

We now know that the collective experience of Eastern European Jewry laid bare by Bialik in the early twentieth century would come increasingly to characterize Jewish existence in most of the Diaspora during the rest of the century: in essence, the experience of destruction and rebirth. We of this generation are accustomed to calling ourselves "the generation of the Holocaust and rebirth"; but these events do not apply only to a discrete historical period that began in the 1930s and ended in the 1940s. Bialik, who died in 1934, before the onset of the Holocaust, deeply felt that the processes of destruction and rebirth were in a dormant, potential state. The poet removed them from a state of social potential and gave them expression in poetry. Jews of his generation were perhaps not conscious of how intensely Bialik felt the internal, spiritual and the external, historical dialectic of their age. But his inclusion in the literary canon was not long in coming because that generation knew, in the depths of its soul, that the poet expressed truths that they dared not feel or express. He breathed the breath of actuality into what at that time was only a vague potentiality, a potentiality that would become an even more dreadful actuality decades later.

If Bialik is still with us here and now, it is because the historical process that was made concrete in his works is still not played out; to our sorrow, it has yet to exhaust itself. The ambiguity of the basic symbols still worms its way, and we still live in a period that the poet Nathan Alterman, who was far closer to Bialik than would seem at first glance, called a time of "life on the razor's edge."

NOTES

1. In the following interpretations I draw upon the work of a long line of commentators, including Fischel Lachower, Dov Sadan, Baruch Kurzweil, Yonatan Ratosh, Adi Zemach, Dan Miron, Menahem Peri, and many others. The interpretations are not meant to stand by themselves but rather to offer additional explications of why Bialik is still with us today.

2. Lionel Trilling, "Art and Neurosis," in *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1953).

3. Thousands of Jews were massacred in this Russian town during the Chmielnicki persecutions of 1648.

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Where shall we hide? Our house is destroyed, and our enemies cover the highways. If a miracle was done for us, and we escaped, must we depend on miracles?

S. Y. Agnon, *As Day Dawns*

by a miracle Agnon's literary representation of social dramas

I

Any historical or social description contains a story. Any presentation of historical or social facts assumes knowledge of the facts and connects those facts according to certain principles, whether conscious and explicit or unconscious and implicit. Thus, even in a historical account—in Aristotelian terms—matters are not described as they actually are but as they ought to have been by necessity and probability. Historians not only choose among facts according to literary criteria but also connect them according to those criteria.

One may concur with Hayden White that a historical narrative posits some social order against which historical forces rise up (so that a precondition for "narrative" history is the existence of a state with laws), and, therefore, any true historian seeks to find and transmit some sort of moral lesson from the sequence of events he describes.¹ Or one may agree with Victor Turner that a given social structure acts according to a certain dramatic order inherent in the structure itself: beginning in disruption, reaching a crisis, and, finally, either achieving reconciliation through the reintegration of the social forces or else culminating in a rift that indicates a perverted social reality that cannot be reformed. Ritual and folk tales, first, and literary stories, later, concretize that drama in literature.²

By the same token, one might use terminology that is more essentially sociological (Marxist vocabulary, for instance), but that also relates to historical facts and usually tells similar "stories" (even though the materials may derive from other societies and historical periods).³ The basic assumption is that the overt facts are merely a superstructure overlying a deeper social and economic structure that is represented by those facts.

Just as history is literary—one can locate the story concealed behind any historical account—literary works that relate to historical materials organize those materials according to their own original story. It is perhaps nothing new to say that a story is a story.

Historical accounts and social descriptions usually refer to various elite groups who represent and enact certain processes. In a work of the imagination, the elite group, which has extraliterary reference, is replaced by imaginary figures that lack such reference (although fiction also includes prototypes and authentic characters that do seem to have extraliterary reference).

