

# The Agnon paradox

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The Nobel award to Agnon had about it a touch of that very irony which permeates his own writings; for of all Israeli authors he has made the least effort to court a universal audience. When Hebrew novelists were consciously emulating the European avant-gardists of their day, Agnon seemed almost to turn his back on the non-Jewish world, choosing as his own theme the narrower, more parochial world of Galician Jewry in exile and in immigration to the Holy Land. Widely read in German literature and deeply impressed by its symbolist and expressionist schools, he nonetheless created as his stylistic medium a highly allusive blend of mishnaic, exegetical, and homiletical Hebrew aimed at the reader cognisant of rabbinic texts, and hence almost defying satisfactory translation. Yet in refusing to join the broader European stream and probing instead into the spiritual dilemma of that small segment of the world closest to his heart, he produced a body of writing which is at the same time esoteric and universal—esoteric in its detailed allusiveness but universal in its individualistic response to the more general spiritual aridity of the twentieth century.

If Prufrock saw the contemporary wasteland contrasted with the Renaissance spirit of Michelangelo, for Agnon the disintegration had a greater immediacy. The partially self-imposed ghetto spirit of East European Jewry had by and large preserved its integrity against the inroads of secularism until the nineteenth century. The early adherents of the enlightenment drifted away from these tightly-knit communities into the larger cities, and there formed new groups only remotely linked with the villages from which they had come and the more traditional communities within the cities. The writers produced by this movement, having broken away from the religious village, tended to view with unconcern and often with a sense of liberation the gradual disintegration of the economically squalid and

spiritually restrictive communities which they had left. They expressed at times a nostalgia for their childhood, for the days of self-discovery and the warmth of the family home; but there was a sense of relief that the harsh discipline of the *cheder* and *Bet-midrash* was drawing to its close. For Agnon, however, it was that very world of religious dedication, of almost ascetic piety, which represented the noblest tradition of Judaism, and it was there that he found the symbols for his own grief at the inexorable signs of its decay.

The myth that Agnon writes as a representative of an inflexible and uncompromising orthodoxy has long been exploded, notably by his most perceptive critic Baruch Kurzweil, and one wonders how it could ever have arisen; for a sensitive reading of almost any passage reveals Agnon's refusal to identify himself with his central figures. Reb Yudel Hasid, immersed in his Talmudic studies and torn reluctantly from them for the more worldly task of collecting dowries for his daughters—a worldly task that remains nonetheless within the context of a holy *mitzvah*—is depicted with a gentle irony often close to condescending pity. The simplicity of his unwavering faith is at the same time both admirable and naive, and this ambivalence, subtly transmitted to the reader, reflects Agnon's own dilemma. In the tradition of Shalom Aleichem, he mingles the tragic and the comic to convey the bitter-sweet suffering of the simple, pious Jew of an earlier generation; but he commits himself neither to the simplicity nor to the piety. Reb Yudel hears, as he is passing through a Gentile village, the strains of a Talmudic chant. He and his Jewish driver Nuta trace it to a peasant cottage where pigs are grubbing in the garden. (I have translated as literally as is consonant with English idiom):

Reb Yudel descended from the cart and entered the house with Nuta. They joyfully greeted the household, saying: 'May the Lord bless you with a good night.' There was a Gentile peasant woman there who replied in the language of the uncircumcised. Nuta said to the woman: 'Tell me, my dear, who is that sitting in your house and studying our holy Torah?' She answered: 'It is my husband.' They peered in and saw a man with shaggy hair and unkempt beard sitting with a Gemara open before him and chanting as he read. The hasid ran to greet him, clasped the man's hand in his own, gazed into his face as one gazes affectionately into the face of a beloved, and cried: 'Like grapes in the wilderness have I found thee, O Israel. How did you come here, my dear friend?' The owner of the house said with a smile: 'The Torah is very sweet. I became slightly converted and here I am sitting and studying the Torah in peace.' At that moment Reb Yudel's soul almost departed from him, and were it not for Nuta he would have left this world without a deathbed confession. What did Nuta do? He seized Reb Yudel and fled with him to the waggon for dear life.

Reb Yudel responds to the situation in simplistic terms. In his eyes the Jew, as a convert, is corrupt and contaminating, and with Nuta he flees for his life to the comparative safety of the waggon. Agnon, however, sees the man with compassion and even humour as only 'slightly converted'—as having undergone a merely formal baptism out of love for the sweetness of the Torah in a world where poverty makes such a study almost impossible. But the apparently flippant reference to deathbed confession suddenly deepens the ambivalence. At one level, the suggestion that Reb Yudel regards the technicality of deathbed confession as of greater consequence than death itself seems to betray a grotesque distortion of values. Yet it is this very concern with formal technicalities, Agnon implies, that separates Reb Yudel from the convert. They both love the sweetness of the Torah; but the convert, by sacrificing the letter of the law to preserve the spirit, has allied himself with the world of the pig-eaters (again a 'technical' infringement) and has cut himself off from his people and his faith. On the other hand, Reb Yudel's instinctive and almost absurd flight from the profane has ultimately preserved his spiritual integrity. And the implications of the incident ripple outward to encompass in their symbolism the central disintegrative force in European Jewry—the enlightened questioning of formal law which served as the prelude to assimilation as its adherents drifted towards the West.

