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The Jew as Everyman is a kind of literary symbol that is likely to wear thin very quickly; it is a tribute to Malamud's resourcefulness as a writer that he has been able to make the symbolic equation succeed to the extent he has in his stories and novels. In his most recent book, he gives new imaginative weight to his conception of Jewishness by adding to it the crucially important dimension of history, and in so doing he manages to transform his recurrent symbol into the stuff of an urgent, tautly controlled novel that firmly engages the emotions and the intellect as well.

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S. Y. AGNON: THE ALPHABET OF HOLINESS

The Jews of Galicia are proverbially noted for wiliness, at least among other European Jews, and Hebrew readers of Shmuel Yosef Agnon are not likely to forget his origins in that eastern province of what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Agnon's Galician hometown of Buczacz, which he left in 1907 at the age of eighteen, figures directly or obliquely in the greater part of his fiction. It plays an important role in all three of his major novels, serving a triple function in them and elsewhere in his work as an image of the undisturbed piety of premodern Jewish life, as a point of convergence for forces of cultural and spiritual dissolution (he sometimes gives Buczacz the fictional name Szybuszcz, suggesting "breakdown" or "corruption" in Hebrew), and, finally, as a broken, twisted testimony to the brutal destructiveness of twentieth-century history.

But the way Agnon uses his Buczacz background is also one of many indications that he has more than a generous share of the alleged Galician wile. The image of himself which he likes to project to the general public in interviews and to his readers through his narrating persona is that of a simple, pious, retiring man—indeed, a kind of archetypal Young Man from the Provinces, like the naïve Galician hero of his long novel, *Just Yesterday*—who is astonished to find himself proclaimed an important literary figure.

As a rule, Agnon chooses to give the impression that he is much more withdrawn from the modern world than he is in fact. Since 1927 he has lived in the quiet neighborhood of Talpiot in the southeastern corner of the New City of Jeru-

salem, where his house at the end of a secluded street looks out through a grove of evergreens toward the Temple Mount. A man with no political involvements or commitments to public life, Agnon often presents himself as an isolated artist, standing at his lectern—a relic of the talmudic academies which he prefers to a writing desk—inscribing Hebrew characters in his minute hand with the painstaking care of an old-world craftsman, his ears closed to the stridencies of the contemporary reality around him. This image does faithfully represent one aspect of Agnon the man and the writer, but no more than that.

In point of fact, Agnon has an avid interest in his immediate social surroundings, in the lives of the people he encounters, and in the broader world of modern culture. It is true that from his earliest years he has steeped himself in the literature of Jewish religious tradition, and he has no formal secular education, but since his youth he has been reading his way through European literature with the zest and energy of a classic autodidact. He knows German literature intimately and extensively—he lived in Germany from 1913 to 1924—and in German translation he has also studied the major Russian, French, and Scandinavian writers. Agnon, who in general tends to be reticent about what he has read, is occasionally vehement in denying influences, but this is hardly surprising, for a kind of provocative elusiveness is an essential part of his whole artistic method.

Over the past two decades, as the awareness gradually dawned on Hebrew readers that Agnon was a bold modernist, not merely a pious teller of tales, critics have quite naturally looked for influences from the outside, and the one that has been insisted upon most frequently is the one that annoys Agnon most—Franz Kafka. In characteristic fashion, Agnon professed in one interview a thorough distaste for Kafka, of whom he had “barely read two books”—Kafka of course barely wrote three—though he also admitted that his wife happened to admire the German writer and kept a complete set of Kafka in *her* library. There is, moreover, even a personal link between Agnon and Kafka in Max Brod, Kafka’s friend, biographer, and

literary executor, who has been an acquaintance and admirer of the Hebrew author since the twenties; interestingly, Brod was persuaded to give Schocken Books the rights to the publication in German of Kafka’s works at the same period in the twenties when Schocken became Agnon’s exclusive publisher in Hebrew.

Yet I think that by and large Agnon is right in minimizing the importance of modern literary influences on him, for he is both a peculiarly original writer and one who derives from peculiar literary traditions, so that the qualities that make him remarkable are most likely to be found not in resemblances to European writers but, on the contrary, in the characteristics unique to him as an individual artist, as a user of the Hebrew language, and as a Jew.

