achieved the form for which he labored. But, to repeat, he may well be the last great author in this medium. It is, after all, the most obvious result of the regeneration of Hebrew as a natural language, that the words have sloughed off the heavy ballast of historical tones and overtones accumulated through 3,000 years of sacred literature.

They have acquired a new virginity; they are now ready to be molded into new contexts from which the old and sometimes oppressive odor of sanctity has evaporated.

Of course, this is precisely what the writers of the last two generations have tried to accomplish, but in the last analysis the burdens of history were in their bones and asserted themselves even in their revolt. In this respect, the new "innocents," for whom the Bible is no longer a holy book but a national saga, and for whom rabbinical and medieval literature is a book with seven seals, are in a happier situation than Agnon and his contemporaries. They are free to wrestle with the words in a completely new emotional setting, and on a level of freedom unheard of hitherto. They are confronted, it is true, with dangers of rebirth which are in no way less than those of birth. Nobody can foretell what will come of this sweep and whirl in terms of literature. For the time being, nothing is audible but stammering. Much of Agnon's work is contemporary with these first stammerings, and one can speak of a secret and mutual fascination between the two: the occupant of the most advanced outpost of the Hebrew language in its old sense, and the pioneers of the unbroken land that stretches beyond. The anarchic vitality, the lawlessness and roughness of the new language has alarmed Agnon and appears as an object of scorn and irony in quite a few of his stories. But the reader of Agnon cannot escape the feeling that more and more of the master's work was produced as a kind of desperate incantation, an appeal to those who would come after him. It is as though he were saying, "Since you no longer accept the continuity of tradition and its language in their true context, at least take them in the transformation they have undergone in my work; take them from someone who stands at the crossroads and can see in both directions."

II

I have tried to explain the condition of Hebrew and Hebrew literature insofar as it is relevant to the task of placing Agnon's work in our time. But to understand the work we must also take a look at its author. Both, to say the least, are somewhat enigmatic.

It is small wonder that over the last forty years a considerable literature of interpretation on the meaning of Agnon's writings has sprung up in which widely differing and even contradictory points of view have been argued. A number of the commentators have indulged in much overinterpretation and have read much into Agnon that is their own point of view.

To be sure, the manifest contradictions in his writings amount to an open invitation to such excesses. These interpretations concentrate upon one point: Agnon's position on the historical, indeed the religious tradition of Judaism. Is he to be considered a spokesman for this tradition, a messenger delivering its message in a highly artistic and articulate form, or should we regard him rather as an accomplished artist who uses tradition to express all the intricacies of the life of a Jew in our time, but who proffers no easy answer to the old question of where we are going? Is he a great defender of the faith, as the Orthodox have acclaimed him? Or is he some kind of existentialist genius, showing the emptiness of all fullness and the fullness of emptiness? Is he, perhaps, like the king of the Moors who filled his palace with portraits of white men, setting up an ideal which he is fully conscious can never be attained in our times?

Agnon himself, for all his great gifts as a conversationalist, has been very reticent when it comes to these questions. He is not a man to commit himself. He has delivered his work and left his readers the task of coming to terms with it, his commentators the task of fighting it out among themselves; and, I should say, he rather enjoys the spectacle. As a matter of fact, having known Agnon for fifty years, I can testify to great changes in Agnon's own outlook over the years, and I doubt whether a harmonizing view would do him justice. He was anything but what one could call an observant Jew when I first knew him, but even then he gave the impression of being a bearer of spiritual tradition. And now, in his later years, when he has become an observant Jew, he still gives the impression of being a man of complete intellectual freedom and of utterly unorthodox mind.

This is confirmed by the story of his life. He began writing as a youth, more than sixty years ago. He grew up in Buczacz in Eastern Galicia (now Western Ukraine), an old and settled community of no more than 8,000 Jews and a center of Rabbinic

scholarship. He came from a family of scholars, some of whom strictly opposed Hasidism and all it represented, but some of whom embraced it. The experience of his childhood reflected both these worlds, which combined to determine the physiognomy of Jewish piety in nineteenth-century Galicia. He had hardly any schooling outside traditional talmudic education; his father was his main teacher in the study of the Talmud.

He spent the years of adolescence in the local *bet hamidrash* (house of study), which boasted a tremendous Hebrew library; there he became an ardent and omnivorous reader. He was a bookworm at a very early age, but the old books fired his imagination. He wrote notes and glosses to the old talmudic tomes, but at the same time he started producing stories and poems in the style of the writers of the Haskalah, the rationalist movement that was attempting to introduce enlightenment and European culture into Hebrew. Galicia was then one of the centers of neo-Hebrew literature, and its writers enjoyed a great reputation as masters of Hebrew style. Still a lad, Agnon joined the ranks of the Zionists.