Agnon offers no easy solutions, and if the choice lies between enlightened questioning and a naive, blindly accepting faith, the religious thinker is in an impasse. It is here that the universal significance is felt, for Agnon is voicing a predicament shared (for the English reader) with Huxley's Spandrell, Eliot's Magnus, Greene's Lieutenant and the other countless embodiments of spiritual paralysis in contemporary literature. Throughout Agnon's writings, time seems to have stopped, and his narrator is for ever digressing to relate the story within a story. In the manner of the Talmudic discusser following a *sugya* to its source and exploring each branching tributary before returning to the mainstream, so Reb Yudel will pause to listen to a tale related by his host which, to be fully understood, needs to be prefaced by another tale, and will itself lead on to a third before the adventures of Reb Yudel are taken up again. Through this discursive narration, the reader senses the inevitable

movement of time in which the individual stands motionless, silent, and passive. For him time seems to pause, but around him the waters swirl on remorselessly towards disaster, the disaster he is powerless to avert.

*The Bridal Canopy* forms the first volume in a trilogy, and is set in eighteenth-century Galicia when the marks of decadence were as yet minimal. In the early 1930's, Agnon left Palestine where he had made his home and set out on an extended tour of Eastern Europe which provided the material for his finest literary achievement, *A Guest for the Night* (1940). The nightmare symbolism, embryonic in the earlier work, here becomes almost unbearable in its impact, and is perhaps only made bearable by the humour which softens the tragic theme. The narrator is here much closer to Agnon himself, moving in a dreamlike yet sensitising trance through a world which is both harrowing and heartwarming, a community which has deserted its past, but contains in its midst the neglected relics of its greatness. The central symbol is the old *Bet-midrash*, which served the dual function of synagogue and house of study.

The narrator, arriving on the Eve of Atonement, learns that the small community remaining is, almost in its entirety, about to emigrate. One member scornfully offers him the large, old-fashioned key to the *Bet-midrash*, advising him to wait there for the coming of the messiah: but he accepts it willingly enough and moves in there to study the few remaining volumes. His description of the interior succinctly projects the paradox inherent in all Agnon's writings, his concern with material progress and spiritual retrogression:

The ceiling which used to be grimy with smoke was now freshly distempered, and the walls which used to be rubbed and marked were now replastered. I am not saying that the black was more beautiful than the whitewash, or the rubbed patches than the plaster; but the grime came from the smoke of our fathers' candles which shone upon their learning, and as long as the walls were rubbed, it was a sign that someone was sitting there. If we were small in our own sight in comparison with those who rubbed away the walls, we felt important at belonging to their generation. Now the freshly plastered walls looked as though no one had ever sat there.

If the scoffing in the key incident represents Agnon's condemnation of those who have deserted their faith, he makes it abundantly clear that the community could not have stayed even had it wished, and the book is filled with the intolerable suffering of those who have been forced to leave—their abject poverty, the brutality of the soldiers, and the disruptive influx of ideas from the secular world.

Even the narrator loses the old key to the *Bet-midrash* and has to order a new one from the local locksmith. Where, then, does Agnon stand? Does he offer no hint of hope?

It is unfair to compress a book as subtle and discursive as this into a single symbol, but it is clear that the key functions as a co-ordinate device. If there is to be any valid response to the central problem posed by the book, it must be suggested in some way by the instrument which both locks and unlocks the house of study and worship. As usual, Agnon refuses arbitrarily to lock or unlock the door, but offers instead an incident pregnant with meaning. The wayfarer must at least return to Jerusalem, and before leaving, he hands the key to the son of the local Jewish atheist, asking him to watch over the old building. That alone gives some hint of Agnon's hope that the next generation may reverse the trend of its fathers. But it is not enough. On reaching Jerusalem after his long journey, he is astonished when his wife discovers a key hidden in the folds of his knapsack. At first he assumes that the atheist has replaced it there in order to prevent his son from being 'corrupted', but on examining it more closely, he finds that it is the original key, the heavy, old-fashioned key he had lost. His wife suggests he should send it back to the town:

I said to her, The one they have is superfluous for them, and you come and tell me to send them a second key. My wife said, Then what will you do with it? A saying of the rabbis of blessed memory came to my lips: 'The synagogues and *Batei-midrash* of the diaspora will be transplanted in the Land of Israel.' I said to myself, when they transplant themselves to the Land of Israel—that man will have the key in his hand.