Despite the foregoing, it must be emphasized that in literature, as in history, general extraliterary references enable the reader to fill in gaps and flesh out the world of the novel. (It is assumed that the reader understands the setting and period depicted as a specific historical time and place.) The social novel, in turn, defines, formulates, and, principally, focuses such references to evoke a "drama" taken to represent events that occur in the extraliterary world. Thus extraliterary associations seem to correspond to the strictly literary associations represented in the fiction. The social novel imposes a fictional viewpoint on history, so much so that frequently our image of a historical period is fashioned more by literary than by historical sources. Through literature readers modify (even if only briefly) the model they ordinarily accept. The general image of a period, place, or personage is shaped by historical accounts, based on facts alone, as well as by fiction. Each new literary work modifies the image.

II

Several of the following remarks, based on the theoretical premises just presented, have already been made in different contexts by

such eminent critics of Agnon as Baruch Kurzweil, David Canaani, and Dov Sadan.⁴ Here, however, I shall attempt to present certain basic assumptions, old and new, that might perhaps receive fresh meaning in the present context; for while it does not always present new details, the approach described above does place this complex of assumptions in a new conceptual framework.

In his six major novels, S. Y. Agnon dealt with at least three of the main periods in the social history of the Jews from the early 1800s through the 1940s. He portrayed the world of the shtetl during three periods in *The Bridal Canopy*, *A Simple Story*, and *A Guest for the Night*. He depicted the new society in the Land of Israel in *Only Yesterday* and *Shirah* (posthumously published in 1971). And he focused on German Jewry in *Mr. Lublin's Shop* (posthumously published in 1975).

Each of these novels has a social significance of its own. Each serves as a kind of synecdoche by means of which the author sought to fashion, pattern, and interpret the model of the society that it portrays. Several of Agnon's models might seem rather surprising to someone habituated to looking at that reality in a cut-and-dried fashion derived from routine literature or from some other purportedly factual source. Whether all the ways of seeing revealed in these different novels combine to produce a general model is a question to be addressed toward the end of our investigation.

The Bridal Canopy was Agnon's first novel. Begun in the 1920s and first published in 1931,⁵ it depicts the world of the shtetl in the early nineteenth century as a society cut off and enclosed within the borders of the religious community. In the forefront of the novel stands the family of Reb Yudel Hassid, the protagonist. The central social problem addressed in the novel is the balance between matter and spirit. At the outset, Reb Yudel Hassid is presented as a spiritual idler, a scholar who is unconcerned with his family's material sustenance. He eventually sets out on a fundraising journey for the dowry of his daughters—leaving his family in order to support them—and thereby to restore the balance between matter and spirit. The family's chances for survival are thus based on a strange welfare system (dowries for poor brides) that provides a certain type of needy person with communal support.

As it happens, the trip is a total failure: The unbalanced protagonist attains no equilibrium whatsoever. He himself repeatedly

slips over to the materialist extreme by spending most of his time at meals, at telling and hearing stories, and at other pleasures. Toward the end he returns to Torah study, which again does not support him. Until the close of the novel he is, therefore, unable to sustain his family by his own resources. It turns out that two paths are open to him. He can save his family either by fraud or by a miracle. The miracle is that the fraud becomes truth: The first Reb Yudel is falsely identified as the *other* Reb Yudel Nathansohn. The latter, a very rich man, is supposed to have a daughter (which he has not) with a "fat" dowry, and so the son of a wealthy family is ready to marry poor Reb Yudel's daughter. Subsequently, by a miracle, poor Reb Yudel discovers a treasure in his home that makes him into a sort of wealthy Reb Yudel Nathansohn. In this way, opposite poles in the dichotomy of matter and spirit are melded.

And if the novel deals with the survival of a family, it is also, by extension, concerned with society's continued existence, which is also precariously dependent on either a miracle or fraud. It is not surprising, then, that Agnon believes that this doomed society, in its parlous state, can be saved only in the imagination, not in the proper advancement of the plot. The fertility ceremony concluding the novel does not draw upon the true power of the society but, rather, upon the force of fraudulence and a miracle.