In local Hebrew and Yiddish journals that have long since disappeared, Agnon began his literary career in 1904. An older friend, Eliezer Meir Lipschitz, to whom he remained intimately attached to the end, used to say to him, "Make up your mind what you propose to be, a writer of talmudic notes, *hiddushim* and *pilpulim*, or a writer of stories and a poet." Agnon made his choice early. But Yiddish soon lost its hold on him, and after going to Palestine in 1907 (not in 1909, as is often erroneously stated) he never again resorted to it as a vehicle of literary expression.

His lifelong struggle with Hebrew as both the matter and the form of his inspiration took shape in those first supreme efforts of his literary genius as a storyteller, which were published in Palestine in the years preceding World War I. Their impact was instantaneous.

The first story by him to be published in Palestine, a most lyrical and melancholy tale called *Agunot* ("Deserted Souls"), remains a classical piece of imaginative Hebrew writing to this day. Those with an ear for Hebrew prose—and there were quite a few of them in Palestine in those days—realized at once that

they were faced with a novel phenomenon. In 1913 the Hebrew critic Shalom Streit said of *Agunot*: "An electric current ran through our community at its reading." No Hebrew writer before had dared to begin a short story with a long quotation from one of the old and forgotten books, presumably a kabbalistic one, or to use that citation as a leitmotif.

And what greater paradox could there be than the fact that the weekly of the socialist group Hapoel Hatzair, a group strongly influenced by Tolstoyan and *narodniki* ideas, published in a long series of installments Agnon's first book, *Vehayah he-akov le-mishor* (*And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*)? The story develops an Enoch Arden theme in a strictly traditional Hasidic framework; it is written not so much in the style of the old devotional books as in the style their authors would have used had they been great artists. Joseph Haim Brenner, a convinced atheist who was the first to recognize Agnon's literary genius, scraped together his last shillings to publish the story in book form (1912); incidentally, the man who set it in print was a convinced follower of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, one of the great saints of Hasidism. It is on record that both these men took the greatest delight in the book, thereby anticipating, so to speak, all the later contradictory attitudes of Agnon's admirers. For Brenner, it represented the first work of secular Hebrew literature in which tradition had become the medium of pure art, untouched by extraneous factors such as criticism of, or apologetics for, Jewish society. For the typesetter, whom I have known for many years, it was a true embodiment of Hasidic lore and spirit.

In those formative years of his first stay in Palestine, Agnon indeed felt at home in both camps. He lived with ease among the first pioneers of the Second Aliyah, who wished to revitalize the Jewish people through the Tolstoyan religion of work and a humanistic renewal of hearts, rather than through social revolution. He accepted their vision of Zionism as the only hope for a Jewish future, even if that Zionism always appears with a peculiar paleness in his writings.

At the same time, however, he could establish close relations with the representatives of traditional piety. There was, no doubt, a difference of nuance in his attitude toward the two

camps. He had consciously left the world of tradition as he had known it in his youth, but he was saturated with, and fascinated by, that world. From the vantage point of a great movement which attempted to transform this life, tradition and its representatives seemed to clamor for artistic shaping. The charmed world of the old *yishuv*, the pre-Zionist settlers, in those years certainly held no message for the young Agnon, so far as his own vision of the renaissance of the Jewish people was concerned; but it provided him with a great store of strange figures and with the excitement this atmosphere was capable of evoking. The life of centuries seemed to have been arrested here in a curious mixture of immortality and decay. And this encounter challenged the young artist who here, too, recognized a submerged part of himself.

In those years before the war, Agnon had absorbed the life of Jewish Palestine, and he longed to dissociate himself from both the centers, Galicia and Palestine, which had determined his life so far. He sought a place for further development and for the crystalization of his artistic experiences. Thus he went to Germany in 1912, intending to stay only a few years, but the war overtook him and it was not until 1924 that he returned to settle permanently in Jerusalem.

Agnon's years in Germany were of the greatest importance to his work. There he met a new kind of Jew who left him forever baffled. Curious as he was about them, he was not involved with them in any deeper sense, as he was with Galicia. Nothing prevented him from truly feeling in exile, and at the same time savoring the exhilaration of a man who knows where he belongs. He was still an inveterate reader, and when I first saw him, it was in the excellent library of the Jewish community in Berlin, where, as he told me, he was looking for books he had not yet read.

At this time, too, he made his main contact with European literature; he was, in particular, an avid reader of Hamsun. Even at that time his natural inclination to perfectionism was quite pronounced; he wrote and rewrote his stories six or seven times, a trait which was to become the bane of his publishers, since he would indefatigably rewrite even during proofreading. He published very little during those years, but he worked persistently both at revising his older stories and at writing new ones. He also

wrote a great amount of poetry at that time and a long autobiographical novel in which he took critical stock of his earlier years and the movements which had shaped them. The only chapter which has been preserved and published paints one of the most bitter and devastating pictures we have of Galician Zionism during Agnon's youth.