Agnon has one word more—again only a hint, but a significant one. Until the coming of the messiah, the narrator decides to wear the key close to his heart. And yet he does not wear it close to his heart. Instead, he has a box made for the key and wears the key to that box near his heart. The reason he gives is that '... the old craftsmen used to make their keys large and heavy, too heavy for our own hearts to bear.' But Agnon has been growing too serious, and the narrator adds that he looks out of the window every now and then to see whether the synagogues were yet flying towards their new sites in Israel. But through the irony can be perceived Agnon's deeper conviction. The old Judaism in its ideal form seems to have no place in the modern world; our hearts are unworthy of it. But the key must not be discarded, and we must preserve and

nourish our longing that we may yet prove worthy to sit in the rebuilt *Bet-midrash* of our fathers.

Throughout Agnon's work can be felt his love for the Holy Land, and despite his lengthy sojourns in other countries, he has made Israel his home. The last volume of the trilogy, *Only Yesterday*, takes as its theme the modern return to Zion, and again there are no easy answers, no flag-waving or chauvinism! Here his central character, a descendant of Reb Yudel Hasid, leaves the European yeshivah in which he was studying and becomes caught up with the youngsters emigrating to Zion. A strange figure, still half within the yeshivah, he joins them nonetheless, and gradually sheds his yeshivah trappings to become a young pioneer. The early part of the book is redolent with Agnon's admiration for these youngsters who, for all their atheistic intent, were fulfilling the words of the prophet in restoring the desolation of Zion. But Yitzhak Kummer always remains half outside the group, finding his livelihood not in the kibbutz settlement but in the more lonely task of house-painting. He moves from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. There his feet eventually lead him, almost of their own volition, to the orthodox quarter of the city, where a timid love springs up between himself and a girl who forms part of that tradition he thought he had left behind him. Baldly stated, this might sound sentimental, but in fact here too Agnon preserves that distance which makes sentimentality impossible. Yitzhak marries and as we expect the trilogy to close on this note of contentment, he is bitten by a dog and dies. The cruel chaos of the world which Agnon had experienced at first hand on his European tour cannot be wiped away by a few pious sentiments. God exists, Agnon seems to say, but in a strangely haphazard world in which the Jew can but pursue the tasks he has been allotted and pray for the divine redemption.

Earlier I remarked that that myth of Agnon as a strictly orthodox Jew had been exploded; but when one hears him described, as he was by one recent critic, as 'the greatest castigator of religion since Bialik' it is time to draw a halt. His satiric attacks upon the emptiness of modern synagogue worship, the unhealthy respect for wealth there, and the general decadence of modern Judaism are patent. But it seems to me that his is the anger of the deeply religious at its contemporary abuse, at the superficiality of the answers from the

pulpit, at the insistence on the letter of the law at the expense of the spirit. From within his writings can be heard the voice of the prophet denouncing corruption in the hope of a return to purity. But behind that denunciation is a vision of the true Judaism, symbolised by the old *Bet-midrash* and the piety of those who once worshipped there. Perhaps above all there is Agnon's refusal to indulge in name-calling, his traditional hatred of publicly shaming his fellow man. Instead, with gentle humour he tells us stories—stories in which to the sensitive ear the tension between surface irony and deeper emotional involvement speaks eloquently and with consummate art.

## Light and levantinism

DAVID VITAL

To have been in Israel between the middle of May and the middle of June of 1967 was to have witnessed, and participated in, one of the great crises of Jewish history. It was not solely an international, military crisis. It was at least equally—and, indeed, preeminently, in my view—a crisis of spirit and a crisis in the relations between the government and the governed, between the leaders and the led. Just as it is too early to suggest what the international political landscape will look like once the storm raised by the military triumph has abated, so it is too early to predict how Israel's internal evolution will be affected, ultimately, by the quite literally traumatic events of those few weeks when universal moods of anxiety, gloom, resolution, confidence, euphoria and determination succeeded one another with unnerving speed.

But three things are plain. Firstly, that the unity of the nation and its capacity for collective action and sacrifice were to all intents and purpose without limit: far greater, for example, than in 1948. Secondly, that popular confidence in the State and in the nation's ability to take on and repel all comers never wavered. For a society subjected to unrelenting siege for twenty years and more these are matters of the greatest importance and deserve to be stated unambiguously. With this firmly in mind any other comment one might make about the crisis cannot but seem trivial and ungenerous. And yet there is a third point to make about a phenomenon which, in the long run, may have the greatest consequences of all and which may conceivably determine in some measure how the public will react when the next major confrontation with the Arab world takes place—react, that is to say, not to the external threat, for of that there can be no doubt, but to the performance of their own leaders.

The point is that the formation of the first truly national government in Israel's history with the inclusion in the Cabinet of Messrs.