Indeed these depictions of traditional society—with its mistaken identity and fraud, material and spiritual bankruptcy—characterized Agnon's work from the very beginning. Without doubt they are already present in the novella *And the Rugged Shall be Made Level* (first published in 1912), which is far more similar in structure to *The Bridal Canopy* than appears at first glance.

III

A Simple Story relates to the same society one hundred years later, at the turn of the twentieth century. Traditional society, which has lost its authority and force, has been replaced by a semisecular society that operates according to economic, rather than halakhic or spiritual, norms. Or, in a distortion of the well-known saying from *The Ethics of the Fathers*: "Who is content with his lot? The rich

man . . ." According to Agnon, the members of that society are concerned, more than anything else, with retaining and maintaining their financial assets: The survival of the Jewish bourgeoisie hangs in the balance. As in *The Bridal Canopy*, marriage is the yardstick by which the community's values are measured. Hirshl, the protagonist, attempts to defy the social convention that wealth must wed wealth. "Any marriage which is not a decent one" in this regard is considered to be a kind of sin against the accepted norms of the parents' world, norms that are quite close to those of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*. To Hirshl's parents, orderly existence and the maximal increase of property supersede all other values. Unable to withstand the tension of the conflict, the young man loses his mind and is sent by his family to those entrusted by the society to cure maladies that do not permit its members to function according to its demands. Psychology thus functions to rehabilitate society's errant sons so that they can maintain the culture of property. Through the "miracle" of psychology, the social order is saved from disintegration: Hirshl, having finished his treatment, is fully prepared to meet society's economic and communal demands.

In both *A Simple Story* and *The Bridal Canopy*, society hovers on the brink of disintegration. And in both the unity of the family is preserved by an external power, a *deus ex machina*, in the guise of a "treasure" or a psychological institute, without which the bonds of society would collapse.

IV

A Guest for the Night can be viewed from two opposing angles. It is a novel about a man who leaves his family and also about a man and his family who leave a place of safety in the Land of Israel so that the head of the family, at least, can relive his own traditional past in the Diaspora. The protagonist is unable to create a substitute for his family in the old house of study.

Incidentally, in the city of Scibucz, the marriage of Rachel and Yeruham—the one and only couple that starts a family—is the exception that proves the rule: This is a story about disintegrating families. Anyone trying to return and strike roots in that society

becomes part of its disintegration; it is a society destined for decline because it no longer even has the power to struggle for unity.

The hero-narrator's effort to bring back old times in such a place is artificial, without purpose, and without a future: He is merely "a guest for the night." The only way out of that cul-de-sac—the Eastern European shtetl—is to leave. As in Agnon's other novels, the society depicted here has nowhere to go. The only exit, in the form of a *deus ex machina*, is rather simple: the return of the protagonist to his home and family. So although this is not a novel of Jewish renaissance, it does have a Zionist message of sorts. But that miracle is possibly *only for the guest*, not for the inhabitants of Scibucz: Implicit in the miracle is the prophecy of disaster for the multitude.

Analyzing these works, one is forced to conclude that the dilemmas they pose are not subject to any true—or natural—solution. They are resolved, in ironic fashion, by miracles that, if anything, oppose the plot. The social drama should end in hopeless defeat because of defects that cannot be corrected. The author must therefore use external countermodels in order to bring elements of rebirth into the pattern of destruction. But they are all merely temporary solutions, ironic miracles that permit the few to exit from the hopeless situations in which the many are trapped.