Influences from the outside, however, or even coincidental similarities with the outside, are obviously not altogether irrelevant to criticism. A collection of stories like Agnon’s *Book of Deeds* (1951) reflects certain affinities with Kafka so pronounced that they can hardly be overlooked. *The Book of Deeds*, in the manner of Kafka, introduces its readers to a dreamlike world where the ordinary laws of time and place, of logical sequence and causality, seem to be suspended. Although Agnon has little of the neurotic intensity that distinguishes Kafka’s writing, although the discontinuities in his stories seem more diffuse, less violently jarring, than Kafka’s, he possesses something of the same sense of a world where terrible things are waiting to spring out from the shadows of experience. Moreover, while Agnon rarely seeks the shocking visual effects one sometimes finds in Kafka, his Hebrew has much the same carefully understated, deliberately restrained tone as Kafka’s German, and achieves a very convincing Kafkaesque *frisson*, often through the imagery of sounds. Here is a characteristic passage from the story “A Whole Loaf”:

Again the clock rang out. My ears ached with tiredness and the lamp smoked and a black stillness filled the room. In the midst of the silence, I heard the scraping of a key in the lock, like the sound of a nail being driven into flesh, and I realized that they had locked me in and forgotten me.

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Agnon seldom offers elaborate visual images of the action he describes, but his quiet, orderly, almost detached contemplation of horror creates a strange and disturbing effect by the very contrast between the manner and matter of narration. The same character who finds himself shut up for the night in an empty restaurant goes on to tell what happens after the final turn of the key in the lock.

I heard a kind of rustling and saw a rat that had jumped up on the table and was nibbling at the left-over bones. Now he's feeding on the bones, I told myself. Afterwards he'll chew up the tablecloth, then the chair I'm sitting on. Afterwards he'll start on me. First he'll chew up my shoes, then my socks, then my feet, then my calves, and finally the whole body. I fixed my eyes on the wall and saw the clock. I waited for it to ring again, hoping it would frighten away the rat before he got me. A cat appeared and I thought I was saved. But the rat ignored the cat and the cat ignored the rat. The two of them crouched there and gnawed away.

The narrator of this story, like most of the protagonists in both Agnon and Kafka, is a wholly passive figure, at the mercy of demonic or at least enigmatic forces that mock him or threaten to destroy him. And the Hebrew writer, like the German, is repeatedly concerned with the theme of judgment. His characters often find themselves peremptorily summoned before some sort of tribunal; their crucial experiences are set characteristically on the eve of the Jewish New Year or on the Day of Atonement, when Jews place themselves under the scrutiny of divine judgment. In all this nightmare world, moreover, Agnon's surrogates, like Kafka's, discover the greatest horror in the reality of their own selves. For example, the short novel *Till Now* (1952) is set in the Germany of World War I that the author knew firsthand, and examines the dislocating and dehumanizing effects of the war; the dramatic and moral interest of the book, however, is characteristically built up around the private experience of the self:

I dreamt that a great war had come upon the world, and they called me up to fight. I swore a solemn vow to God that

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if I returned from the war unharmed, whoever came out of my house to greet me when I returned I would offer up as a sacrifice. I returned to my house unharmed, and it was I myself who came out to greet me.

Agnon's earliest stories are largely artistic reworkings of themes drawn from folktales and pious tradition. But one of the folktale themes that attracted him from the start was that of the fatal mistake and its inescapable consequences, one which also preoccupied Kafka. *Agunot* ("Mateless Souls"), the first story he published after his arrival in Palestine in 1907 and the one from which he took his name, begins, significantly, with an image of disrupted moral order. God is described weaving a beautiful prayer shawl from the threads of loving-kindness in the actions of the people of Israel. But sometimes a mishap occurs: a thread is broken off, the fabric begins to unravel, evil winds pierce it and rip it to pieces. "At once men are seized by a feeling of shame and they know that they are naked." These last words, of course, echo the description in Genesis of the shame of Adam and Eve. And though some of Agnon's artful folktales, both early and late, present Edens of ideal harmony and piety, his imagination is more usually drawn to situations where the serpent's counsel has been followed, and there is no way of revoking its disruptive and evil consequences. In "Mateless Souls" a father contracts the wrong marriage for his daughter; in the long story, "And the Crooked Shall Be Straight," a storekeeper squanders his family's savings and then abandons his wife; in "The Outcast" a proud aristocrat calls down a holy man's curse on his house—and in each case the protagonists are caught up in an irreversible stream of circumstances that carries them to their ruin. In his later work, Agnon no longer presents this situation in the traditional terms of inexorable fate, but he places his characters in the same predicament of being subject to inscrutable forces over which they have no control.