I have referred to the "only chapter," for in June 1924 all his manuscripts and other papers, together with his invaluable Hebrew library, were completely destroyed by a fire that broke out in his house in Homburg (near Frankfurt). This catastrophe constituted a turning point in Agnon's life. He was never again the same and, indeed, who can fathom the impact of such a blow on the personality of a great artist? Agnon had to start once more from scratch. He gave up writing poetry and never tried to reconstruct his lost novel. He surrendered what was lost and started again from what he had, prepared a semifinal version of his published writings, and turned to new beginnings out of the depths of his creative imagination.

A few months after the fire, Agnon returned to Jerusalem. He developed an ever deeper and more indissoluble bond to the city and he adopted a conservative way of life within the framework of the Jewish tradition. In the ensuing quarter century he returned to the Diaspora only once, and then only after another shock, after his house in a suburb of Jerusalem had been pillaged by Arabs during the riots of 1929. This time he went for a short visit to his home town, and for a longer stay of nearly a year in Germany to see through the press the first four volumes of his collected works, which had taken five years to prepare.

This trip was his last encounter with Europe and European Jews, an encounter leaving an imprint on his mind and constituting a ferment for some of his most significant later writings. In fact there was no further need for him to seek out the Diaspora—the Diaspora was coming to Palestine, in ever larger waves of *aliyah*. In these years his work took on ever wider dimensions.

It is relevant in this connection to mention Agnon's peculiar gifts as an anthologist. This activity represented much more than a mere sideline in his creative work as a writer. To be sure, Agnon was never a scholar in the sense of a person dedicated to

historical and critical analysis and to the study of phenomena within a conceptual framework. Nevertheless, he had a penchant for scholarship, enamored as he was of the study of primary sources. He had a genuine feel for the significant and the curious in the vast realm of Hebrew literature, and a talent for synthesis.

Already during his first years in Germany, he had edited, in German, two anthologies, *The Book of the Polish Jew* and *The Book of Hanukkah*. In Jerusalem, he devoted a considerable amount of work and time to three anthologies into which he inserted a great deal of himself. They represent a perfect intermingling of his propensities for scholarship and connoisseurship with his ambitions as a writer and master of form. In their way, they, too, are outstanding examples of creative work. The first of them is *Days of Awe, A Treasury of Traditions, Legends and Learned Commentaries Concerning Rosh Ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, and the Days Between*, culled from 300 volumes, ancient and new; an abridged edition of this work exists in English. Agnon well knew the value of this book and it was clear to him that he would be widely plagiarized, as indeed he was. With his caustic sense of humor he included a number of highly imaginative (and imaginary) passages, culled from his own vineyard, a nonexistent book, *Kol Dodi* ("The Voice of My Beloved"), innocently mentioned in the bibliography as a "manuscript in possession of the author."

The second anthology is comprised of stories and anecdotes about books and their authors and reflects Agnon's unquenchable thirst for the anecdotal side of Jewish bibliography. It is a wonderful book that for some unfathomable reason has never been published except in a private edition. The last of these anthologies is a great collection of sayings about the Ten Commandments.

Agnon has given years of his life to the preparation of these works, and they must have meant a great deal to him. In them he turned himself into an instrument through which the pure voice of tradition could be heard to speak with a voice of laconic refinement, and frequently his own voice is mingled indistinguishably with that of the primary sources. Many years ago Agnon had also planned a thesaurus of Hasidic stories on which he had agreed to cooperate with Martin Buber. He had

commenced the work, but the first batches of the manuscript fell victim to the flames in Homburg, and he never returned to it.

These scholarly propensities of Agnon show his genius in the service of craftsmanship. It is unobtrusive but nevertheless effective. It is noteworthy that the only great Hebrew writer with whom Agnon felt perfectly at ease was the poet Haim Nahman Bialik, who in this respect had the same inclination for creative anthologizing.

As a matter of fact, Agnon never felt as comfortable in the company of writers as he did in that of scholars, who surprisingly enough appear in some of his strangest stories set against a contemporary background. The calling of the writer or artist as such seems to have held no mysteries for him, in contradistinction to that of the scholar, whose utter and largely hopeless concentration on his subject matter excited a sinister fascination in him—as, for example, it comes to the fore in *Edo and Enam*, an enigmatic story about the greatness and failure of scholarship.