V

Like the other novels, *Only Yesterday* also begins with the protagonist leaving the bosom of his family and his homeland to find a new identity—following in the footsteps of his ancestor Reb Yudel Hassid in *The Bridal Canopy*. This novel of maturation and character formation represents as well the effort of part of the shtetl society to find a new identity and a new homeland for itself. Yitzhak Kummer, the main character, along with "our other brethren, men of our redemption" have a romantic, personal vision of renewal and renaissance in the Land of Israel, a kind of Arcadia. What emerges is that the effort at maturation fails. The protagonist, who had tried to separate himself from his family in order to achieve some degree of erotic and personal freedom, forfeits those liberties in Reb Faish's ultra-Orthodox house. In other words, the one who sought a new

identity, loses his identity. And unidentified powers of madness (in the guise of Balak the dog) overcome him and eliminate him. Moreover, it is the very desire to cut himself off from his former self that provokes the powers that destroy him. This story takes a rather dim view of the efforts of the Second Aliyah to strike roots in the Land of Israel, an effort that was doomed to failure because the generation was unworthy. The main character, "like our other brethren, men of our redemption," had insufficient spiritual power to attain the freedom, independence, and maturity that would permit him to meet the challenges and overcome the hardships of existence in the new Land of Israel.

In this novel, too, the proper development of the plot leads into a cul-de-sac, and again the author attempts to offer some measure of Zionist redemption by means of a *mythical miracle*: the rain after the drought and after Yitzhak's burial. It serves as a sign, as it were, that now that the victim has been sacrificed, the sin has been atoned for and the land will once more flourish. Again, a causal sequence stands in opposition to the inner logic of the plot and derives from another source, implying that only by means of a miracle can society be saved. The force of miracles, the need for miracles, permeates these novels. Thus we have seen the treasure that cancels out the false identity of matter and spirit; the psychologist who exorcises the demon of rebellion; the gates that open to the guest, allowing him to leave the "hotel" and return to his home and family; and here in *Only Yesterday*, a society unable to cope with its conflicts that might be saved through a suprahuman miracle, even though, or perhaps because, the individual is condemned to death.

VI

There is, of course, a parallel between *The Bridal Canopy* as a journey and *Only Yesterday* as a journey, between the successful failure of Reb Yudel and the failed success of his grandson Yitzhak Kummer. Similarly, it is possible to discern a strange parallel between Hirshl's desperate efforts to break through the boundaries of family in *A Simple Story* and the effort made by Herbst (a sort of Hirshl thirty years older) to shatter its framework in *Shirah*. Herbst lives in

the Land of Israel during the thirties, in a society in transition between settlement and state, a society of those remaining after a large part of the Second Aliyah had disappeared—left—and those added in the waves of immigration after World War I. Agnon chose to represent that society through a remote professor, an academic scholar who specializes in the study of the royal graves of Byzantium, and whose life is more immersed in the past than in the daily life of the present. Like the other professors in the novel (*Weltfremd*, Neu, Bachlam), Herbst's life is very different from the dynamism of others in the Jerusalem of the 1930s and 1940s, the city of Taglicht, Zohara, Tamara, and Heinz.

Various and sundry groups and institutions of the Yishuv occupy the background of the work: the Haganah, Revisionist dissidents, kibbutzim, Neturei Karta (ultra-Orthodox anti-Zionists), Oriental Jews, and more. The oppositions between past and present, foreground and background, are central to the literary structure. The protagonist tries to flee from the restrictive norms of his society, from his family, and from his obsessive preoccupation with the dead past (the cemeteries of Byzantium), to a present that offers both life and poetry (Hebrew *shirah*). The quest poses a question: Can one be devoted to the past and live in the present? Or, is it possible to build a bridge between the dynamic, perhaps overly dynamic, present and the preoccupation with the dead past, which has become the intellectual's *raison d'être* in the new land? This opposition not only provides the social and spiritual infrastructure of the novel but also represents one of the central conflicts of the modern Land of Israel.

Following the logic of the plot, another of Agnon's protagonists reaches a dead end, unable to break out of the confines of the family or of his listless spiritual life. The novel, which the author left unfinished, has two conclusions, each leading into a cul-de-sac. The ending as published presents the return to mundane, trivial existence, a conclusion somewhat similar to that of *A Simple Story*. The quest for redemption and for escape from one's bourgeois fate fails because social conventions overpower the yearning for rebellion.