A similar kind of helplessness is discernible in the heroes of those later novels by Agnon which have realistic social backgrounds. As in Kafka, this helplessness frequently expresses

itself in the passivity of male figures vis-à-vis the domineering and sometimes demonic females who enter their lives. Herschel Hurwitz, the hero of *A Simple Story* (1935), a novel about life in Buczacz at the turn of the century, is controlled first by his mother and then by the woman to whom he is married against his will. Yitzhak Kummer, the protagonist of *Just Yesterday* (1945), which is set in Palestine in the years before the outbreak of World War I, is buffeted between two women—Sonya, the “emancipated woman” in the new settlement at Jaffa, and the pious daughter Shifra in old Jerusalem. Manfred Herbst, the central figure in the unfinished novel *Shira* (chapters appeared from 1951 to 1954), is a university professor in the Jerusalem of the late thirties, a man with a dangerous habit of passivity both in his career and in his private life. He allows himself to be seduced by the hard-mannered, sensual nurse, Shira, at the very moment when his wife is giving birth to their child in the hospital where Shira works.

Though such points of resemblance to Kafka may in some ways be instructive, Agnon, the distinctive artist, is, it need hardly be said, much more than a Hebrew Kafka. Even his “Kafkaesque” stories bear the unmistakable marks of Agnon’s own special vision; in any case, they constitute only one segment of his varied literary production over more than half a century. But beyond all similarities, there is one radical difference between the two writers: while Kafka exemplifies the distress of rootlessness that has characterized so many Jews in modern times, Agnon’s uniqueness derives from the fact that he is so deeply rooted in a tradition. Agnon is in many ways the most profoundly Jewish writer to have appeared in modern Hebrew literature, and it is in his role as heir to a Jewish religious and cultural heritage that much of his artistic distinctiveness is to be sought. During the same period in the early thirties when he was conceiving the first stories of *The Book of Deeds*, Agnon published a charming little anecdotal essay, “The Sense of Smell,” which includes a short section entitled “The Secret of Writing Stories.” Here he discloses the religious impulse of his fiction and the peculiar imagination of history behind it:

Out of affection for our language and love of the holy, I burn midnight oil over the teachings of the Torah and deny myself food for the words of our sages that I may store them up within me to be ready upon my lips. If the Temple were still standing, I would take my place on the platform with my fellow choristers [Agnon traces his ancestry to the tribe of Levi] and would recite each day the song that the Levites used to say in the Holy Temple. But since the Temple is destroyed and we have neither Priests in their service nor Levites in their chorus and song, I devote myself to the Torah, the Prophets, the latter Scriptures, the Mishnah, Halakhah and Agadah, the Tosefta, rabbinical commentaries and textual glosses. When I look at their words and see that of all our precious possessions in ancient times only the memory is left us, I am filled with sorrow. And that sorrow makes my heart tremble. And from that trembling I write stories, like a man banished from his father’s palace who builds himself a small shelter and sits there telling the glory of his ancestral home.

The passage suggests not only Agnon’s religious conception of his role but also the inborn need of a poet to sing, in one way or another, which has motivated him since boyhood. The years around the turn of the century, when the young Agnon was learning Talmud in his native town of Buczacz, were part of a period when one might often discover a copy of Euclid or Spinoza hidden inside a *yeshiva* student’s bulky Talmud folio. But if anything were found slipped in between the pages of the youthful Agnon’s Aramaic text, it would probably have been a sample of his own Hebrew verse. Unlike the surreptitious pamphlets of mathematics and philosophy, his verses were directly and closely related to much of what was printed on the pages of the Talmud, and when Agnon left the traditional study-house to venture out into the world of belles-lettres, he did not leave the Talmud behind, as did his contemporaries from the *yeshivot* when they made their entrance into European culture. The common opposition, in fact, between traditional Jewish life and modern secular culture played no significant part in Agnon’s formation. Though the home he grew up in was solidly Ortho-

dox in faith, his mother was well read in German literature, his father had even tried his hand at Hebrew verse, and the whole family viewed with pride rather than pious dismay the poems and stories that Agnon began to publish in Hebrew and Yiddish journals in Galicia while he was still in his mid-teens.

Agnon has devoted his whole life to writing—and with a permanent annual stipend from Schocken Books, he is probably the only Hebrew writer ever to make a comfortable living from his writing alone. But he has also devoted his life to the study of Torah. On Agnon's worktable in his home in Talpiot, one might conceivably find a copy of James Joyce (in translation) or Rilke, but one is more likely to see some yellowed, flaking volume that proves to be an obscure eighth-century homiletical commentary on the Pentateuch, or a collection of Hasidic parables, or perhaps a late medieval mystical treatise. In this respect, Agnon continues the tradition of the illustrious rabbinic line from which he is descended, and possesses a voluminous knowledge of traditional Hebrew and Aramaic source materials—the Bible with all its rabbinic commentaries, the Talmud, the Midrash, Maimonides and the medieval Jewish philosophers, legal codifiers, and poets, the Kabbalah, the literature of the *Musar* movement and of the Hasidic tradition of more modern times.