III

Agnon's work over the last sixty years ranges from short stories, some of extraordinarily small compass, to great chronicles and novels reflecting Jewish life during many generations, particularly the last four or five. Many critics have rightly observed the obvious tension between the artist and the traditionalist in Agnon. It is of his essence. He started from tradition, but only in the sense that he used it as his material. From there he set off on a double track: on the one hand, he penetrated ever deeper into this tradition, its grandeur and its intricacies; on the other hand, he exposed its ambiguities and, as it were, left it in limbo, starting instead from the insecurity, the *Verlorenheit* (forlornness) and alienation of the modern Jew who must—or fails to—come to terms with himself without the guiding lights of a tradition that has ceased to be meaningful.

The ellipse of Agnon's work moves between two poles essentially, the world of Buczacz and Polish Jewry as a whole, and the world of the new life in the old center, the land of Israel. Both of these worlds are portrayed on the two levels mentioned

above, a circumstance that has proved confusing to many of his readers.

The world of established Jewish values and the world of utter confusion often seem to be separated by two or three generations, but this first impression is somewhat misleading. For there are great tensions even within the world of tradition, notwithstanding its seeming simplicity; and the duality of harmony and disintegration is visible as well in the struggles of the writer's own times. Now confusion seems to be predominant, but a delicately balanced equilibrium exists even now. A forlorn corner like the little town of Buczacz could still contain the entire world of human passions and ambitions, of infinite richness and abysmal tragedy, just as the struggle for a new life in the old land would have comprised the infinite ambiguities and inner problems of Zionism, had Agnon carried out his intention and given us the promised continuation of his novel on the Second Aliyah, called *Tmol Shilshom (Not Long Ago)*.

Agnon began by writing short stories and in this mode he almost at once achieved a perfection leaving the reader breathless. More than twenty years of intense productivity passed before he published his first long book, a chronicle of Jewish life in Hasidic Galicia nearly 150 years ago which in many ways stands on the borderline between a story and a novel, being itself full of what the author calls "stories within a story."

Many of these first stories, which gained Agnon a wide reputation and which must be considered classics of their kind, are legends of the Jewish past. The secret of their perfection lies in the fact that they succeeded in expressing an infinite wealth of content in infinitesimal space. Unsurpassed in this respect are his masterpieces in the third volume of his collected writings, many of which are suffused by a spirit of immense sadness and at the same time hold out a great promise of consolation.

This intermingling of consolation and sadness is a profoundly Jewish feature of Agnon's creativity. There is, for example, the story of Azriel Moshe the Porter, an ignoramus who grows enamored of the books in the great library of the *bet hamidrash* and teaches himself the titles of all the books whose contents he will never be able to grasp; he becomes the keeper of the library, dying a martyr's death while shielding the books with his body

during the hour of persecution. Then there is the story of the messenger from the Holy Land who, while delivering a talmudic discourse before the congregation, is put to shame by its learned members who confuse him with their objections until he leaves the town in tears; the synagogue building, witness to his shame, sets out after him.

A number of these legends are inspired by some colorful talmudic saying. Another story concerns an impoverished vinegar maker, all alone in this world, who saves up penny after penny in order to make his way to the Holy Land; uncertain as to where he should hide his money for safekeeping, he places it in an almsbox under a crucifix at the crossroads. Upon finally coming to fetch his money, he is arrested for robbing sacred funds. However, "that man," as Jesus is called in Hebrew, comes to his prison cell and takes him to Jerusalem, where he is found dead by his compatriots. Agnon, who was attacked by fools (of which there is no lack even in Israel) for having glorified Christ in this case, later maintained that this story was a bitter allegory about the failure of political Zionism, which clung to the coattails of empty English promises, by which one at best arrives in the Holy Land but thereby loses one's life by crashing into the hard ground of reality. I do not believe this cunning interpretation.

Through the years Agnon has produced a great number of these stories of very short or medium length. Some relate a single episode, while in others an entire drama is condensed into a dense narrative. I have mentioned some examples of the former. Among the more dramatic stories, it is difficult to say which of their great number deserves the greatest praise. I will mention only three, which in my opinion are of the highest possible merit. They are "The Tale of the Scribe," "The Doctor's Divorce," and "Two Scholars Who Lived in Our Town."

The first story tells of a Torah scribe whose wife craves a child and asks her husband, a man of irreproachable piety, to intercede with Heaven on her behalf. But she dies young, before her wish is granted. The scribe, whose craft is described with much Hasidic and kabbalistic detail, writes a Torah scroll in her memory and, having finished it, dies on the night of Simhat Torah in an ecstatic-erotic vision of his wife. The story is told without any psychological instrumentation, but with a full account of the

dramatic tension in the life of Raphael the Scribe. It is one of Agnon's few stories written in a highly solemn style and one would almost expect to read it on a scroll in the ceremonial letters used by scribes. I vividly recall the evening of the Hebrew Club of Berlin, in the spring of 1917, when Agnon read this story in manuscript. It made a tremendous impression, and I can still hear the mournful and monotonous intonation of his voice, reminiscent of that used in the synagogue by the reader who recites the *haftarah*.