There is an alternative ending to the novel that had been part of the original manuscript and that was published earlier, in 1956, as a story entitled "Forevermore." In it the desire to escape from the conflict leads to a world entirely removed from the present: the

leper asylum. There, in the realm of "eternal time," every conflict is resolved by acknowledging that the life of suffering is eternal law.

From the social point of view, it seems that the author prefers the ahistorical situation of exile to the entrance into history that characterizes life in the Land of Israel. If "Forevermore" is in fact an alternate ending for *Shirah*, that story symbolizes the fate of a society that has let its miracles slip through its fingers. It is an extreme expression of the failure of personal rebirth in old age (personal rebirth implied by the artistic attempt to bring the tombs of history back to life), and perhaps the failure of social rebirth of a nation which, in old age, feels the flush of life.

VII

In the novel *Mr. Lublin's Store*, the depiction of social reality through the plot (or lack of plot) reaches its literary peak. To Agnon, the West offers only hopeless suffocation and a dead end from the Jewish point of view and in every other respect as well. This plotless story is about characters who are mired in the slough of German life but are incapable of leaving it. Eastern European Jews (Lublin, Stern) have nowhere to go back to. Once again, the only people who might be able to save themselves are those who can break out of the vicious cycle of hopelessness produced by a chain of "German" plots with no redemptive endings. These plots depict the German local world: The Jews there are permanent outsiders, marginal victims of impersonal processes.

By exception, then, one who has come from the Land of Israel can go back. In this case, as in the novella *Ad henna* (Unto Here), the miracle of leaving Germany is a possible solution only for the chosen few but not for the entire community, which is apparently condemned to remain behind.

VIII

Again and again, in his "Diaspora" novels, Agnon depicted the drama of a society trying to stay alive by means of obsolete values and with no economic infrastructure to sustain those values.

The Jewish framework is validated only insofar as it supports the struggle for survival of this bourgeois society. It is in a state of disintegration; its structures have been shattered and destroyed; and it has not the slightest chance for rehabilitation. The only hope for its members is to abandon it completely.

אגון
נבדל

Agnon presents a social group that tries to restore itself to life in this way—through a new identity, a new land, and a new system of values—in *The Field*, his never-written novel about life in the Land of Israel during the Second Aliyah. But the individual within the group lacks the strength to undergo the far-reaching transformation that the new society demands, and he is destroyed in the effort to effectuate it. In *Shirah*, Agnon portrays the drama of an intellectual in a dynamic society trying to justify his present life through an obsessive bond to the past. The disparity between eras causes him to try to detach himself from the existing structures of work and family and live for the moment. In each of these dramas, as in the ones discussed earlier in this essay, the normal causal structure of the plot leads to a dead end; and the author usually resolves his drama by means of a counterplot that derives from the realm of the irrational: miracles, depth psychology, myth, and other similar devices. These works do not end happily, with reconciliation, but rather with acknowledgment of the irreconcilable gap between the powers that are at odds with each other.

Agnon tries to grapple with the dead end by drawing upon powers from elsewhere, as it were. And within the body of his stories he holds out the promise, either explicitly or implicitly, of a book that would depict the countervailing positive process. For example, he mentions the story of Bluma Nacht in *A Simple Story*; and the story of our brethren who work the lands of the Lord in *The Field* is previewed at the end of *Only Yesterday*. His other novels and stories hint at an alternate story, one that was not written, such as the story of the key of the synagogue transplanted from the shtetl in the Land of Israel as a sequel to *A Guest for the Night*, and the story of the renewed life of Dr. Levi's library after it reaches the Land of Israel as a sequel to *Ad henna*. All of these plots are miraculous, and the author hints at them without bringing them to realization. They are likely to appear at the end of a story, deriving from a different plot and leading to yet another plot (such as the Reb Yudel's voyage to the Land of Israel).