While all this Jewish erudition has served as an inexhaustible mine of materials—both verbal and conceptual—from which Agnon has fashioned his creative vision, the relation between Agnon the author and Agnon the learned and pious Jew is to some extent ambivalent. There are times when he looks ironically on his own role as writer (or *sofer*, which in traditional Hebrew meant Torah scribe, and in modern usage generally means author); a Jew, he implies, ought to be an inscriber of holy scrolls, not someone who simply tries to write pretty things. In at least two of his stories he attempts to resolve this conflict by imagining himself as a *sofer* in both senses of the word—a writer whose stories and novels form one long Torah scroll.

The image that Agnon draws of himself as the craftsman of

a holy book in which the people will read and God's name will be sanctified is instructive, but it is not an altogether faithful self-portrait. It is true, on the one hand, that Agnon's work often gives evidence of a writer who has a sense of himself not merely as the artist before his audience, but as the artist-member of a people standing before God. There are stories that he uses from beginning to end as vehicles for "telling the glory of his ancestral home." When he depicts the greatness of a Jewish past—which means for him the traces of God's working, or the lives of godly men, in the ancient or recent past—his role as artist does not differ substantially from that of the creative imaginations in the early Middle Ages that produced the Midrash, or of the half-forgotten medieval poets who produced the ornamental liturgical verse of the *piyyutim*. One senses, however, that such stories are the work of a virtuoso ventriloquist, not direct expressions of the world in which the writer really sees himself. In any case, it is also true that a large part of Agnon's work is intensely personal, even confessional, in nature. The *sofer* who has mastered the calligraphy of sacred scrolls is no less a modern writer struggling with his own individual problems and with his own needs for expression. The banished son attempting to recall the splendors of his father's house cannot shelter himself from the world around him with its visions of destruction and uprooting, its dream demons and their twisted Jephthah-vows.

Thus at times there is a perceptible tension between the artist and the traditionalist in Agnon; but what is most remarkable about him is the way he has absorbed Jewish tradition, made it part of himself in making himself part of it, so that he has been able to build upon it a distinctive and highly personal artistic vision. Agnon's creative adaptation of traditional materials can best be examined in terms of the language and the motifs and symbols he employs. At the same time, his use of language and symbol discloses the recurrent ideas and concerns of Jewish tradition that appear in his writing.

When Agnon chose to reveal to his readers the secret of writing stories, he mentioned first his affection for language, and it is certainly true that his painstaking concern for words

plays a large part in the originality of his art. During a conversation with Agnon in Jerusalem in 1960, I mentioned to him the often unpredictable struggle with the medium of words that Virginia Woolf speaks of in *A Writer's Diary*. Agnon nodded, then told me about a short story he had written over forty years earlier called "The Outcast." It had begun, he explained, as a full-scale tetralogy, but the more he worked it, the more the scheme shrank, until he finished with just sixty pages of Hebrew print. "I couldn't carry out the original plan," Agnon concluded, "because at that time my language wasn't adequate for the task." If language in general tends to be a clumsy instrument for the demanding requirements of human expression, modern Hebrew, as a language that has barely advanced beyond the stage of its own rebirth, is clumsier than most. What Agnon has done through the years is to create a Hebrew of his own that has come to fit his particular needs of expression with extraordinary precision. It is about as different from the Hebrew spoken in Israel today as Elizabethan English from modern colloquial American—though one is likely now to hear occasional archaic turns of speech among literate Israelis which, one suspects, have come straight out of Agnon.

In a satire written in the forties on the politics and bureaucracy of the new state, Agnon apologized for not representing the speeches of the state's leaders in their own special shade of purple prose. "[Instead] I've put down their words in my own language, an easy and simple language, the language of the generations that came before us and of the generations that will come after us as well." Agnon's use of an older Hebrew comes largely from his desire to avoid the provincialism in time from which so much of modern culture—and particularly Israeli culture—suffers. A writer of immense ambition, Agnon quite seriously means his work to take its place with the great Hebrew literature of the ages, and so he uses the language in which a hundred generations of pious Jews studied, wrote, gave shape to their inner world. Though he has fashioned his style from many sources, with spoken Yiddish and the language of relatively recent devotional literature playing important roles,

the Hebrew he writes has a predominantly medieval flavor, frequently recalling the Hebrew of the Mishnah, and even more, of the Midrash—that is, of the earliest compilations of rabbinic law and homiletic commentary, respectively.