The other two stories are quite different; in each, one act determines the course of a whole life. A Viennese doctor marries a nurse who has told him that before meeting him she has had an affair with another man. But this knowledge destroys the marriage from the start. He cannot live with such knowledge and thus a deep and genuine love is wrecked from within.

In contradistinction to the utter laconism of these pages is—in "Two Scholars Who Lived in Our Town"—the full description of the lives of two friends that develop under an ever-darkening shadow, caused by a slight, unkind remark made quite inadvertently by one of them in the course of a casual conversation. One of the friends, Rabbi Shlomo, goes on, as it seems, from one success to another, and tries in vain to placate the silent but inexorable enmity of his friend Rabbi Moshe Pinhas, whose heart has been hurt beyond repair, and whose bitterness grows with every new step taken by his friend toward reconciliation. Both are first-rank talmudists, but they cannot live together in the same world. The story is told with uncanny logic and magnificent psychological insight. The light of the Torah is not enough to warm a frozen heart. This bitter truth, however, is brought home not with the polemical passion that any earlier Hebrew writer would have employed, but with a depth of understanding and a superior serenity and objectivity that makes it one of the greatest stories of all Hebrew literature.

I have referred to the human passions which have their natural place in Agnon's work. Yet, with some rare and remarkable exceptions, Agnon's writing is distinguished by a singular stillness, by an absence of pathos and exultation. He hardly ever raises his voice, and his writings are free from even a

trace of expressionistic hysteria. Not infrequently he describes situations which could do with a bit of the latter, but he never despairs of conveying them in a still, small voice.

Without doubt, he was greatly helped in this respect by the extraordinary sobriety of rabbinic prose, of the style of the Midrash and Mishnah, which have had such a profound influence on his manner of writing. This prose dislikes exuberance and emotionalism and makes its restraining force felt even when Agnon deals with situations of high emotional tension.

That is particularly true of his Hasidic stories, a genre in which the depiction of the impact of mysticism on Jewish life has led almost every other Hebrew writer who attempted to portray it into sentimentality. Agnon, however, deeply steeped in the unemotional prose of kabbalistic literature, found a different way to respond to the challenge of such situations. A long road leads from the highstrung sentimentality characterizing the famous Hasidic stories of I. L. Peretz to Agnon's descriptions of the world of Hasidism. Even in this, part of his work is dominated by a kind of perfect bonhomie and urbanity. The miraculous is closely interwoven with stark reality; indeed, the former is part of the latter. Moreover, it is not the saints and their ecstatic raptures who are the authentic objects of his interest—they appear mostly in quotations or in what other people tell of them—but the little man, the faithful member of the Hasidic community for whom all aspects of life are at the same time real and full of unfathomable mystery. It is he who is the true "hero" of these tales.

Withal, the ground on which even the pious Jew treads is thin enough. Dark powers lurk everywhere, and the magic of the Law barely suffices to keep them at bay. It takes very little for the ground of belief to crack, leaving man, be he within the domain of the Law or without it, prey to the demons that may or may not be mere extensions of his own uncertainties and confusions. Agnon, who has given great attention to this side of human experience, takes no stand as to the true character of the arena in which these strange happenings occur. His stories about such uncanny experiences, told with utmost lucidity and realistic simplicity, are collected in his *Book of Deeds* or *Book of*

Happenings, which has aroused much controversy because of the obviously Kafkaesque nature of the experiences described.*

Some see these stories as a direct counterpart to Agnon's other writings, which stray far from the world of tradition, the ambiguities of which he so often puts into sharp relief. Others regard them, rather, as merely a complement to his earlier *oeuvre*, and many simply prefer to look the other way and to take no notice at all of the existence of this disturbing book. But that it is meant to express something of the greatest relevance to Agnon's purpose is clear. The paradox inhering in every step a man undertakes is already expressed in the utter incongruity of the title—the Hebrew word *maasim* means at one and the same time “deeds,” “stories,” and “happenings”—for what this book stresses is precisely the impossibility of performing even the smallest deed without becoming enmeshed in an inexorable jumble and confusion from which there is no escape, except through some kind of *deus ex machina*, or by waking up as from an oppressive dream.

In fact, some of these stories seem to me to be simply that: descriptions of dreams. But this dreamlike quality also applies to the simplest happening in life. The storyteller wants, say, to mail a letter or to go and meet a friend, but these prove to be hopeless undertakings. What determines this hopelessness cannot be unequivocally determined. It may be the simplest obstacles and obstructions which stand in the hero's way, or something like what Friedrich Theodor Vischer calls “the malignity of the objects”; but it can just as well be a nightmare of surrealistic proportions. In any case, it always becomes perfectly clear that there is not the slightest security in even the smallest step of real life, let alone the sphere of transcendence.