What emerges from a general examination of the plots of these novels is that Agnon "argued" that only by means of irrational counterplots (or a rational counterplot contrasting with an irrational act based on nostalgia, such as the return to the doomed shtetl) can this generation grapple with the conflicts it confronts. According to his perception of the nature of things and logic, recent generations of Jewish society are trapped in a cul-de-sac, and each generation, everywhere, is similarly threatened. One might say that the final lesson of Agnon's view of history is that the society exists by virtue of miracles; and we have nothing else on which to depend.

IX

The preceding remarks are not an attempt to investigate the thematics of the works discussed. Nor is the claim made that these works actually represent reality. It is Agnon's very personal interpretation of historical reality that is elucidated by this general examination of the patterns of the plot and the organizational principle behind the depiction of the historical material. And his world view, in turn, influences our own interpretation of the extraliterary world—a model as valid as any other model certainly. One can even lose sight of the fact that Agnon's world is fictional—so well made and persuasive is it in its comprehensiveness, so convincing in its fidelity. We believe that it exists as depicted; we trust that it mirrors nonfictional reality. Indeed, his depiction may seem even more reliable than those we obtain from other literary or non-literary sources, and we read reality according to the rules imposed upon us by his fiction. By a miracle, Agnon's world becomes our own.

NOTES

1. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *On Narrativity*, ed. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 1–23.
2. Victor Turner, "Social Dramas and Stories About Them," in *ibid.*, pp. 137–164.

3. Maynard Solomon, ed., *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

4. Baruch Kurzweil, *Masot al sipurei shai agnon* (Essays on the Stories of S. Y. Agnon) (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1962); David Canaani, "The Revealed and the Hidden" (in Hebrew), in *Beinam levein zemanam* (Between Themselves and Their Time) (Merhaviah: Sifriat Poalim, 1955), 9–36; Dov Sadan, *Al shai agnon: masa, iyun ve-heker* (On S. Y. Agnon: Essay, Study, Research) (Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz ha-Meuhad, 1959).

5. Henceforth I shall not refer to the many interpretations of each of these novels. It is sufficient to note that this article could not have been written without the assistance of earlier research. Matters have been largely summed up in Hillel Barzel's introduction to the collection of articles in Hebrew on Agnon: Hillel Barzel, ed., *Shemuel yosef agnon: mi'ohar maamarim al yetsirato* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1982). Regrettably, that collection does not include the extremely important articles of A. M. Lipschutz and Gustav Krojanker. Cf. also the short survey, Gershon Shaked, *Ha-siporet ha-ivrit 1880–1980* (Hebrew Narrative Fiction, 1880–1980), vol. 2 (Tel Aviv: Keter, 1983), 180–184.

first person plural literature of the 1948 generation

I

The earliest Hebrew writers in Eretz Israel—the majority of them native-born, or "sabras"—were the first children of a culture in formation. Born in the 1920s and raised on a Hebrew vernacular and a Hebrew literary tradition, they built upon the foundations for a new society that had been laid by their parents. Most of these young writers identified with the ideals of the parent generation—the pioneering elite of the Labor movement.

The world view of these writers took shape during the British Mandate period, a time when the Yishuv, the young Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel, was enduring repeated clashes with its Arab neighbors (the riots of 1921, 1929, 1936–1939) and ambivalent relations with the British authorities. The Holocaust and the founding of the State provided the historical climaxes in their development; but it was the War of Independence in particular that afforded them their most intense existential experience. Not without reason were they called the "1948 generation" or the "Palmah generation," after the vanguard brigade of the Jewish armed forces during the 1940s.

The 1948 generation was educated to fulfill the pioneer ethos of their parents by means of the formal and informal educational systems of the Yishuv—especially the "workers' stream," which was controlled by the Histadrut, and the pioneer youth movements Ha-Noar ha-Oved, Maḥanot ha-Olim, and Ha-Shomer ha-Tzair. In-

□ Gershon
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□ the
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