The term "medieval" may give the wrong impression to an American or European reader because there is really no analogue among the Western languages to the body of Hebrew upon which Agnon draws. One tends to think, for example, of older literary English, at least since the later Middle Ages, as more ornate, more rhetorically elaborate and consciously artificial, than its modern counterpart, while Old English has for most of us the roughhewn look of a less developed language. The Hebrew of the Midrash, on the other hand, does not suffer from either old-fashioned ornateness or from even the appearance of crudeness. The style of this great medieval collection of homiletic and legendary variations on biblical themes is simple, even-toned, quietly modulated (and consequently Agnon's own style can be deceptively "easy and simple"), but it possesses a peculiar lyric grace, and its flexibility of syntax and breadth of vocabulary make it capable of representing minute details of action and fine nuances of feeling.

Midrashic Hebrew is, moreover, much closer to the modern Hebrew reader than its history of nearly two thousand years would suggest. The source books in which it is used have been traditionally studied from childhood on with the sort of application that would make them as familiar to the cultivated reader of Hebrew as, say, *Pilgrim's Progress* once was to English schoolchildren. Agnon's Hebrew stands with the readers for whom it is intended on a footing of old and intimate acquaintance, in all its archaic accouterment. It has a distinctive poetic charm that necessarily disappears in translation, and because of the deliberate simplicity of the style, Agnon in a Western language is likely to look rather wan and anemic.

Throughout his long career, Agnon has had the perfectionist's passion for polishing and repolishing style which is associated in European literature with figures like Flaubert and Joyce. Agnon may write a story, lock it up in a drawer, and let it sit for

ten or fifteen years until he is ready, then take it out, rework it, and finally publish it. At present he has nearly four hundred pages of two different novels that have appeared in progress in various periodicals over the past decade; there is no way of knowing whether he has actually finished either book or when he will decide to let any more chapters get into print. Today, at the age of seventy-three, he continues to follow an active work schedule, is still a vigorous experimenter, and even now he will on occasion make stylistic revisions of stories he published more than thirty years ago.

But Agnon is no more a Hebrew Flaubert than he is a Hebrew Kafka. In his own concern for language there is one major distinguishing element: the Hebrew he writes is for him not merely a language (*lashon*) but the Holy Language (*l'shon ha-kodesh*). In explaining "The Secret of Writing Stories," he naturally connects affection for the language with love of the holy; for, like generations of Jews before him, Agnon regards Hebrew as the Jew's indispensable means of entrance into the sphere of sanctity. His stylistic perfectionism partly derives from his feeling that as a Hebrew writer he is a kind of guardian of sacred vessels who must protect them from every possible contamination. It is through the direct continuity which he preserves in his style with the Hebrew of the past that he is able to maintain a grip on the spiritual vision of the past. Even in the darkest corners of his nightmare world, the language he uses becomes a safeguard of sanity, a constant though sometimes ambiguous testimony of the continuing strength of traditional values.

In a volume of his stories published in 1952, there is a striking account of a father and daughter who are forced to flee their home after anonymous enemies have destroyed their house and all their possessions. The father asks the little daughter (who in Agnon's symbolic scheme represents the soul) if she knows what the Hebrew letters *aleph bet* spell. She answers correctly that they form the word *av* ("father"). The father then tells her: "You see, my darling, two little letters stand in the prayerbook as if they were all alone; they come

together and make *av*. And not only these letters, but all the letters when they are joined make words, and the words form prayers, and the prayers rise up before our Father in heaven who gives ear and listens to the voice of our supplication." For Agnon this alphabet alone—the Hebrew of tradition in which he writes—is the alphabet of holiness. It was the instrument through which the sanctity of the past was expressed and preserved; it is what enables him to hold on to a sense of that sanctity and to re-create it in his writing, even when he is most intensely aware of the chaotic and threatening aspects of the world he lives in.

Together with the words of tradition, Agnon has adopted for his own uses a wide variety of motifs and symbols from this religious—and often highly poetic—literature. In effect he has found in it one solution to a problem that has typically concerned modern writers beginning with Yeats, Eliot, and Joyce: the need for a living body of mythology from which the artist can draw symbols meaningful to his audience to use in his own work. Agnon discovered a virtually untapped reservoir of symbolic richness in Jewish tradition, and, most particularly, in the Midrash. His development of traditional motifs endows his vision with an unusual poetic coherence, even over the apparently ambling stretches of some of his longer novels. A novel by Agnon is likely to prove to be, among other things, an extended variation on several symbolic themes, frequently themes he has taken from the Midrash.