That all this should be said by a writer who is in full command of the heritage of that tradition, the absence or inaccessibility of which has frequently been noted as the determining characteristic of Kafka's universe, should certainly

* I wish only to refer to one of the many characteristic traits that Kafka and Agnon have in common. Max Brod says of Kafka, “It was almost impossible to talk to Kafka about abstractions. He thought in images and spoke in images. He tried to express what he felt simply and in the most direct manner possible, but nevertheless the result was usually very complicated and led to endless speculation without any real decision.” This is precisely true of Agnon as well, as I have seen over and over again.

set us thinking. Agnon, to be sure, was in no way the first to recognize or to be shocked by, the permeability, the loosened state of tradition. He could, and possibly did, learn much about this state of things from the teachings and famous tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratzlav, which have that same intrinsic quality. If the “Story of the Seven Beggars” had not already been told by Rabbi Nahman, it could have become an Agnon story and would have taken on a perfectly Kafkaesque aura.

IV

After his return to Jerusalem Agnon produced a number of full-length novels, the most outstanding of which might perhaps more aptly be described as chronicles. As chronicles of Jewish life in the century between 1830 and 1930, three of them in a way constitute a trilogy which, for all the diversity of its parts, is bound together by the unity of historical dynamics. I refer to his three novels *The Bridal Canopy* (1931), *A Guest for the Night* (1940), and *Not Long Ago* (1946). In terms of historical continuity, the third novel should be considered the second, if incomplete, part of the trilogy. It is a pity that as of now only the first is available in English translation.

The Bridal Canopy depicts the wanderings and adventures in Eastern Galicia of Rabbi Judel Hasid, who has set out to collect a dowry for his daughters. Without earthly goods, he has undertaken the journey with a letter of recommendation of the rabbi of Apta, one of the great figures of Hasidism. Rabbi Judel is a perfect embodiment of Hasidism in its prime, when, around 1830, it had conquered a very large segment of Galician Jewry. He is at home in the Holy Books and in the sayings and tales of the great *tzaddikim*; these constitute for him the true face of reality which whatever happens to him on his travels can serve only to confirm. His is a serenity of mind that can never be perturbed because everything fits into the sacred scheme explained in the Holy Books. The most incredible things befall him and his coachman, his down-to-earth Sancho Panza, and the prospects of his success seem less than dim. But all this fails to touch him. The assurance of the holy Rabbi of Apta, who has sent

him on his way, means much more to him than all the vicissitudes and adversities of life.

I noted before that Agnon's stories, especially those of his early years, are suffused with an atmosphere of great sadness. In *The Bridal Canopy*, however, Agnon's delicate humor comes to the fore. He never offers the slightest criticism of his hero's conduct, which involves him in such an unending chain of absurdities. In telling the story, he plays it straight and lets dialogue and situation speak for themselves. The first stories of Agnon's *Book of Deeds* were composed at about the same time as *The Bridal Canopy*. They are, as it were, two sides of the same coin, but if Rabbi Judel had been the central figure of Kafka's trial, he would have waited patiently for the repeal of the verdict. Much of the naked absurdity of *The Book of Deeds* is already present in *The Bridal Canopy*, but it is resolved by humor and, finally, by a miracle at which Kafka himself would have been the last to be surprised.

Moreover, the canvas of Jewish life, before it was affected by the impact of modern times, is painted in precise and colorful detail. Agnon belongs to the category of craftsmen who take details seriously. Rabbi Judel will never take a step that is not vouchsafed by the Holy Books, and each and every ceremony or superstitious hocus-pocus is in strict conformity to the literary sources. The great rabbis who are quoted are flesh and blood and have lived and their books exist. (This precision characterizes the whole of Agnon's work, and even the most minute details concerning Berlin streetcars are accurate.)

Eighty years later, however, the scene—and much more than the scene—has changed. Yitzhak Kummer, the hero of *Not Long Ago*, is the grandson of Rabbi Judel. Hasidism and, for that matter, Jewish tradition have broken up. The magnificent impulse has been exhausted and a new ideal, the rebirth of the Jewish people in its old homeland, now arouses the enthusiasm of the young. It is a revolutionary beginning although it purports to be, at the same time, a continuation of the past, albeit in a transformed shape. It is never made completely clear what the place of religious tradition in all this is or will be. Tradition, too, has been worn out and is manifestly in a state of crisis. Where it still lingers on—and it certainly does in no small measure—it

keeps within closed boundaries and its attraction as a living force for the outsider is negligible. After all, Hasidism was the last great social reality in which, under the guidance of a great idea, Judaism as a living form was powered from within. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Zionism was to be the new driving force, born out of the crisis of Jewish life in the Diaspora and calling for a new metamorphosis. I say it *called* for such a metamorphosis, but it had obviously not yet produced it, and the birth pangs of the new Jewish society were to be cruel and perilous indeed.

This is the atmosphere that is brought to life in Agnon's masterpiece. Like Agnon himself, Kummer goes as a very young man to Palestine, where everything is in transition. He cannot find his place, even though he is prepared to take upon himself any chore required of him in the life of the new *yishuv*. Thus he moves between two societies, the old one in Jerusalem and the new one in recently founded Tel Aviv and in the agricultural settlements. The positive side of the new life, even in its most problematic aspects, is visible more or less only as background; it is barely sketched.

Agnon planned to make the life of these young pioneers who clung to labor in the new settlements and the *kibbutzim* just then arising the center of another novel, as promised at the end of *Not Long Ago*. But it has not appeared to this day. Thus we are left only with the tribulations of a lost soul, described in loving detail with a mixture of melancholy and humor.

Agnon possesses a keen sense of the melancholy emptiness that shows through the busy bustle of the new life. His hero is forever seeking some fulfillment whose substance he is unable to define. In time he comes to Jerusalem and is strangely attracted by its haunting atmosphere. His adventures there—adventures of a restless seeker after redemption in a stagnant life—constitute the core of the book. He strives to reestablish a genuine relation to the world of tradition, which increasingly seems to hold out to him some great promise that he can find himself at home. But it is all in vain. Something is wrong from the beginning. This "something" is made symbolically clear in the surrealistic goings-on between Kummer and a stray dog. It all begins with an incidental joke and it ends as tragedy. Kummer is utterly

unaware of what he has done to the dog on whose back he (working as a painter at the time) jokingly wrote, with the remaining paint in his brush, the words *kelev meshugah* ("mad dog"). In a piece of perfect art, using the modern technique of stream of consciousness, the author relates how this inscription, unknown to the dog, becomes the instrument by which the hero's life, as well as that of the dog, is destroyed. The researches of this dog, if I may be permitted to refer to his musings in that way, are a counterpart to the experiences and quest of Kummer, which also come to no good end.

Zionism, to be sure, has proclaimed a new life, but it would be too much to say that anywhere in Agnon's work has it been seen to be attained. It would be much better to say that in Agnon's writing Zionism appears basically as a noble failure, while everything else is even worse, namely a sham. As for the old life, notwithstanding all its past glory, there is, in our time, no way back. To the extent that Agnon's stories and novels take place in our time, they move between these two impossibilities. Nostalgia is no solution. To be conscious of the greatness of our past is still to be far from having a key to our own problems. A key may exist somewhere, but it is not ready for use, and the locksmith who could forge a proper fit has yet to be found.

Nowhere is this forlornness between past and future depicted with greater precision than in the last novel of Agnon's trilogy, the novel *A Guest for the Night*, the excellent translation of which into German undoubtedly played a great part in the decision of the Nobel Prize Committee. Whereas *Not Long Ago* is placed in the years before World War I, this book chronicles a visit which the narrator, after an absence of twenty years, pays to his home town.

Among the melancholy works abounding in Agnon's *oeuvre*, this book is by far the most melancholy. The Hebrew original appeared in 1939, two years before the German murder of the Jews, which physically destroyed the community portrayed in this book. But what we see here is the death of a Jewish town before it was drowned in actual blood. The narrator comes for a visit from the land of Israel. That he had followed the message of the new life and left his home town was in its time itself a sign of Jewish life in its positive aspects, for the struggle and polemics of

that time had an object and a meaning. Now, however, life in Szybusz—a thin disguise for Buczacz—becomes empty, idle, and miserable; it is perishing in resignation and resentment and even the promises of Zionism have become doubtful and questionable.

It is the year 1930, and the narrator himself has suffered during the Arab riots of 1929. There is no ultimate purpose to his visit, and his coming is but that of a wayfarer stopped for the night. Clearly the image of his home town has never left him, and during a break in his life in the new land he wishes to see again the city in which so much of himself is rooted. But he no longer finds what he came to seek. He encounters instead the horror of decline and decay, a horror no less sinister for its ignorance of the murder yet to come. The narrator arrives full of the vivid images of his town as it was in his youth.

It is the utter incongruity of the old and the new experience of life in its fullness and life in its full decline that is at the center of the novel. At every step, remembrance of things past intertwines with the present experience of the visitor. The sad reality of the town confronts him, but he tries to establish a continuity with a past that has vanished forever. If, as I have said, Kummer's efforts in Jerusalem failed, all the more so is the narrator's attempt in Szybusz bound to fail. There he begins a life whose perfectly illusionary character becomes ironically visible in the course of the narrative.