A well-known midrashic legend, for example, represents the people of Israel in exile as a prince (that is, God's son) who has been transformed by sorcery into a dog and who must suffer in this state until a redeemer will restore him to his original regal figure. Agnon's major novel, *A Guest for the Night* (1939), which deals with the physical and spiritual destruction of East-European Jewry, elaborates on this theme with great effectiveness. At the very beginning of the book, the narrator sees a plaque upon which the name of a Polish king had been inscribed in gold; the plaque is now broken, the letters are tarnished, and blood-red weeds have sprung up over them.

Everywhere the vestiges of majesty are trampled on or cast under the shadow of death. The inhabitants of the war-ruined Galician town in which the story takes place stubbornly refuse to regard themselves as anything better than animals—and rather pitiful animals at that. “The greatest of all evils,” reflects the narrator, “is when a prince forgets he is a prince.” And so the theme is reiterated and developed throughout the novel.

To cite a somewhat different use of symbolic source material, an apparently formless piece like the expressionistic story called “The Orchestra” achieves a poetic unity through the manipulation of contrasting imagery of light and darkness. On its narrative surface, the story looks like nothing but a series of broken zigzags: the narrator sits down to write letters on the eve of the New Year, gets up to bathe for the holiday but is frustrated in his attempt to enter the bath awaiting him at his grandfather’s house (which presumably exists in another time and place); he goes home as the sun sets and then finds himself wandering into a bizarre concert at which the conductor remains invisible. Verbally and visually, however, the story has considerable coherence. Several key references (which someone reading the story in the original would be more likely to notice) are to verses in Psalms: the associations made by the Psalmist of light-God-salvation and darkness-trouble-death are recalled at critical points. The little girl in the story who longs to go to the concert has a Hebrew name that means light, while the Russian name of the old woman at the grandfather’s house suggests darkness. As soon as the little girl leaves the narrator, the old woman approaches. The narrator’s daughter calls out “Light” plaintively as darkness falls on this Day of Judgment, and the story concludes with a vision in the light of bright stars against a dark sky. It is possible that, in addition to the light-imagery from Psalms, Agnon may have had in mind the symbolic use of light in the lore of the Kabbalah, where human existence is conceived as a struggle to redeem the scattered sparks of the broken divine effulgence from the envelopes of darkness in which they are imprisoned.

In some cases, Agnon’s knowledge of Jewish tradition has

served merely as a source for his own symbolic imagination, and he brings his final creative product very far indeed from its literary antecedents. The remarkable story “Forevermore,”* about a scholarly investigator of an ancient culture who renounces prospects of worldly glory to enter a leper colony, seems to reflect such a process in operation. The germinal idea for the story’s symbolic use of the lepers is in all probability a passage in the Midrash Bereshit Rabba commenting on the verse from Psalms, “Make me not the reproach of the base.” The Midrash explains the verse as a plea to God by the Jews that He keep the other peoples from singling them out in their exile with the reproach, “Are you not a nation of lepers?” But in the story Agnon develops an original and self-sufficient fantasy from the image of the Jews as a people of lepers. I say fantasy, because the writer has gone out of his way to stress the quality of bizarreness and in this way to remind us that the reality of the story is a product of the imagination. He achieves this effect through the willfully bizarre details of the ancient Scroll of Gumlidata, and, more generally, through the peculiar impression he creates by beginning all proper names in the story with one of two letters. The Hebrew consonants *ayin* and *gimel* are the first two letters of Agnon’s own last name, so the exclusion of all names that begin with other letters is a means of asserting that the events of the story exist peculiarly within the domain of its author’s imagination. But what is most remarkable about “Forevermore” is the way its central symbol embodies in a single image the two contradictory elements of a highly paradoxical attitude toward Judaism. On the one hand, the lepers are prisoners of a living death. Their parchment book that tells the glory and destruction of an ancient city is befouled by the suppurations of its diseased readers. Yet it is only among the lepers and from their book that Adiel Amzeh finds the truth.

“Forevermore” is a striking illustration of Agnon’s artistic distinctiveness in still another way, because it combines the most deadly seriousness with a studied, playful coyness about

* Available in English in *Israeli Stories*, ed. Joel Blocker (New York: Schocken Books, 1962).