Irony permeates the book from beginning to end. His nostalgia focuses upon the old house of study, whose key is delivered to him with a disdainful shrug by its last keepers when they set out to emigrate into the wide world, presumably to America. The only people he can attract to fill it again are those who are too poor to heat their own homes during the long winter and who come to warm themselves in the old place where the heating is paid for by the narrator. The key to the old house of study gets—not wholly unsymbolically—lost, and the narrator must have a new one made; upon his departure it finally passes to a Communist who had gone to Palestine ten years before as an ardent Zionist but after enduring much suffering and disappointment had returned to his old town. The debit side of Zionism finds its spokesman in him.

What, then, is this debit side, according to Agnon? It is the reign of empty phrases and bombastic oratory not followed by action; it is held up to scorn in very many of Agnon's writings about the Jews of our time. The new key to the old house of study that Agnon has left with the disappointed-Zionist-turned-Communist is in itself an ironical symbol; and it is small wonder that the old key, deemed lost, turns up rather surprisingly, but perhaps not all that surprisingly, in the narrator's bag upon his return to Jerusalem. In contradistinction to *Not Long Ago*, there is a key in this novel, but it fits nowhere in the new land. But there is a secret hint, however slight, of messianic restoration and integration, as is indicated in the old talmudic saying: "Even the houses of study and the synagogues in exile are destined to be transplanted to the land of Israel."

As I have noted, the efforts of the narrator to establish a genuine and living relationship to his town, especially those he has known in his youth or their relatives, are in the main unsuccessful. The reason may be that there is no longer any true reality in Szybucz and that life there has a somewhat ghostlike quality. But another factor may also be involved: most surprisingly, the narrator's mind is set on the restoration of the past. He comes as a visitor from the sphere of the new life, but he brings no message along that would make him efficacious. It is not only the people he encounters who are slow and inflexible; he himself succumbs to this atmosphere. Although he befriends a group of *halutzim* who are preparing themselves for their *aliyah* to Palestine, his visit to them remains a romantic interlude. The silence and inability to respond of most of the other people he meets exerts a much greater attraction for him, and his heart goes out to them. Thus there unfolds a picture of Polish Jewry in a little town on the eve of the Holocaust, written with great love but at the same time with perfect sincerity. Somewhere in his tale the narrator says, "When I was young I could see in my mind all I wished to see; nowadays I do not see either what I wished to see or what I am shown." What then does he see? That is what the book is about.

V

These are some highlights of Agnon's work before he fully realized the impact and significance of the destruction of European Jewry. The main body of his later work has not yet been collected, but is scattered through various journals and daily newspapers. Moreover, much of what he has written is apparently still unpublished.

Here I should like only to stress two tendencies that stand out in many of these later writings.

There is first of all the predominant wish to emphasize the ritual aspects of Jewish life. Formerly, Agnon took them largely for granted. Now, however, there is an almost morbid effort on his part to stress each and every detail of ritual in his narrative, an effort that scarcely favors the progress of the particular story being told. For all their breathtaking perfection of language, much in these writings seems to be of greater relevance to students of folklore and Hebrew style than to readers of literature. We observe a frenzied endeavor to save for posterity the forms of a life doomed to extinction. It is a somewhat sad spectacle, for one notices the intention and becomes annoyed.

The second tendency now coming to the fore has to do with a curious widening of Agnon's retrospection. He no longer tells the story of the last four or five generations, but goes back much farther. Thus he may pretend to be editing the family papers of his ancestors and thereby covering important episodes in Jewish history over the last 400 years; or he may even undertake to tell the story of his own soul in its transmigrations since the days of Creation, a most peculiar autobiography. He sees himself as being present at all stages of Biblical and post-Biblical history and provides, as it were, eyewitness accounts of the most arresting events over thousands of years, out of a deep sense of identification with the Jewish people. This metahistorical autobiography is contained in a book, *Hadam Ve-kisse* (*Stool and Throne*), of which large fragments have been published during recent years. Whereas it may be said with regard to all his preceding work that there was never a total identification of the author with the narrator, this tension, arising from nonidentifica-

tion, is now gone. Gone, too, is the novelistic element and the narrative is transformed into a plain chronicle of what has happened to the author's own self. There is no longer the unfolding of a story, but rather the undialectical juxtaposition of events told in separate paragraphs, each under its own heading.

It seems to me a most peculiar work, but I would not venture to judge it on its literary merits before it is published as a whole. The author's dialectical attitude toward his own experience and toward his tradition, which was so predominant in his other writings, has been abandoned, and that, I would almost say, is a great pity. For, if I were to reduce to one formula what I think is the core of Agnon's genius, I would say: *it is the dialectics of simplicity.*