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revealing meanings. One is tempted to associate the *ayin*-people of the story with a sphere of commitment and the *gimel*-people with a sphere of empty worldliness: the numerical value of *ayin* is seventy, the decade of sevens sanctified by Jewish tradition, and *gimel* is three, the first incomplete number after unity and balanced duality. But if Agnon encourages us—here and elsewhere—to play such interpretative games, he discourages us from thinking we have won them. The characters of “Forevermore” almost fall into the neat polarity I have suggested, but there are enough ambiguous cases, possible exceptions, to leave us wondering about the adequacy of the scheme. And the Scroll of Gumlidata uncovered at the end of the story, with its parade of brilliantly fantastic details—a mantle woven with bands of calves’ eyes, a princess giving suck to asses, and more of the like—invites the interpreter to go to work while defying him to be satisfied with his efforts.

It is indicative of Agnon’s originality as an artist that he has drawn from so many sources and yet managed to avoid making his work into a literary pastiche. A sound creative insight led him to choose from the tradition what was most appropriate for his personal needs of expression. For example, in an autobiographical story entitled “The Kerchief,” Agnon creates a memorable portrait of family love and moral coming of age by building on a single comment of Rashi’s on a verse in the Book of Lamentations. The verse is, “How is she [Jerusalem] become as a widow!” Rashi points out that Scripture does not say “a widow” but “as a widow”—“like a woman whose husband has gone to some far-off place but with the intention of returning to her.” The absence of the boy’s father is identified with the absence of God from the Land of Israel. The mother sits at the window waiting for her husband’s return like Jerusalem waiting for its redeemer, and the boy has childish imaginings about the advent of the Messiah. Every night he tries to fall asleep with one ear open in case the ram’s horn of redemption should sound before morning. But the boy has to discover that a genuine sense of the Messiah’s coming—like the feeling of the family when the father finally arrives home—is only to be

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had by learning to face the most repellent sufferings of humanity in the unredeemed world.

When, by contrast, Agnon takes youthful love as his theme in “Nights”—his stay in Jaffa from 1907 to 1913 is the background for his story—he adopts a rich lyric prose filled with reminiscences of the language of the Song of Songs. This haunting love story is a kind of extended prose-poem, luxuriant with the floral imagery of the Bible’s great love poem. Agnon can even adopt so unlikely a form as the moralistic parable and turn it to his own artistic purposes. One of the recurrent concerns of his writing is the struggle—and the general failure—of the individual conscience to carry out its own moral responsibilities. He dramatizes this struggle with great effectiveness in a parable called “The Garment”—the story of a tailor who postpones making a garment commissioned by a great lord, stains the fabric while eating at his worktable, and finally drowns when he tries to wash the ruined material in the river. “The lord has many garments and he can afford to do without one of them. But the tailor who spoiled the garment made with material from the lord’s workshop—what will he answer and what will he say when they ask him where is the garment?” Agnon does with the parable what the great Hasidic teachers might have done if they had been masters of Hebrew prose.

Of all his achievements in adapting the materials of Jewish tradition to his own fictional modes of expression, the most important has been his remarkable success in weaving the legendary tapestry of the medieval Midrash into the texture of the twentieth-century world lived in and experienced by Shmuel Yosef Agnon. One significant instance of this process is his treatment of the theme of the house. Perhaps the greatest single concern in Agnon’s writings is the problem of modern man who, spiritually, finds himself with no place to live. Though this theme is almost everywhere in Agnon’s fiction, it receives its most extensive and resonant expression in *A Guest for the Night*: the very title of that novel suggests the uneasy fate of transience to which most of his central characters are condemned, and the main action is the futile, finally self-de-

ceiving attempt of the protagonist, who has returned from Jerusalem to his native Szybuszcz, to revive there the old study-house, the key educational and religious institution that in fact had been the sheltering spiritual "home" for East-European Jewry in recent centuries. The comment made by the hero of Agnon's short novel *Till Now* might serve as an epigraph for the author's collected works. "I'll tell you the story of a man who has neither house nor room, who left the place he did have and lost the one he found. And so he goes from one place to another, looking for a place for himself."

By a strange double coincidence, Agnon has had two experiences in his own life paradigmatic of the violent destruction of order which has been such an important element in the history of our times. In 1924, when the Hebrew writer was living in Hamburg, his house burned down, and everything he owned went up in the flames, including his library of four thousand books and the manuscript of an autobiographical novel (which he never attempted to begin again). The suddenness and totality of the loss shocked Agnon profoundly. Within five years, the same thing was to happen to him again. This time it was his home in Jerusalem that was ravaged, and the agents of destruction were the Arab rioters in the Palestine pogroms of 1929: once again, significantly, a valuable library of rare books and manuscripts was lost.

There is evidence enough in Agnon's work that he has brooded ever since over this twice-experienced archetypal event of destruction. In any case, the typical subject of his stories since the thirties is the dispossessed—the physically, culturally, and most important, spiritually dispossessed. Typically, the enemy has destroyed a man's house. In one story we may encounter him on the road, running away. Or, in others, he may be on a bus or train or ship that will not take him where he wants to go. There are no vacancies when he looks for an apartment, or he is unable to find the address he wants, or the house is locked and he has no way of getting in. The house he once lived in—the ordered structure of an older way of life—has

been knocked to pieces, and he finds himself a radically displaced person in a world without homes.

This subject is hardly a unique one in twentieth-century fiction, but Agnon's conception of the dispossessed is distinctive because it connects the image of homeless man with the complex of symbols and ideas bound up in the idea of *galut* (exile) enunciated in the literature of Jewish tradition. The Midrash characteristically portrays *galut* as the banishing of a prince from his father's palace (the Land of Israel) to live in a series of makeshift huts. (For this reason Agnon, the would-have-been Levite, builds himself a "small shelter" to recall the glory of his father's house.) The creators of the Midrash intended to instill in their audience a deep realization that any house until the time of redemption was only a temporary and flimsy shelter. *Galut* is not simply a matter of geographical displacement. When the people of Israel went into exile, the Divine Presence was said to have gone into exile as well. The notion of *galut*, in other words, involves a cosmic as well as a historical event, implying the idea of a whole world-order out of kilter, with even God out of his appropriate place. Or as the Kabbalists poignantly put it, not Israel alone was in *galut*, it was the whole world that was in *galut*, and the world had to be redeemed if Israel was to be redeemed.

The Midrash in this way gives Agnon not only the language and images with which to represent the state of homelessness of modern man, but also a way to interpret this distressing phenomenon. Jewish tradition always opposes to the hut of exile the image of the house that was, which is also the image of the house that will be; the dark reality of exile is confronted in the unswerving belief in a redemption to follow the exile. There are many moments in Agnon's stories when his dispossessed protagonists seem on the point of being wholly submerged by the forces that threaten them, but what ultimately distinguishes Agnon from an uprooted Jew like Kafka is the fact that at times he can honestly envisage a restoration of the shattered order, a rebuilding of the ruined house. To be

sure, it is often difficult to know quite how to take Agnon: even his occasional images of hope flicker ambiguously, are gravely threatened by the world of shadows around them, but they possess an imaginative reality that cannot be entirely discounted.

Agnon has in his varied literary enterprise confronted some of the most disturbing aspects of the contemporary world, and he is too shrewd, too tough-minded an observer to be capable of deceiving himself about the way things are. Yet by remaining constantly in touch—both in his art and in his private life—with the spiritual wholeness of the past, he has preserved the conviction that such wholeness of spirit is both indispensable and still possible to achieve, however unreachable it may now seem. Agnon is sometimes able, then, to conclude his visions of disaster on a note of affirmation. It is not a loud or insistent note: it seems to waver somewhere between the reliance of faith and the devout, even desperate, hope of prayer. But the occasional affirming voice has the ring of authenticity, and in these “war days,” as Agnon often designates the last half-century, it is a rare and precious sound.

1961

ELIE WIESEL: BETWEEN HANGMAN AND VICTIM

The novels of Elie Wiesel strike me as a singularly impressive instance of how the creative imagination can surprise our expectations of what its limits should be. It is natural enough to wonder whether it is really possible to write about the Holocaust, to use the written word, which by its very nature is committed to order, as a means of representing and assessing absolute moral chaos. With this awesome difficulty in mind, the British critic, A. Alvarez, has suggested that any adequate writing on the Holocaust must be in some way antirealistic, fracturing reality into jumbled splinters, as in fact the Nazi horror fractured the moral world which people used to imagine. The suggestion is plausible, and Alvarez offers one persuasive example for his thesis in the patterned madness of *Blood from the Sky*, a novel by another East-European Jew writing in French, Piotr Rawicz.

The achievement, however, of Elie Wiesel's five published books reminds us of the danger in issuing prescriptions about things of the spirit. He has managed to realize the terrible past imaginatively with growing artistic strength in a narrative form that is consecutive, coherent, and, at least on the surface, realistic, in a taut prose that is a model of lucidity and precision. Yet by the very nature of his subject, what we might want to describe as the “realism” of his technique constantly transcends itself, as we are made to feel the pitiful inadequacy of all our commonsense categories of reality. Thus, when the young prisoner in *Night* arrives at Auschwitz, the report he gives us of a flaming ditch filled with the bodies of burning babies is of an

